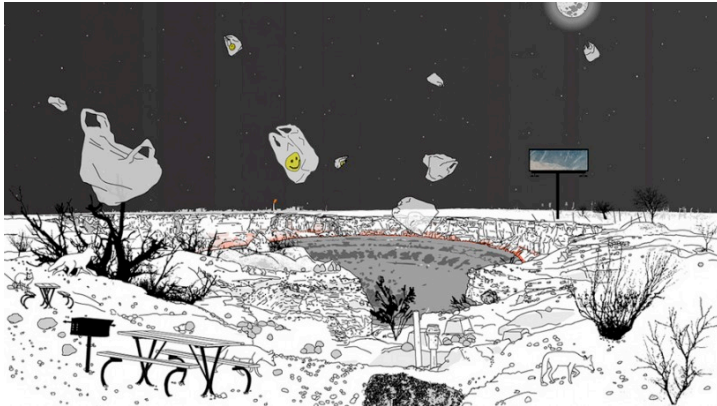


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Marina Zurkow. *Mesocosm* (Wink, Texas), 2012. Software-driven animation  
Courtesy of the artist

## Interview: Marina Zurkow

*Marina Zurkow came to Texas in January 2011 for a research trip to the Permian Basin, an endeavor that culminated in her solo exhibition at DiverseWorks, Necrocracy. Part of the FotoFest Biennial, the exhibition considers the effects of petroleum production on the ecology and geology of West Texas with a refreshingly open mind. Rachel Hooper set down with Zurkow just after the installation of Necrocracy to discuss the artist's research and the animations and drawings that debuted in the exhibition, which closes this Saturday.*

**Rachel Hooper [RH]:** I'm interested in your animations and how you set up what you call "dynamic choreographies." Can you tell us more about them?

**Marina Zurkow [MZ]:** There are four different animation strategies in this show. There are four different sets of work: NeoGeo, Mesocosm (Wink, Texas), The Thirsty Bird and Hydrocarbons. *Mesocosm* is the heart of the show and my starting point for the exhibition. It is based on a sinkhole in Wink, Texas that I first discovered on Google satellite view. The piece has a dynamic choreography in that it's not canned video. There's literally an animated stage and a file folder with events or actors. Actors might be weather, snakes, bees, people in hazmat suits, prairie dogs, monarch butterflies in October, cranes in the winter, more monarch butterflies in March, etc. There is action script coding that I developed with a software designer that manages both time and the actors. They're not 3D objects, they're 2D drawings, so the actors' movements are tightly controlled. Finally, I have an xml data file that is thousands of lines of code organized by month and then by time of day: dawn, day, dusk and night. A day takes 24 minutes to elapse. Each "bucket" of time has a specified bunch of characters that might come out.

**[RH]:** And the video also cycles through an entire year?

**[MZ]:** The video cycles through twelve months and then continues. Each of these animals or weather has a percentage assigned to it so in, let's say, July when it's really hot, there is a 12% chance that a snake will come out at night and no snakes during the day. As it gets cooler, the percentage that the snake will come out during the day increases. It's an elegant, simple system.

**[RH]:** Is it based on studies of habitats and animal patterns?

**[MZ]:** The animations are a negotiation between the reality of an ecosystem and a mythological or surreal offset of that place. In the case of West Texas, the hazmat people play the strange role

in this world. They're like choreographed dancers. They're not doing anything practical, they're performing the gestures that hazmat guys learn in training. They crawl, they drag, they walk, then occasionally they joke around. There're all these YouTube videos of kibitzing guys in hazmat suits, doing these weird dances. The suits turn you into a Teletubby, so instead of giving them disastrous, practical concerns, I gave them their own bird dances.

**[RH]:** A lot of research has gone into the people in the hazmat suits, the animals. Can you talk about your research trip to the Permian Basin, how you got inspired to go there, and what sort of discoveries you made?

**[MZ]:** A mesocosm is a term used in environmental science that describes a mid-sized, artificial ecosystem used for study. So, say behind an agricultural extension college they build a pond and populate it with a certain kind of bug and certain kinds of weeds, and they recombine elements of an ecosystem to see what happens. I wanted to go to West Texas because I wanted to make a piece for Texas, for DiverseWorks, that spoke to some of the issues around landscape and nature that would be less romantic. The first Mesocosm piece was for Northumberland, England, and that is a landscape that looks totally natural and "unspoiled" but actually has been managed, mined and deforested since the Bronze Age. It's been a long-term manipulated ecosystem that included the presence and interventions of humans in the landscape—as well as populating it with stories about fairies. Both of these works are part of a larger planned series of mediated landscapes, or mesocosms.

**[RH]:** It's not just science that you're talking about. Are you talking about a system that would incorporate mythology, that would incorporate assumptions, as well as verified scientific discoveries?

**[MZ]:** Exactly. It's a dynamic, constantly renegotiated space that includes airplanes, petrochemicals and hydrocarbons. I am influenced by Bruno Latour, especially by the idea of non-human agency and the sort of negotiations that are constantly being made in the world between all these players.

It's very typical to come to Texas and do a piece about oil, but it's also important to think outside the pejorative box, or the championing box—depending on which side of the line you're on. I wanted to break through the binaries around that.

From 2006-2009 my work was based in what I called the "ecology of the internet." Everything was taken from YouTube; every bit of research, every inquiry, lived within that world. When I went to Northeast England in 2009, I had a research residency at ISIS Arts in Newcastle, Northumberland. My inquiry started with two squirrel species, the invasive American Gray squirrel and Great Britain's precious, disintegrating native Red squirrel population. There were many ironies and high stakes, and a high degree of xenophobia expressed in this idea of invasive species and that was my lead into this place.

I wanted to go to Texas, to Midland, because I wanted to complicate my relationship to this material. My first drawing (which I absolutely wouldn't put in the show) was vilifying. It was an Armageddon-view of the oil business and the ugliness of that landscape. It was aestheticized and definitely not what somebody from Texas would think. To my surprise the landscape around Midland wasn't littered with pump jacks, there's actually space between them, which is disappointing if you're expecting to see a certain kind of thing. So I had to confront a lot of my own prejudices, and that was great. I also had to confront a lot of local people's prejudices and their suspicion that I must be there to vilify them, which I wasn't.

**[RH]:** I was thinking about what you were saying earlier about how you're interested in a sort of dialectic between humans and nature or relationships between humans and nature where the natural world or animals are given agency. I'm curious of how that played out of the oil industry because I think most people when they think of the petroleum industry, they think of a completely

manmade system that's used to sustain our human society and that is so harmful to the natural world that surrounds it. How did you allow nature agency in that sort of context?

**[MZ]:** When I was doing my research before I went to Midland, I got in touch with a place called the Sibley Nature Center, which is the work of one man, Burr Williams, a naturalist, who started this education center training an army of amateur naturalists to document the Llano Estacado—the southern high planes which stretch from Lubbock to the Edwards Plateau south of Midland. It's coincident with the Permian Basin. Absolutely coincident with it, although neither necessarily talks about the other.

**[RH]:** So you're talking about a binary between what's above the ground and what's beneath the ground, at work there coincidentally?

**[MZ]:** Yes. *Mesocosm (Wink, Texas)* is a piece that's more or less about what's above the ground although there is the sinkhole, and that sinkhole functions as a sort of Pandora's box over the course of the piece, but the piece doesn't explicitly talk about oil. There are suggestions of that in the landscape, but if you go into the Flicker Lounge and see *NeoGeo*, that piece is completely about what's underground. That piece process-wise is constructed very differently from *Wink*.

I worked with Daniel Shiffman, a mathematician and code artist on *NeoGeo* and that series of works consists of video recordings of rocks assembling themselves into strata, punctuated by a drill bit boring through the endless layers. Occasionally, given the right accumulation of hydrocarbons, there will be an oil gush. I thought this was a pretty neutral thing for that environment, but oil gushes are blowouts. I had a student who used to be a mudlogger and he said *you're just going to be vilified, you're depicting the oil industry in a negative light*. As outsiders we look to the cinematic history, movies like *Giant* and *There Will be Blood*, where the blowout is equivalent to striking gold. Without the gush you've got nothing. Also that piece is about time in a really different way than the other pieces. *Wink* is a 146 hour real-time cycle and *NeoGeo* is a set of four 12 minute recordings of endlessly recombinant strata. The density of the rock affects the speed of the drill and the way the hydrocarbon particles accumulate; they only accumulate under certain kinds of rock. But that piece is also about the liquidity of rock; because that rock is moving around in ways that rock moves over millions of years. We think that the earth is this inert, stable, inanimate material but it folds, subsides and rises up over long time periods—or sometimes, as in the case of the sinkhole, you'll have an event that's caused by pumping large volumes of water (as in fracking) or by an earthquake, that suddenly causes these kinds of shifts and collapses. So time is not stable in the geological context and we don't or can't imagine that, so I try to deal with that a little bit in *NeoGeo*. You can see the plasticity of what we consider hard matter.

**[RH]:** Thinking about material makes me want to go back to what we were talking about earlier with how you are grappling with the materiality of what you're doing as an animator who works mostly with digital images and thinking about what kind of machines that involves. Were you aware as you did this research that you were working on computers made mostly from components that are derivative from petroleum?

**[MZ]:** Everything in the show is made out of petrochemicals. Everything. The paper that the Petroleum Manga are printed on is Tyvek; the inks are solvent inks, the little hazmat suits, made from Tychem® TK from DuPont™—the fabric was donated under the condition that I wouldn't actually let any children get in them. *(laughs)*

**[RH]:** Do they actually make child-size suits?

**[MZ]:** No, absolutely not. I had the suits fabricated.

**[RH]:** But also the material the suits are made of is fabricated from petroleum products. Isn't it also the idea that it would protect you from a petroleum spill as well?

**[MZ]:** Yes, exactly. It's ironic that so many of the things we have to protect ourselves from petrochemicals are made from petrochemicals.

**[RH]:** Your title for the exhibition, *Necrocracy*, pertains to what we were just talking about because petroleum itself, the actual material, is made from dead things, but then there's this idea that the oil industry itself may someday be dead. At least that's been bandied about for the last 30 or 40 years—that we've hit peak oil and that we're going to have to phase out petroleum. After all your research and working on this project, have you thought about that, what might come after the *Necrocracy*?

**[MZ]:** The title comes from a book by the classicist Robert Pogue Harrison, titled *The Dominion of the Dead*; he looks at Greek and Roman cultures' ancestor worship and concludes that Western civilization as we know it has been based on the worship of our dead. I thought, wow, what a great way to think about hydrocarbons. We obviously have a very deep connection to oil. I'd say an interdependence. We can't survive without it. When I started working on this, I realized: I lack the imagination to think of an oil-free world. I think many people lack that imagination, short of knocking off 90% of the human population on this planet. I think with about 10% of the population we could live without oil, but there is no way to clothe, feed and shelter this many people without it. Yet it is a finite resource and I think we understand that on some psychological level.

When I constructed the survey that's in the lab and online, I asked big questions. What could you not live without? What's your opinion about plastics? Have you ever considered that plastics assume a kind of immortality for dead marine animals (hydrocarbons)? There's a sense that these little dead things figured out a way to solicit us to make them into things that would outlive us. On a side note, it's especially interesting talking to invasion biologists because I know they feel like they're fighting a losing battle, because as long as you have a globalized culture, you're going to drive the world towards monocultures. There is too much movement of goods and hitchhikers. There's no room for niche developments. Niches require some privacy in order to diversify, otherwise you end up with fields of knotweed and mesquite. I asked a biologist where he thought we'd be in a hundred thousand years, and he replied that we're going to be in more or less of a monoculture. We had way more diversity. But even in a hundred thousand years the realities of our globalization will still be manifesting.

**[RH]:** And then we get into the apocalyptic scenarios.

**[MZ]:** I'm very happy that this show doesn't feel so apocalyptic. Because my work has been called apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic, and I think that's a comforting space to work in. I try not to promulgate that anymore. I want to figure out a way to postulate these relationships that isn't so negative.

**[RH]:** In a way it's apocalyptic, but in another way I think your work is about how life goes on. Even in an apocalyptic scenario, even in a sinkhole in Wink, Texas which I would assume is a pretty toxic environment, still things are moving, life is there, and it may be invasive species, it may be humans in hazmat suits crawling around, but still, something persevering.

**[MZ]:** It's a really amazing ecosystem. This is the thing about Burr Williams. He has scores of essays on the Sibley website about the delicate, subtle ecosystems of the Llano Estacado and what a rich, migratory space it is for birds—it's an incredible bird space and even an oil pad will be colonized by birds, insects, reptiles and rabbits and these're actually quite wild spaces. There's not a lot of population density out there so there's room for animals to thrive. When I was in Midland he took me all around. We looked at everything from old tiny pocket forests to the largest shin oak forest in the world: the oaks don't go past your knee, but they yield normal-sized acorns. No one ever lived there because the only water, the Ogallala Aquifer, is fossil water which is not potable. The Llano is actually an ecotone, not so much an ecosystem itself. It is the overlap between more sustainable ecosystems around it. Nature abhors a vacuum and makes no moral judgments about where it might spring from.

**[RH]:** In a way what that's about is nature having an imagination where we cannot. We look at an oil field that could potentially dry up, and we think this is the end of the world. We can't live without this oil. But nature doesn't even question it and just jumps right in and adapts.

**[MZ]:** There is resilience and flexibility and abhorring the vacuum. That's the best way to put it.

*Rachel Hooper is a PhD student in art history at Rice University in Houston, Texas.*