Peter Suchin

Elements in Motion: *The Weather Was Inside*

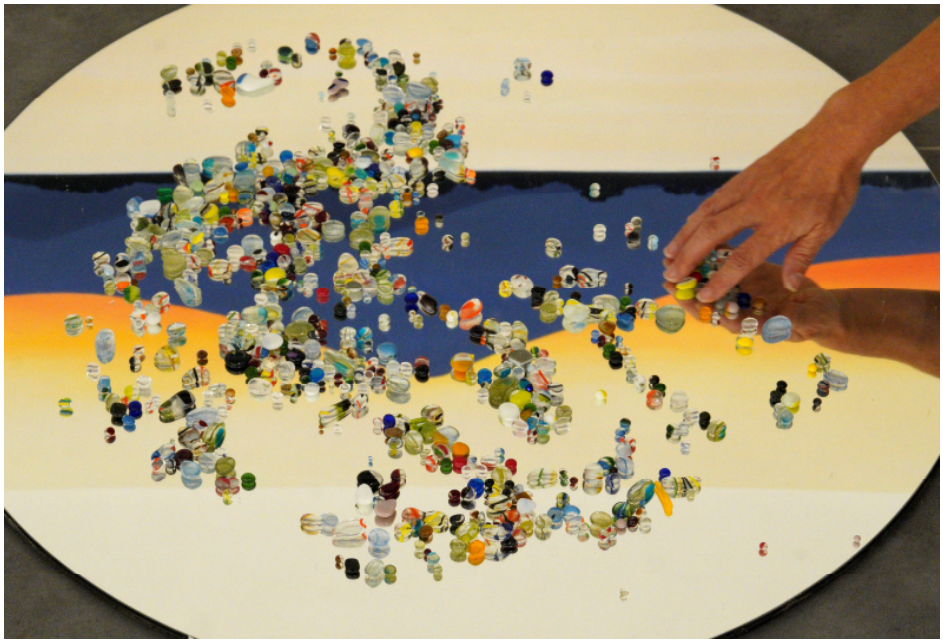
The Weather Was Inside partly takes its point of departure from long-running conversations between three artists, Katie Deith, Helen Maurer and Sarah Woodfine. [1] Although the trio's work shares, at first sight, little in common, they have held many conversations through which it became apparent that they have a number of mutual interests and ideas. Predominant among these is a strong, persistent relation to 'the real', a deep appreciation of, and sophisticated engagement with 'nature' and 'the natural'. But *nature* is today regarded as a complex, contradictory entity or 'thing'; to use an expression from Sarah Woodfine, 'the nature of nature' is no longer straightforwardly secure. [2]

Already in 1971, that impressively astute cultural commentator Roland Barthes had raised a number of pertinent, vivid, provocative questions about the relations between the seemingly opposing designations *nature* and *culture*:

> To say that culture is in opposition to nature is dubious, because we are not sure where the limits of each are: where is nature in man? If one is to describe himself as man, that man must have a language, i.e. culture itself. In the biological? Today we recognize in the living organism the same structures as in the speaking subject: life itself is constructed as a language. In short, everything is culture, from garment to book, from food to image, and culture is everywhere, from end to end of the social scale. This culture, certainly, is a very paradoxical object: without contours, without oppositional terms, *without remainder.* [3]

It is evident from this and many other passages in Barthes' writings that what has been rendered 'natural' in western society is frequently, and perhaps inescapably, the product of a kind of mythologising. 'Nature' is not *natural*, since everything accessed by human beings is affected by the filter of language, by a linguistic operation in which the binary opposition *nature/culture* can only have been determined by human beings, from within culture itself. The very concept of nature is a *cultural* idea, an anthropomorphic construction involving belief in an as it were timeless, unspoilt, wholly innocent environment well outside human control. Refusing to accept such a simple definition, Theodor Adorno suggested that

> In every perception of nature there is actually present the whole of society. The latter not only provides the patterns of nature in general, but also defines nature a priori in relation to itself… As technology and, more important, the principle of commodity exchange go on expanding, natural beauty increasingly takes on a merely contrasting function, in which it is easily subject to co-optation by the reified world it opposes. [4]



Helen Maurer *The Seabed Remade*, interactive sound installation, fused glass, mirror, diam. 80cm. 2025.
Photography: Sebastian Sharples

'Natural beauty is', Adorno continues, 'an ideological notion because it offers mediatedness in the guise of immediacy.' [5]

> In natural beauty…natural and historical elements form ever-changing constellations like the pieces of a kaleidoscope, one thing taking the place of another. It is this kind of fluctuation…which gives life to the beautiful in nature…The beautiful in nature is history standing still and refusing to unfold. [6]

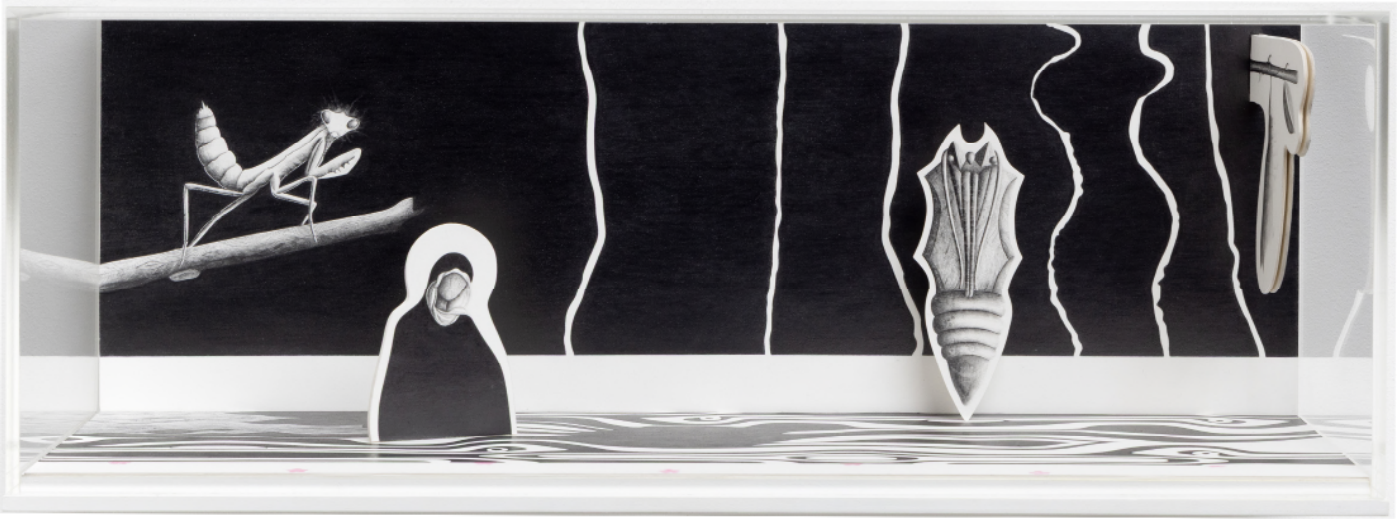
Adorno's critical account of what we unthinkingly consider as the way things have always been, suggests that society never really escapes its own fantasies and projections. What we call nature is both a mental and a physical concoction, a human reading of the brute stuff that remains subject to society's consecrating gaze. Notions of beauty associated with the natural are inevitably linked to historically-shifting networks of belief.

There is then a certain irony involved in the decision made by Deith, Maurer and Woodfine to include as a structural feature of their exhibition an extended visit to the Venetian island of Torcello, carried out in Autumn 2024. during the period of that year's Venice Biennale, one of the great European highlights of culture, also included within their trip as a matter of course. The island, if not exactly outside the tourist itinerary, is nonetheless located on its margins, notwithstanding its important role within the founding of Venice itself. Now occupied by only a tiny population Torcello is today established as Venice's most untamed isle. As Amedio Storti remarked in 1979, 'The visitor to Torcello is immediately struck by the whole environment – water, mudflats, flights of birds, solitude', and another guidebook also describes the island as 'plunged in solitude and silence.' [7] The island has changed little since the writing of these summary accounts. As Venice's internal 'other', Torcello is a fascinating place in which to reengage with intrinsic natural forms and to continue former discussions. Being on unfamiliar territory, close to the thronging Biennale yet far enough away from it to forget it, simple methods of image-making and the gathering of materials were carried out. A number of cyanotypes – unsophisticated images made with sensitive photographic paper (without a camera) – were produced, pebbles and shells gathered, and sketches sketched. Chance encounters were encouraged, the results being carefully noted for later use. *The Weather Was Inside* involves three artists with established, well-defined practices coming together to see what can be made of the combinatory action of bringing into their work the influence of extended discussions about artworks and ideas, as well as the perspectival shift facilitated by giving one's attention to a location never before encountered by the individuals concerned.

Katie Deith's paintings involve the investigation and (re)staging of received ideas about the depiction of landscape scenery, as well as a consideration of the visual close-up of natural forms. Painted in a highly-realistic style, provoked to a degree by the complexity and subtlety of colour and light established within western landscape painting, Deith concentrates on how conventions of pictorial realism have been extended by the development of photography. Her paintings draw mainly on photographic imagery, with the latter usually produced by herself or family members, as opposed to her painting in a *plein air* mode. The works have on occasion an hallucinatory, hyperreal sense of address, with an out-of-focus blurring of distant objects being strictly adhered to within the painterly replication of the photograph. The intensity of Venetian light as experienced during the group's visit will surely leave its mark upon Deith's practice. For the artist, it is her reaction to the photographically-translated *image* that determines the selection of what exactly it is that she will paint – it is this, and not the place represented within it that becomes the starting point for a particular painting, though the relations between different levels of perception invariably play an important role in the procedure. Is Deith taking photographs so as to paint from them, choosing a set of views in a pre-planned fashion, confident, as she presses the camera button that she will work from whatever photo emerges? Or is it the case that only after she has seen an image does she select it as a future painting? The decision process is perhaps not so simple or direct. Her paintings remind one of film stills, a moment within an unfolding narrative, a frozen second preceding, perhaps, an event of great importance. Or possibly it is a moment of conclusion. Often the presence of something invisible, hidden by layers of fog or mist, is hinted at but not revealed in these works, giving to the image a spooky, ethereal tint.

Helen Maurer's ludic approach to making work involves a range of disparate, flexible strategies. [8] In Venice, discarded remnants of Murano glass production were deployed as a found medium, glass beads later becoming the elements of a free-flowing game in which audience members are encouraged to take part. Video is used to record such volatile fragments, together with their related ambient sounds. Glass constructions that have, in their fabrication, gone wrong are reused – something, anything, is taken and moved in a different direction to that conventionally expected; indeterminate things are ascribed a surrogate use. The secret interiors of shells are cast, making new, externalised forms: 'an empty shell, like an empty nest, invites', writes Gaston Bachelard, 'day-dreams of refuge.' [9] The lips of jugs are also cast. Making, repeating and erasing are consciously carried out, with the knowledge that in its remaking an object returns 'differently', 'Telling It Again and Again' – to quote the title of Bruce F Kawin's study of repetition in the arts. [10] Familiar objects reinvent themselves; ladders one can't climb are assembled with Brancusi-like allusions, and the question asked by Clarence Ellis, 'What is a pebble?' – a thing 'easily recognized but not so easily defined' – seems open to general application as established identities become irrelevant, forgotten or lost [11]. Maurer assembles new things from old, which in turn are rearranged, implying an incessant cyclical flow.

For many years Sarah Woodfine has produced a range of small Perspex boxes into which she has inserted specially-made drawings, the individual elements of which combine to form detailed vignettes, miniature stage-sets in which the various component parts may be mentally moved about by the viewer so as to enact a range of possible scenarios. Her main contribution to *The Weather Was Inside* is a three-part work entitled *Sky End* (2025). The first section of the triptych, *Sky End (Passage)*, presents a range of curious creatures whose moral and representational status elude easy definition, while suggesting a range of mythological themes. To the left of the display can be seen a praying mantis in what may be read as a potentially-comical pose, while right at the centre of the work are two prominent figures: a faceless, childless Madonna, adapted from the 13th century painter Duccio, and a somewhat creepy upright chrysalis owing something to fictionalised



Sarah Woodfine *Sky End (Passage),* pencil on paper, H23 x W61 x D21.5cm. 2025

versions of extraterrestrial life. A second chrysalis-like creature clings to a leaf on the right-hand side of the picture, where there can also be seen a very bright full moon. Although the drawn imagery is two-dimensional the space these forms inhabit corresponds to a window-ledge, with the flat plane of the imaginary wood functioning as the stage upon which the action takes place. The background plane against which the drama unfolds is a drawing of an intensely dark window, suggesting and withholding transparency at one and the same time. The window-ledge is itself is a complicated formation of psychedelic, sinuous stripes with, just off-centre, a deep illusory abyss**,** the whole resembling a dizzying optical illusion or the interlocking abstractions of aboriginal art. With this 'woodgrain' pattern doubling as the stage or floor, one almost expects the entire assemblage to vanish deep into itself at any moment**.** [12]

The presence of absence and the absence of presence haunt this show.

Katie Deith lives and works in London and trained at the Slade School of Fine Art, London. Deith's recent work explores the transient nature of fleeting moments in landscapes. Collage is used as a tool in the process to arrive at poetic and dream-like spaces, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Helen Maurer is an artist and educator, working primarily with glass, light and sound to create site-specific installations. She was born in Portsmouth and now lives and works in London. Having spent many years living on a boat, water and reflection are recurring themes within her practice. She is a winner of the Jerwood Prize for Applied Arts: Glass.

Sarah Woodfine lives and works in London. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, including Ha Gamle Presetegard, Norway; *Only Make Believe*, Compton Verney, curated by Marina Warner; Harewood House, *Snowdomes;* Graves Gallery, Sheffield. Sarah was awarded the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2004.

Peter Suchin is an artist, critic and curator. He has contributed to *Art Monthly*, *Frieze, The Guardian*, *Variant*, *Mute* and many other journals, and has exhibited his paintings widely, both in the UK and abroad. He is currently exhibiting in *Objects, History, Time* at Vestry Street, London (until 6 December 2025).

Notes

1. The exhibition's title is borrowed from the first line of Emily Berry's poem 'Canopy', included in Berry's *Stranger Baby*, Faber, 2017, p. 57.

2. Private conversation, Friday, 26 September, 2025.

3. Roland Barthes, 'Pax Culturalis' (1971) in Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p.100.

4. T W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, RKP, 1984, p. 101.

5. Adorno, p. 101.

6. Adorno. p. 105. Gustav Metzger has suggested that the term 'damaged nature' (and not just 'nature') should be deployed today as a matter of course. See 'Nature Demised Resurrects as Environment' in Gustav Metzger, *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*, Coracle,1996.

7. Amedio Storti, *Venice inside and out*, Storti-Venezia, 1980, p. 123; MCP, *How to Visit Venice and its Neighbourhood*, Cesare Capello, pp. 122-123.

8 Two key volumes on the idea of play as a cultural force are those by Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Paladin, 1970, and Roger Callois, *Man, Play and Games*, University of Illinois Press, 2001. Hans Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Penguin, 1972, may also be of relevance here.

9. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, 1969, p. 107.

10. Bruce F Kawin, *Telling it Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and the Arts*, Cornell University Press, 1972.

11.Clarence Ellis, *The Pebbles on the Beach*, Faber, 1954/1974, p. 13.

12. An expression from the study of heraldry, *mise en abyme*, or 'into the abyss', is relevant here. For a discussion of this device as used in modern literature see Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, Methuen, 1980, especially chapter 3. Marcel Duchamp's *Etant donnes* (1946-66), a piece permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is also, as a complex construction containing an allusive void, a reference point for Woodfine's work. The most significant image with respect to themes developed in *Sky End* is, however, Alberto Giacometti's sculpture *Woman with her Throat Cut* of 1932, which Woodfine depicts therein.

The Weather Was Inside
Katie Deith - Helen Maurer - Sarah Woodfine
7 November 2025 - 17 January 2026
By appointment only

Cover: Katie Deith *Shroud,* oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm 2023

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