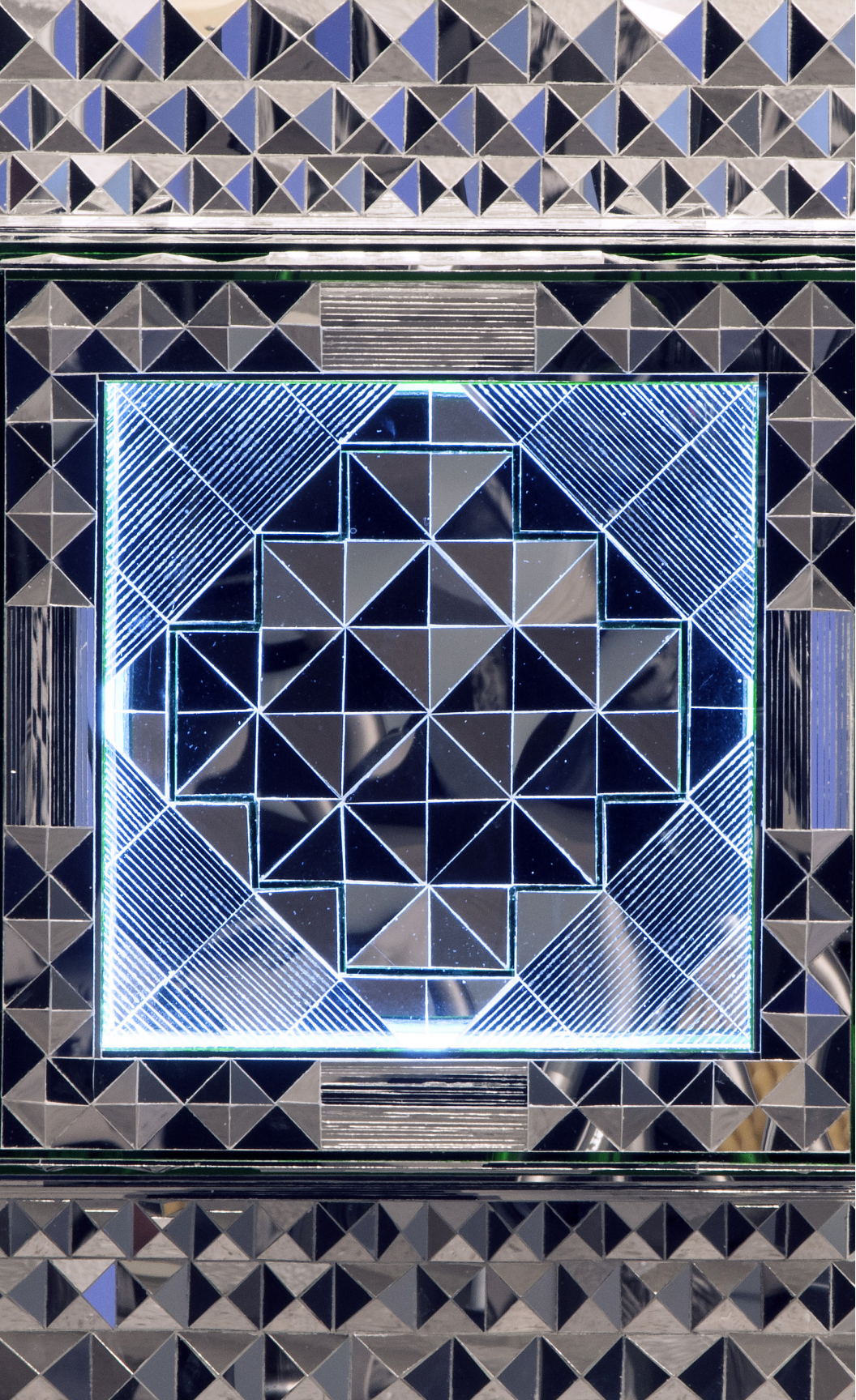




SUMMER 2017

Transmundane



TRANSMUNDANE

DAVEANDJENN, PALOMA RENDÓN DAWKINS, DEBORAH EDMEADES, FRANCES ADAIR MCKENZIE,
RYAN PETER, BRENDAN SCHICK, AND ARMA YARI
JUNE 24 TO SEPTEMBER 6, 2017, SHERWOOD GALLERY
JULY 6 TO SEPTEMBER 27, 2017, CENTRAL MEDIATHEQUE
JULY 7 TO SEPTEMBER 27, 2017, CENTRAL GALLERY
CURATED BY BLAIR FORNWALD, JENNIFER MATOTEK, AND WENDY PEART

Make it Strange

BY BLAIR FORNWALD, JENNIFER MATOTEK, AND WENDY PEART

The “transmundane” refers to that which extends beyond the physical or visible world – beyond the mundane into the realm of the divine or transcendent. There are countless ways that we attempt to gain insight into otherworldly realms from our earthbound positions – with psychedelics and other drugs, or via religious, spiritual, or mind-body practices like prayer, yoga, or meditation. We may attempt to understand and control subconscious drives through clinical practices from cognitive behavioural therapy to hypnosis, or by analyzing natal charts, tarot spreads, or dreams. Rituals, ceremonies, mantras, and spells may be performed to honour, invoke, or alter metaphysical forces that we can only believe to be present. The artists in *Transmundane* make works that tread within this ambiguous territory – creating perplexing, beautiful analogues to trans/mundane experience,

using various means to access the subconscious, and referencing historic milestones that have shaped this long inward journey.

It is undeniable that the pursuit of altered states has profoundly impacted human culture, and that attitudes and perceptions surrounding these pursuits cannot be separated from a complex rubric of social and cultural factors. Drugs have contributed to the Western world’s cultural development – their presence and use is inseparable from the history and artistic production of the Beats, the hippie counterculture of the 1960s, and the rave scene 1980s and 90s, among other movements. The Dadaists and Surrealists experimented with drugs, hypnosis, and automatism in attempts to bypass conscious thought and access the dream-like, supposedly more “pure” realms of the unconscious. Later, in 1959, William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin collaborated on the design

of the “Dreamachine” – a simple flicker device made from a cardboard tube with cutout shapes, a bright light, and a spinning record turntable which lulled viewers into a hypnogogic state, akin to the calm sensation of closing your eyes and staring out the window of a car that zips past buildings and trees – a high that most of us experienced as children – tripping on light itself.

Transmundane artist Arma Yari uses light and mirrors to describe states that Burroughs and Gysin’s Dreamachine stimulates. Her series, titled *3.5-7.5 Hz*, references the electrical activity of theta brainwaves, lower and slower than beta waves (12 to 38 Hz), that indicate “normal” adult brain activity (a waking theta state is considered normal in children under 13). Theta waves indicate a threshold consciousness generated in sleep, deep meditation, under hypnosis, or with sound/light devices designed to alter brainwave frequencies. Yari’s radiant, symmetrical works, assembled with mathematical precision using traditional Islamic tilework techniques, express the relationship between the neurological and the psychological, between objective fact and subjective experience. The size and placement of each mirrored glass triangle corresponds with the incremental shifts in electrical activity of the brain as it enters the REM phase, while the effects of light reflecting from the surfaces of hundreds of tiny, angled mirrors mimics the strange geometry – the alternate clarity and confusion – of a dream-state.

The most inadvertent way to reach an altered state of consciousness is in dreams – another subject that the

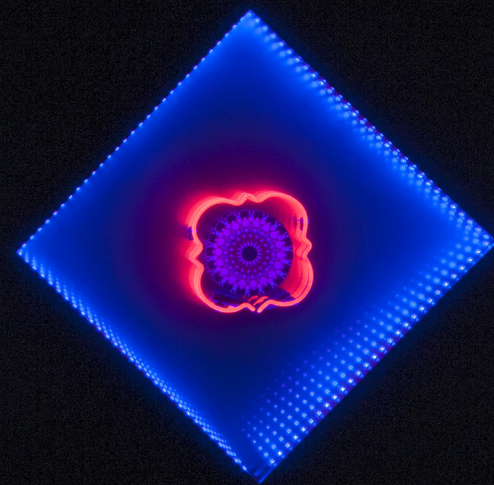
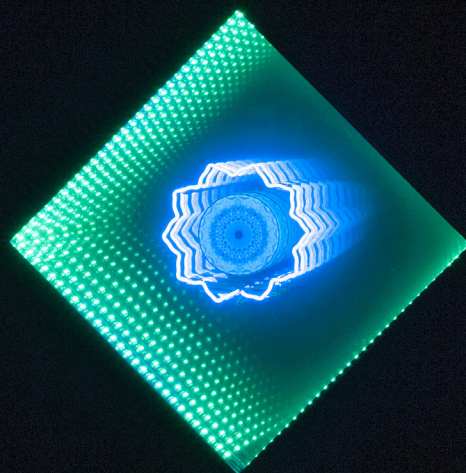
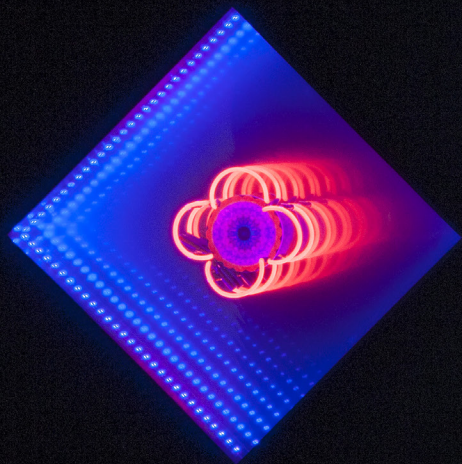
Surrealists aimed to depict with the inconcise language and imagery of real-world referents. Brendan Schick’s oil paintings of crumpled and billowing bedsheets evoke interiority suggestive of the psychosomatic experiences that occur during sleep. A restless sleeper, Schick records and replicates the state of his sheets in the morning, creating strangely telling depictions of his nightly physical and psychological travels.

During REM sleep, we dream, and it is said that our subconscious selves emerge. For those who are lucid dreamers, able to recall dreams, or tend to confuse or intermix awoken and dreamt experiences, the sleeping state is highly charged. We go to bed with anticipation or dread of what might happen in dreamland, where we are safe, but paradoxically vulnerable to the bizarre experiences of the night. Interestingly, traces of human forms seem to emerge in some of Schick’s paintings, inviting the viewer to seek the representational within the abstract, the same processes we use when we aim to decipher dream imagery, or make metaphysical connections between the body and the mind.

In Schick’s graphite drawings, *Placental Broccoli Bonsai* and *Hub*, flora- and fauna-like forms radiate with extreme textural complexity. This level of detail can induce visceral physical and perceptual responses, like nausea or dizziness, demonstrating how specific visual stimulation can affect anticipated neural brain activity.¹ These images take circular forms, with segments branching out in a seemingly endless pattern. As an ancient symbol, the circle or mandala



Brendan Schick, *Rambler in the Clouds* (from the series *Formlessness*, detail), 2017, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of the artist.



represents the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, and is commonly used as a visual tool for meditation. While Schick's bedsheet paintings allude to the uncontrollability and vulnerability of our dream-state, these drawings articulate a desire to enter the transcendental realm in a purposeful and meaningful way.

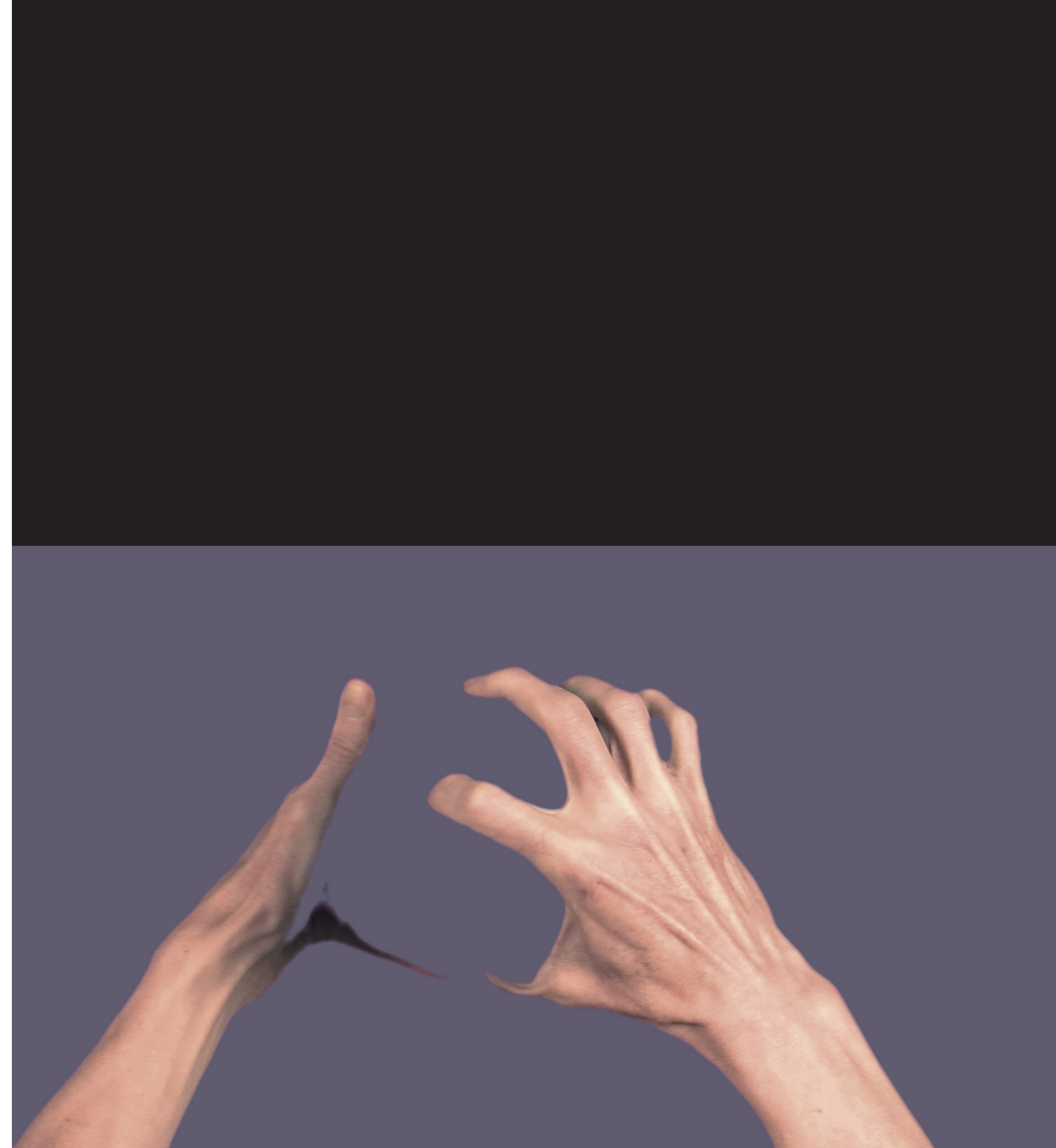
Having access to higher spiritual planes is inextricably bound to issues of class, race, and state-sanctioned belief systems and laws. The exalted artistic contributions of Aldous Huxley and the Beatniks, for example, stand in opposition to centuries of negative treatment towards disenfranchised drug users, and use by people of colour. Similarly, the religious and spiritual practices of Indigenous and minority populations have been, and are often still, government-suppressed.

Many psychotropics that are now classified substances have long-since been used as medicine. Peyote and ayahuasca, from which mescaline and DMT are derived, have long-since been used in Indigenous ceremonies. Coca, from which cocaine is derived, has been used for pain management and other purposes since prehistory. Cannabis has an equally-long history of use, and has only recently and partially regained its status as a legal medicinal herb. Albert Hofmann, Abram Hoffer, Humphry Osmond, and Duncan Blewett tested LSD as a treatment for alcoholism and the delirium tremens of withdrawal, schizophrenia, PTSD, depression, and psychosis at the Weyburn Mental Hospital in the 1950s, research supported by the province and the University of Saskatchewan.

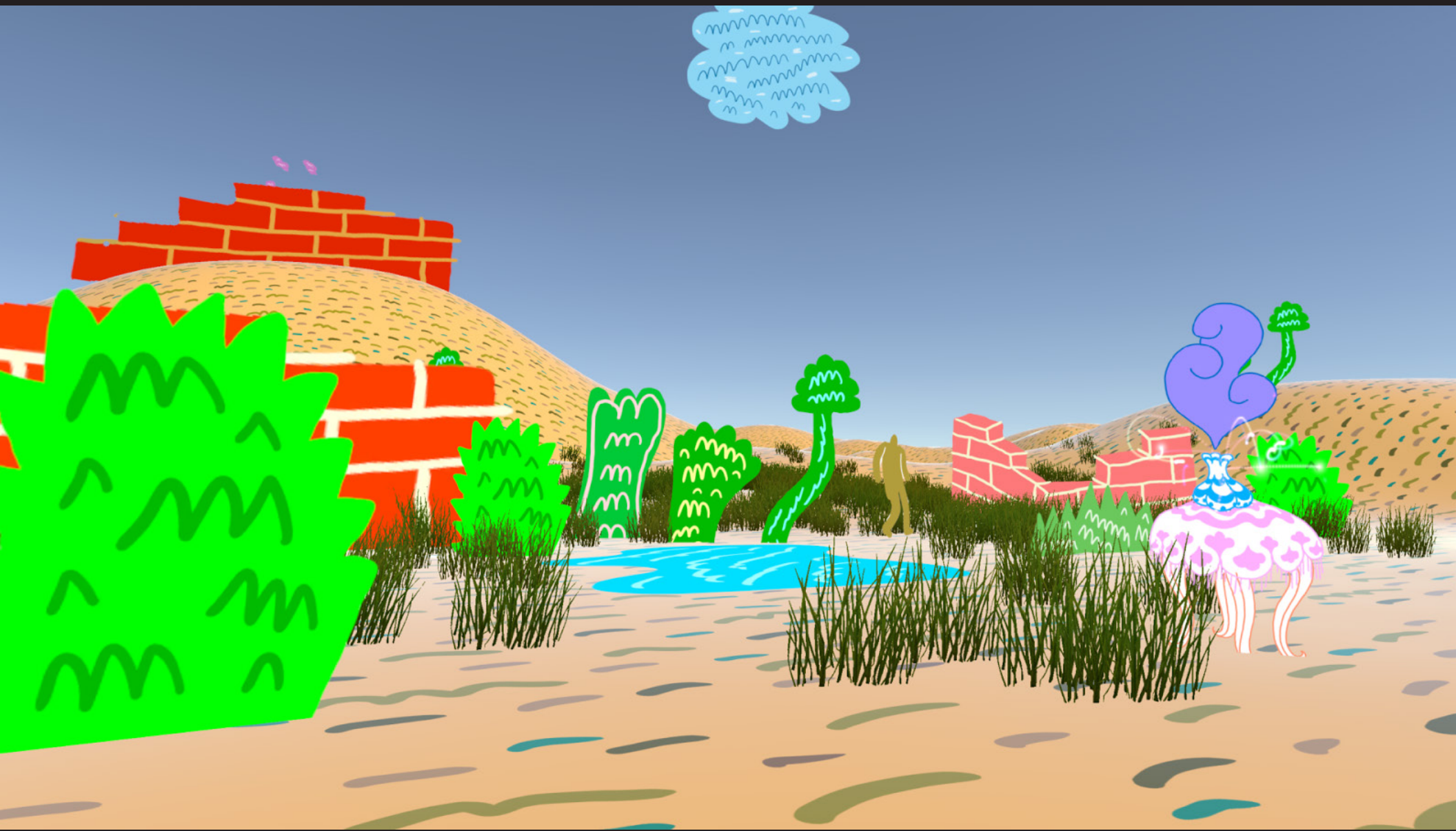
Similarly, MDMA was promoted by chemist and psychopharmacologist Dr. Alexander Shulgin and psychotherapist Dr. Leo Zeff as an empathy-enhancing aid to talk therapy in the mid-1970s, moved from the therapist's couch to the dancefloor in the 1980s, and is now being considered as a possible treatment for PTSD.

Arma Yari's series, *A Chemical Love Story*, pays tribute to the psychedelic pioneers who synthesized, studied, and made impassioned, poetic arguments for the substances they grew to know and love. The series title is taken from the subtitle of Shulgin's psychedelic "how-to" manual, *PiHKAL*, and individual titles reference *Dr. A.H.* (Albert Hofmann, who discovered LSD), the chemistry of psychedelic substances, and the neurochemical processes that occur when they are taken into the body. In each piece, a central photographic image, based on an MRI scan, the molecular structure of a psychotropic substance, or a neurotransmitter being chemically stimulated, has been altered to achieve radial symmetry. Each image is encircled in bright coloured neon and encased in a mirrored lightbox lined with strips of LED lighting. The effect is a hallucinatory and transfixing mise en abyme that pulls the viewer's eye into a space that, like a psychedelic trip, is both physical and illusory.

For the last several years, Deborah Edmeades has explored the therapeutic dimensions of esoteric and mystical practices and philosophical thought. Through her video, installation and performance work, Edmeades proposes 21st century of ways of theorizing



Deborah Edmeades, *This (and this and this...)*, 2014, video. Video still courtesy of the artist.



Paloma Rendón Dawkins, *Palomystery*, 2016, videogame. Featuring a scene designed by Keith Jones, *Aphrodite Affirmations* by Andrea Young, and music by Neo Edo, Snowboarder/Karneef, YlangYlang, and Eccinaccea. Videogame still courtesy of the artist.

the self, creating visual speculations about how we see and understand the world through complex and incidental thought as well as sensory experience. Edmeades' works in *Transmundane* are united by concerns of perception, vision, and insight. *Blinking and Other Involuntary Portals* addresses conceptual and spiritual ideas around the nature and function of the "lens" – the portal through which the eye sees and makes sense of the world. A pair of electromagnetic powered sculptural eyes adorned with glittery lashes endlessly blink before a live video feed. Equally mesmerizing, the video *This (and this and this...)* features a pair of hands gripping and manipulating a series of invisible objects, shot against a green screen. The physical handling of the objects is deliberate and seems to be mysteriously colour-coded – decisions that tell the viewer as much about the nature of the objects as the nature of the artist. In the context of *Transmundane*, Edmeades' works remind us that raw consciousness and lived experience itself, without activation from substances, can be a total trip – that colour is a conceptual product of our nervous system, that subjectivity is a mystery that can't be proven, that at a certain tipping point, material existence and scientific fact dissolve into conjecture, faith, and mystery, and that the brain can simultaneously hold belief and disbelief as evidence of a continual breach in stable consciousness – a consciousness that views itself, like the forever-blinking eyes of her kinetic sculpture.

An increased interest in accessing otherworldly realms seems to be

linked to both personal and historical periods of overwhelming uncertainty. In the videogame *Palmystery*, Paloma Rendón Dawkins provides the viewer with a trippy, haptic experience – a journey into an animated universe filled with hands, sigils, and symbols, set to a haunting soundtrack. Navigating *Palmystery* is mysterious; it isn't immediately obvious how to proceed from one level to the next. Rather than seeking the traditional goal of advancement to higher levels, *Palmystery* asks the viewer to search for secret doorways that calmly open new worlds to explore. What this exploration yields for each player will depend on their unique interaction with the game, but those who pass through Dawkins' worlds, filled with various panics, will find a calm and entrancing conclusion. It is notable that *Palmystery* was developed just after the American election in response to Trump's presidential win² – a reflection of a dark present and nebulous future.

Transmundane artist Ryan Peter's photograms are reminiscent of works from the Surrealist era, which corresponds to another uncertain period: the economic instability and rise of fascism following the First World War. Applying paints, chemicals and industrial materials to translucent plastic film, placing these films atop photosensitive paper, and using traditional darkroom processes like dodging and burning, Peter creates strange figures and otherworldly narratives. Vertically stacked lumpen shapes create biological forms with heads, eyes, and hands – motifs which repeat in the foreground and background, amidst strange landscapes.



Ryan Peter, *LL*, 2016, unique gelatin silver print (photogram). Photo: Don Hall.



DaveandJenn, PAINTEATER/*Thin Skin Thick Hide*, 2015, epoxy, bronze, and mixed media. Photo: Don Hall.

Together, these elements offer a viewing experience akin to zoning out or daydreaming, finding faces in the moon or animal shapes in clouds. While Peter's figures may first appear silly or benign, the bodily motifs (as in the hands, symbols, and sigils of Dawkin's *Palmystery*) are like components of a recurring nightmare. The figures themselves seem to be imprisoned in the images, frozen in various states of distress or discomfort, arranged in ways that prohibit movement, or impossibly and precariously unbalanced, creating a sense of anxiety. Like a Rorschach inkblot test, Peter's photograms may serve as a litmus for the viewer's own psychological states.

The worlds created by the artist duo DaveandJenn (David Foy and Jennifer Saleik) are similarly uncanny and remarkable places. The works in *Transmundane* are from a body of work called *A Natural History of Islands*, which marks a departure from their viscerally layered painting practice to a sculptural one. It is as if their paintings were left to soak in a warm magical liquid, absorbing it like dry sponges, until the figures contained within their canvases mutated, sprung to life, and adapted to the conditions of the wild, three-dimensional world. Together they suggest a unified microcosm of the fittest or feistiest of creatures. DaveandJenn flesh out weighty concepts like love, loss, interconnection, purpose, and death through their credibly rendered beings – equipped with wings, fingernails, horns, flesh, fur, boils, spores, and talons – positioned to tell fairytale-like eco-narratives that address grand themes. Sourced from

online imagery and rendered primarily in versatile polymer clay, each piece delicately stations a complex cosmos of polarities: reality and fantasy, futility and hope, life and decay, pain and ecstasy. *This Creeping Feeling*, for instance, depicts two humanoid coral creatures carrying a third to what one might assume is safety, an act of loving altruism – a dream-image that might articulate contradictory feelings of hopelessness and duty to act as good stewards faced with the unprecedented collapse of our real-world coral reef ecology. *In Pretender is the Other Bird*, the protagonist postures atop of shiny tree; pierced, hollow-eyed, and doing its best to display endurance and virility. It appears to project a plea to a higher force, asking for some elevation or reprieve from a dark and ominous reality.

Frances Adair McKenzie's video, *A Love Poem to Unnecessary Objects*, renders the stuff of everyday life strange. Using a variety of digital and analog editing techniques, including stop motion animation, puppetry, and chroma key compositing, McKenzie makes half-inflated balloons, a lightbulb, knives, adaptor cables, workout dumbbells, and novelty décor items vibrate with animate energy. Latex-glove-clad hands feel up pieces of fruit and creep across the screen like insects. Cheap party store wigs in bright, unnatural hues dance and spin. Amidst the hoard of household objects are squishy, visceral body parts, which also twitch and twirl: a grid of pink button nipples, beating hearts, a mass of intestines that communicate by spelling out words in undulating cursive script. In McKenzie's



Frances Adair McKenzie, *A Love Poem to Unnecessary Objects*, 2013, video. Vidéograph Residency Project, sound by Benjamin IV. Video still courtesy of the artist.





Jelly, animated video is projected atop a wall-mounted tactile support, also tube-like and intestinal. The endless progression of glitchy video images – of blinking eyes, twitching mouths, reptilian scales and unidentifiable textures that seem to inflate and deflate – makes it appear as if the structure is heaving and sighing, digesting, or moving, like the delicate jellyfish that float across the screen in the background. These pieces articulate the strange attachments that we forge with inanimate objects, and the strangeness of being – our fleshy bodies both whole and composite, corporeal, but somehow more than that too.

Transmundane articulates the desire to seek the transcendent within the mundane. The roots of this desire are as numerous as the ways one might satisfy it: focusing inward when the world outside overwhelms us; focusing outward to appreciate the awesome intricacy of the micro- and macrocosmic realities that we are a part of; creating sigils and talismans from mere symbols and stuff. Turning on, tuning in and dropping out is both a coping strategy and an act of protest.

¹ Bruce Goldstein, *Cognitive Psychology: Connecting Mind, Research and Everyday Experience* (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning; Stamford, 2015), 285-287.

² Chris Priestman, "Mindlessly Dance Through Cartoon Fantasies in 'Palmystery'", *VICE*, 24 March 2017, accessed 19 May 2017 <https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/mindlessly-dance-through-cartoon-fantasies-in-palmystery>



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COVER IMAGE

Deborah Edmeades, *Blinking and Other Involuntary Portals* (detail), 2016, rocks, felt, wood, paint, false eyelashes, silver leaf, paper, galvanized wire, polyester resin, magnets, circuitry, solar panels, mount board, 5" video monitors, cameras, and teleprompter glass. Photo: Blaine Campbell.



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