

HILLARY IRENE JOHNSON

2024 MFA THESIS EXHIBITION



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

2024 MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

5th Floor Student Center May 6–28, 2024

The 2024 MFA Thesis Exhibition features the thesis works of the MFA candidates in Columbia College Chicago's Art I Design and Photography Departments. The exhibition, which includes paintings, prints, drawings, photography, sound, and installation, captures the extensive research, exploration, critical analysis, creative inquiry, productivity, practice, and achievement these emerging artists have maintained throughout their time in the programs. With varied approaches to subject matter, distinct methods of creation, and a unique blending of personal, political, and historical narratives, the artists in this show weave together the nuanced strands of the contemporary moment.

Participating Artists: Andre Barker Jr, Nora Benjamin, Callie Clark Wiren, Noah Fodor, Eli Giclas, Ash Huse, Hillary Irene Johnson, Adam MacArthur, Giselle Mira-Diaz, Grace Papineau-Couture, Arrietta van der Voort, and andrew vogelpohl

The 2024 MFA Thesis Exhibition is presented in conjunction with the Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), the Art I Design Department, and the Photography Department.

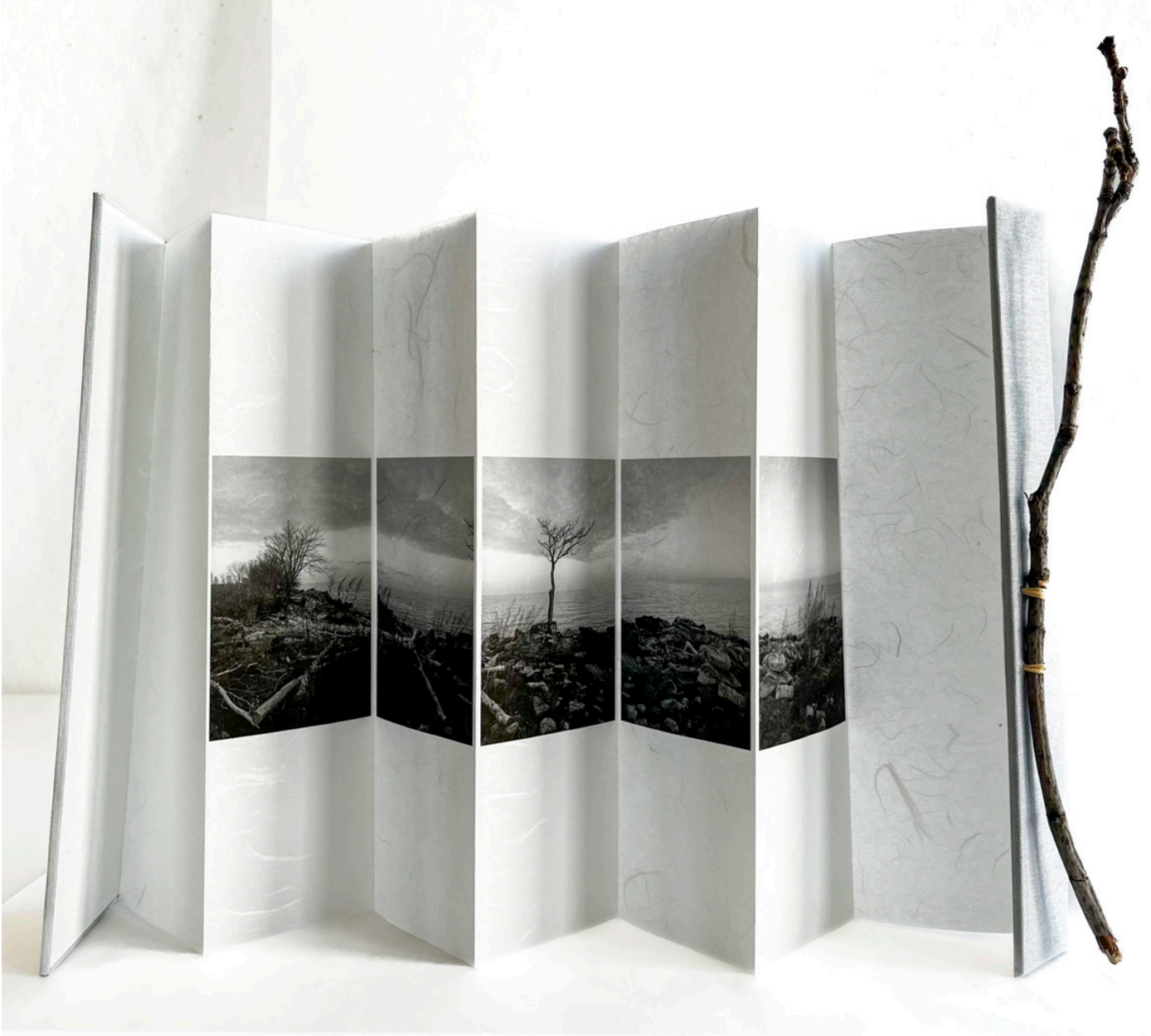
HILLARY IRENE JOHNSON

Hillary Johnson is a multidisciplinary artist who works in photography, video, handmade books, and immersive multimedia installations. She's interested in the tension between heartache and beauty; grief and joy; and longing and belonging that underpin the human condition. Her work and research have their roots in twin threads of anxiety: a global cultural anxiety which developed in during the industrial age in the mid-1800's, expanding exponentially in the Anthropocene era as our complicity in climate change was revealed, as well as her own quite personal existential concerns. Her work engages the body in the process of coming to know a place through slow walking and mindful observation. Johnson's photographs of the landscape and portraiture examine drastic upheavals that transform or destroy delicate beauty in both the environment and in humankind. She believes that photography can be part of an expansive exploration of empathy, consciousness, and connection for positive social and cultural change.

Johnson is an MFA Candidate in Photography at Columbia College Chicago where she also serves as a Curatorial and Education Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Photography. She is recipient of an Albert P. Weisman Award, and Thall-Mulvany Awards for her work creating immersive installations that explore ways in which art and science may be a critical piece of how we create a more loving and compassionate world. Her work has been featured in the 2nd Quanzhou International Image Biennale at the Fujulian Huanguang Photography Art Museum, Hüten Gallery in Shanghai, China, Image Union, Pasadena Photo Arts, The Chicago Reader, National Public Radio, NBC News, A Photo Editor, and Frontrunner Magazine. Her works have been exhibited across the United States and internationally.



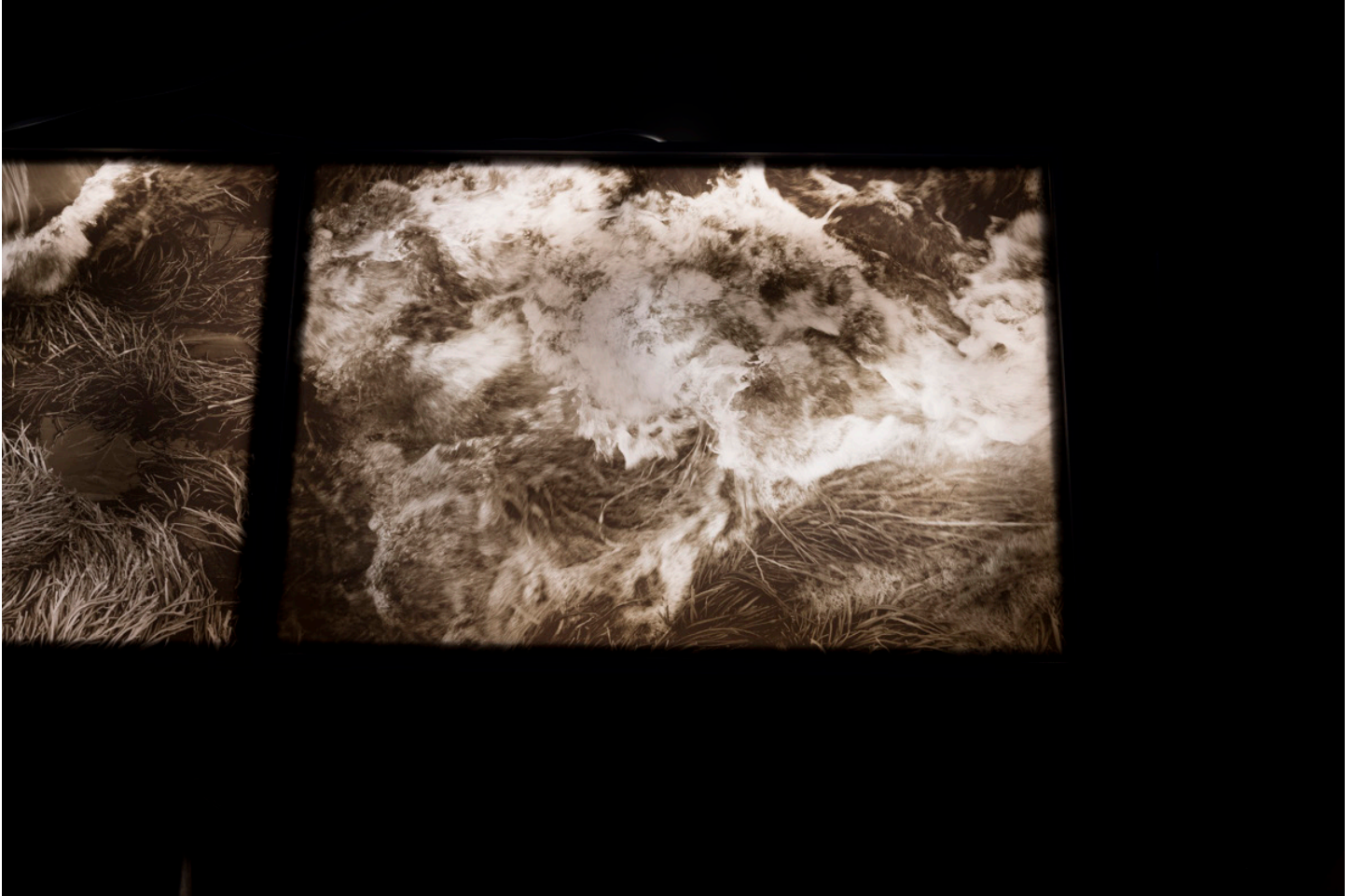
Dinosaur Feather, 2024, Inkjet print on Mulberry paper, gold leaf on handmade wooden box,
4" x 6" x 3"



The Landmark Tree, 2023, handmade accordion book object, Piezo print on awagami paper, handstitching, stone, twig from location



*Tidal Pool and Seaweed, No. 1, 2024, Inkjet print on abaca paper, handmade wooden box, LED lights,
24" x 36" x 4"*



*Tidal Pool and Seaweed, No. 2, 2024, Inkjet print on abaca paper, handmade wooden box, LED lights,
24" x 36" x 4"*



Tidal Pool and Seaweed, No. 3, 2024, Inkjet print on abaca paper, handmade wooden box, LED lights, 24" x 36" x 4"



Tidal Pool and Seaweed (Series), 2024, Inkjet print on abaca paper, handmade wooden box, LED lights,
24" x 36" x 4"



Bartek, 2020, inkjet on Phototex



Christina, 2018, Inkjet on Phototex



Francesca, 2023, Inkjet on Phototex



The Natural Order of Things is Connection, 2024, 80 sheets of handmade abaca paper, Inkjet print, thread, ribbon, 68" x 115"

INTERVIEW WITH HILLARY IRENE JOHNSON

Conducted by Rachel Manlubatan

Rachel Manlubatan: What stylistic choices do you include in your compositions, colors, and subjects to express the duality of nature and human emotion? How do you think audiences will differentiate these two concepts within your photos?

Hillary Irene Johnson: It's an interesting question. What is style? It's complex. How do ideas and forms dance together? My sensibilities are informed, amongst other things, by ancient traditions of landscape painting and photography from China, Japan and Korea not only formally but in terms of their spiritual aims. My work is made by *responding* to the world. I try to get out of the way. I see a composition emerge or manifest better than anything I could "create."

I work in black and white quite often so my choices are more about the form and empty space, the lines I see. I consider color more as a matter of tone, warmth or coolness in paper choice.

I'm not sure there is a duality of nature and human emotion. We are nature and as such, we feel emotions and those are energies that are part of the natural expression of the universe, her subtle and always vibrating energies with which we may align and learn about life and it's nature to be expansive. Every audience member will have their own experience and will apply a way of looking that feels natural for them. I hope they can put down duality for a moment because thinking about concepts like that will take them out of their experience. I hope they can simply be with the work and let it impact them, inform them beyond thinking mind and feel it in their bodies.

RM: What methods do you explore before starting a piece, such as going on walks or observing outside? What do you gain from

these techniques and how do they inform the aesthetics of your work?

HIJ: I walk a lot as a regular practice, it's a kind of meta-layer to my work that makes other things possible. It clears my thinking and feels grounding. Any way can be filled by so much astonishing ordinary beauty that it also feels hopeful in a storm-tossed world. Sometimes the walking is part of the work directly and sometimes it's more a letting go of thinking mind. I like walking as a way of slowing down and coming fully into the body and not racing around in my mind or on a computer or car or whatever. The body moving and stepping and breathing and paying attention, being mindful to what is going on with the whole organism, the whole envelope feels more important than ever. It's a humble scale, the distance a human stride, a foot can make and it connects me to my breath.

The experience of this pace stays with me in the studio. Reminds me to take my time. Reminds me that to really see a thing fully takes time, care and loving attention.

RM: What parts of your project are influenced by your personal experience and what parts are influenced by research you have conducted on the mid-1800s? How do you combine your own emotions with history, and how has learning about both transformed your creative voice?

HIJ: The ground of my work is extremely personal, deeply rooted in an absolute knowing that has been with me my whole life, though many tried to stamp it out or invalidate it. I have always known that there's no real divisions between things. Of course, this idea that people have that we human beings are at the top of an imagined hierarchy of existence, that posits everything is there for us to consume, extract, to use rather than love, has caused us unending trouble and we are hardly

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

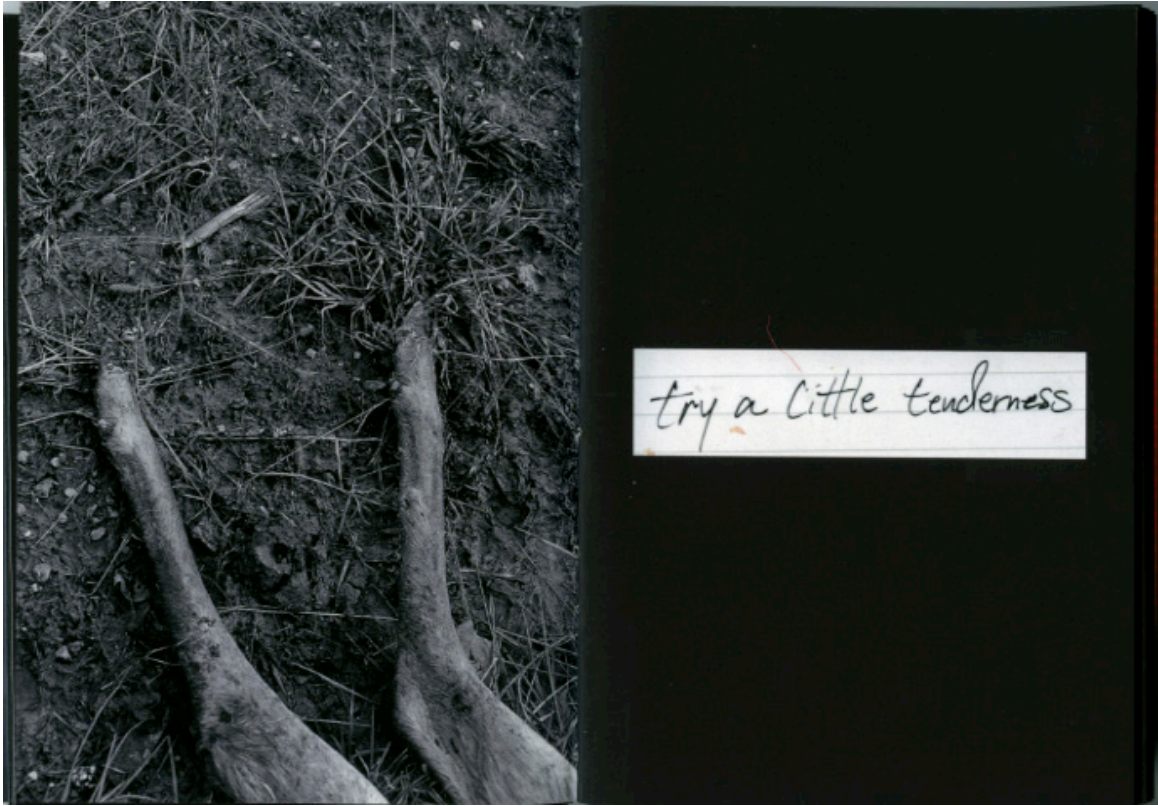
clear of it yet. It is the care and attention which may come from love that we give something that matters. But when we miss this, we think everything is just there for the taking and everything gets thrown out of balance. My research has shown me how that's unfolded. Some of my favorite readings on these ideas come from Rebecca Solnit's book, "River of Shadows," which plainly explains the implications of key technologies arising in the 1800s without any modulating factors to slow them down, with disastrous physical and spiritual results. I feel my emotional truth has understood this trouble all along and that I feel compelled to make work which addresses my own experience as a highly sensitive person, as an empath, which responds to the conditions in the world. There's such a cultural, economic push to gaslight those of us who say something is wrong here, these systems that are so world destroying, but the good histories and truth telling histories say otherwise and that all supports my work too and gives energy to my voice. There are those out there who insist things can become a great turning rather than a great unravelling and so I hope my work is in support of that.

RM: How do you think art impacts social and cultural change, especially regarding our environment? How do you think the different mediums you work with individually recognize feelings of tension or grief while also suggesting joy and belonging?

HJ: I think the work artists are doing now in this area of social and cultural change, particularly around the environment and the climate is critical but that the way it works perhaps is a softer way, a more indirect, rather than a hammer and nail kind of solution. One of the ways we create massive positive change is through the way art creates infinite ripple effects for each viewer with whom the work resonates by inviting them into encounters

which are totally somatic, embodied, and emotional experiences which allow for feeling and deeper processing beyond the rational mind, that engages instead with deep intuitive knowing which is our birthright.

If my work can create spaces in which people feel they can soften, be safe, be seen, and feel a real connection with the rich variety of life all around them, they can feel all of it, the grief the joy and know they are not opposites, neither is wrong but rather they are part of the unity of existence, two sides of the natural order of things. Our biggest challenge is probably our own personal struggles with impermanence, ephemerality. And that of course, is part of what makes things beautiful too, isn't it?



THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series and graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: colum.edu/deps

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Gallery hours: Monday-Saturday 9 a.m.-5 p.m.