Title and General Introduction to the exhibition.

Natural World

What is natural about the world as we know it? How do we teach ourselves to recognize the community of beings, things, relationships, and experiences that make up a natural order? This exhibition explores perceptions of the world that expand and nuance the lenses through which we understand the way things are, can be, and should be.

Natural World is a collaboration between artists John Edmonds and David Hartt, whose newly commissioned bodies of work are on view, poet and scholar Jason Allen-Paisant, and curator Nathaniel M. Stein. Each of these individuals brings particular tools and perspectives to the task of perceiving the world in new ways. A shared premise is that our concepts of naturalness are socially constructed and can evolve.

In addition to these two galleries, Edmonds and Hartt have selected meaningful places throughout the museum to display their artwork. Please take an exhibition guide to find their additional installations.

The artists also expand on their projects in a companion book, designed by Hartt and with new writing by Allen-Paisant and Stein.

Section Title and Introduction to an installation by artist David Hartt.

David Hartt

The Garden

David Hartt (Canadian, b.1967) created the installation in this room in dialogue with the museum's collection. In The Garden, Hartt examines ways of seeing and picturing the world rooted in European artistic, political, and intellectual traditions. He presents us with opportunities to recognize certain stories about the nature of the world and to consider the significance of what they do not say.

Hartt paired his new artworks with older objects he selected from the museum's collection. His selections focus on cultural activity in France and Italy in the 18th and 19th centuries, a period shaped by the far-reaching effects of the Enlightenment, European imperialism, and industrialization. Most artworks on view depict Paris, Rome, or their surrounding countrysides. Like tending gardens, humans have fashioned the physical shape and symbolic meaning of these places for centuries. They are also enduring subjects of artistic representation.

Hartt created new images of present-day Rome in materials and visual styles that echo past acts of representation, pointing out their interests and limitations. His works draw attention to plants that grow outside the physical parameters and social meanings humans have assigned to them. For Hartt, these ever-present, non-human lifeforms hint at other life that is present and active in the world, yet marginalized by dominant systems of representation. The Garden raises the possibility of including silenced positions in a shared conversation about the nature of the world.

Artwork Labels appearing in David Hartt's installation.

[A grouped artwork label addressing five photographs by Édouard Baldus.]

Édouard Baldus (French, born Prussia, 1813–1889)

Pont du Gard

circa 1861

albumen silver print

Museum Purchase: Gift of H. Tracy Balcom, by exchange

1978.250

Île de la Cité, Paris

circa 1855

salted paper print

Library Transfer

1989.77

Place du Carrousel (Tuileries from Pavillon de l'Horloge, Louvre, Paris)

early 1850s

albumen silver print

Gift of Alfred Traber Goshorn, 1892 (Library Transfer)

1981.327

Avignon

circa 1861

albumen silver print

Bequest of Elizabeth Haven Appleton, 1891 (Library Transfer)

1981.335

Les Remparts d'Avignon

1856, printed later

albumen silver print

Bequest of Elizabeth Haven Appleton, 1891 (Library Transfer)

1981.334

In 1851 the French government commissioned photographers, including Édouard Baldus, to perform a survey of the nation's architectural heritage. Baldus went on to depict many subjects after completing his initial commission, including Roman and medieval monuments near the Mediterranean (Pont du Gard, Avignon) and, in Paris, the transformation of the Louvre under Napoleon III (1808–1873).

One of the French government's motivations for a national survey was to legitimize Napoleon III's revival of the French empire on the model established by his uncle, Napoleon I (1769–1821). In the late 1700s, the elder Napoleon ordered an unprecedented survey of Egypt—a key step in the military, political, and intellectual process of European imperialism—illustrated with engravings. The later photographic campaign within France used similar visual strategies in a related effort to present the world in a certain order.

Consider how these photographs reflect upon human shaping of the environment over history. What—and whose—ideas about a proper order seem to be at play? Is there anything about the pictured world itself that disrupts the message?

[A grouped artwork label addressing photographs by Gioacchino Altobelli, David Hartt, and Charles Aubry.]

Gioacchino Altobelli (Italian, 1814–about 1879)

Castel e Ponte Sant'Angelo, Rome

circa 1868

albumen silver print

The Albert P. Strietmann Collection

1979.41

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

The Garden (Papaver rhoeas, Sonchus oleraceus, Matricaria discoidea & Hordeum murinum / Rome, Italy / May 20, 2022)

2022

dye transfer print

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum

Charles Aubry (French, 1811–1877)

Roses

circa 1864

albumen silver print

The Albert P. Strietmann Collection

1980.93

In the 1860s, Charles Aubry, a designer by training, created a photographic archive of flora to help French industrial designers modernize their production of botanical patterns. Gioacchino Altobelli was a trained painter who transitioned to photography as the market for photographic souvenirs began to supplant the demand for paintings among Roman tourists. Both artists are known for the elegance of their imagery even

as they moved older representational practices into the modern language of photography. Arguably, elegance is a quality attributed to representations that skillfully present the world to a cultural elite through the prism of their aesthetic values.

Like Aubry, David Hartt represents a botanical subject at close range. Like Altobelli, Hartt depicts an intersection of nature and the built environment in the historic city of Rome. Yet, Hartt's picture suggests a different representational priority and a different relationship between nature and the city, as well as a new way of looking at Aubry's and Altobelli's pictures.

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

The Garden (Acanthus mollis, Urtica dioica & Oenanthe javanica / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022)

2022

polyester, cotton, wool, and acrylic yarns

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum

Charles Nègre (French, 1820–1880)

Plants in Sunlight

circa 1865

albumen silver print

Museum Purchase: Gift of John Sanborn Conner, by exchange

1981.157

Charles Nègre was among the early French photographers who explored the medium's potential in many ways. An academically trained artist, Nègre made camera studies to aid painters, as well as portrait, genre, and landscape photographs that

stood as artworks in their own right. He also sought government patronage for photographic survey projects similar to those of his contemporary, Édouard Baldus.

Here, Nègre pictures a thicket of plants, probably in his home city of Nice. The vegetation takes on a shimmering and ambiguous quality even while the artist offers a direct, close-range view of the subject. Nègre did not often photograph plants. It is difficult to know whether he meant this picture as a visual aid for painters, a record for botanists, a personal note about something he found meaningful, a study of Mediterranean light, an almost abstract artwork, all of these things, or none. The new context provided in this room suggests new ways of seeing Nègre's 160-year-old photograph.

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

The Garden (Passiflora foetida / Rome, Italy / May 17, 2022)

2022

polyester, cotton, wool, and acrylic yarns

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum

Théodore Rousseau (French, 1812–1867)

Le Cerisier de la Plante à Biau (Cherry Tree at Plante à Biau), from the portfolio Quarante Clichés-Glace

1862, published 1921

cliché-verre

Gift of Herbert Greer French

1940.594

The painter Théodore Rousseau made this image in the Forest of Fountainebleau, about 35 miles south of Paris. Along with other Barbizon School painters, Rousseau

saw the forest as a place to reinvent art by painting nature from direct experience rather than basing pictures on other examples from art history. He believed trees possessed a kind of consciousness and had something to communicate.

Humans have shaped the Forest of Fountainebleau from prehistory to the present. When Rousseau worked there, the forest was the subject of preservation efforts due to railroads and encroaching industry. While he aims to make unspoiled nature a ground for artistic truth, inadvertently, he shows that nature is already entwined with society. This cliché-verre is a photographic print (made from a hand-drawn glass negative), meaning that Rousseau used a modern technology—photography—to represent a natural world he imagined to be pure.

Manufacture Royale de Beauvais (French, est. 1679, closed 1780)

after cartoon by Francesco Giuseppe Casanova (Italian, 1727–1803)

Les Quatre Ages: Le Concert (The Four Ages: The Concert)

1778-1780

wool, silk

Gift of John W. Warrington and Joseph B. Hall

1960.19

A luxury object intended to decorate a grand home, this tapestry presents an idyllic depiction of the French nobility enjoying music and other cultured leisure pursuits within a verdant paradise and overgrown classical ruins. The foreground hunting motif suggests ownership of vast managed lands. Yet, amid all this teeming nature, work is only hinted at by figures from lower social classes: a rustic stablehand and an African servant whose presence indicates the social hierarchy of empire. The Concert represents the rightly-ordered world as seen from the perspective of its owners. It tells of a harmonious relationship with nature imagined through and for the dominant social structure.

There are two other tapestries in this room, both contemporary works by David Hartt, that ask us to consider different stories about the world. Hartt also asks us to consider

how our twenty-first-century eyes—sharpened with artworks like his—can read between the lines of older pictures such as The Concert in a way people at that time might not have been equipped to do.

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

The Garden (Rosa hybrida & Wisteria sinensis / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022)

2022

dye transfer print

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum

[Three artwork labels for three objects displayed on a table in the middle of the gallery.]

Nathan Flint Baker (American, 1820–1891)

Leavitt Hunt (American, 1831–1907)

Remains of Temple of Venus and Roma, Rome, in the album Souvenir of the Orient

1851–1852, printed and album assembled 1900–1910

gelatin silver print from waxed paper negative

FotoFocus Art Purchase Fund and Gift of Frederick Rock

2013.251.9

The son of a prominent Cincinnati family, Nathan Flint Baker went to Italy to study sculpture. Baker befriended Leavitt Hunt, another American in Italy to absorb the lessons of antiquity and establish a cultural pedigree. In Rome, they became involved with a group of European artists who explored the artistic potential of photography.

Among them was the British painter-photographer James Anderson, whose work is also on view on this table. Do you notice similarities between their photographs?

In 1851, Baker and Hunt embarked on a journey around the Mediterranean and Near East. They were the first Americans to photograph many of the places they visited. Yet, their voyage was also conventional. Privileged Europeans had long made similar journeys to establish their cultural accomplishment. The purpose of such as trip was to study a Eurocentric history of the world and to show other members of high society that one had seen the right things in the right way.

But, look closely. In conversation with David Hartt's work, is there anything about these photographs that you might see differently than Baker and Hunt's contemporaries?

Probably James Anderson (British, 1813–1877)

Temple of Minerva Medica, Rome, in the album Roma

1855–1870s, album assembled circa 1861–1878

albumen silver print

Gift of the Grandsons of Susan L. Winslow, 1905 (Library Transfer)

1981.715.28

James Anderson relocated from England to Rome in 1838 to develop his career as a painter and sculptor. He took up photography around 1849, joining a circle of artists in Rome also exploring the potential of the new medium. Nathan Flint Baker and Leavitt Hunt were among this circle, and their work is also on view on this table. Do you notice similarities between Anderson's, Baker's and Hunt's photographs?

Anderson quickly established a reputation as one of the finest and most prolific photographers of art and architecture in Rome, selling photographs to well-heeled tourists wishing to take home evidence of their encounter with the history and cultural wealth of the city. His pictures were also distributed by a printseller in Britain. Whether

or not they were able to travel, buyers of luxurious albums like this one could demonstrate their cultural savvy by showing that they knew how to look at the right things in the right ways.

But, look closely. In conversation with David Hartt's work, is there anything about these photographs that you might see differently than Anderson and his contemporaries?

Unidentified artist

after Jean-Antoine Houdon (French, 1741–1828)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

19th century

plaster

John J. Emery Fund

1944.104

Why does a soiled bust of the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau preside over a contemporary photography exhibition?

One might expect to see a bust like this in a library, university, or even (if it were made of a material suitable for the outdoors) a stately garden. Like museums, these are places historically enabled by wealth and the holding of property, where members of society build upon existing knowledge of the world. In that sense, this artwork is part of a conversation through which we learn to perceive the world in established ways.

Yet, conversations can be cut across. Sculptures and other artworks held in museum storage can be used to tell unexpected stories. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that what we take to be the natural order is actually a social creation. Rather than seeing the status quo as a reflection of natural law, he argued that there is no natural right to own land, things, or living beings, and that societies have the power to transfigure themselves by enlarging the scope of voices in their conversation.

Text Appearing in the Exhibition Guide.

Exhibition Guide

Natural World

What is natural about the world as we know it?

When we build, write, or paint, we make sense of the world through specific ideas about the quality of naturalness and the meaning of nature. The representations we create—when shaping cities, landscapes, and bodies—invest our physical world with social meanings. But culturally dominant understandings of the natural world are both foundations of knowledge and limitations on our ability to see.

Museums play a role in building and teaching human stories, of which they are an improving, but still imperfect, microcosm. In addition to the two first-floor galleries devoted to the Natural World exhibition, artists John Edmonds and David Hartt have selected places throughout the museum to display their artwork. To find their additional installations, please use the map inside this guide.

As you move through the museum, notice how frequently artists use nature to carry social meaning and how central those meanings are to prevailing stories about human life and art history. Look carefully, and you will also find nature incorporated in the museum's architecture and grounds: You are learning about the meaning of nature through pictures set inside a built representation of the natural world. How might Edmonds's and Hartt's artworks open this circle?

Around the Museum

- Gallery 106/107, Cincinnati 1800s, intervention by David Hartt.
- Gallery 103, African, intervention by John Edmonds and David Hartt.
- Gallery 208, Europe 1600s-1800s, intervention by David Hartt.
- Gallery 207, France 1700s, intervention by David Hartt.
- Gallery 204, Europe 1100s-1500s, intervention by John Edmonds.

In Print

Conceived as a conceptual extension of the exhibition and designed by David Hartt, the book The Natural World present Edmonds's and Hartt's photographs together with artworks and documents they selected from the collections and archives of the museum. Essays by Jason Allen-Paisant and Nathaniel M. Stein explore interrelated encounters with collections and the natural world, reflecting on the practice of history against the impetus to tell history straight.

Available in the Museum Shop.

Project Collaborators

Jason Allen-Paisant (Jamaican, lives/works Leeds, England, b. 1980) is a poet and Associate Professor of Aesthetic Theory and Decolonial Thought in the School of English and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds.

David Hartt (Canadian, lives/works Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, b. 1967) is an artist and Associate Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania.

John Edmonds (American, lives/works Brooklyn, New York, b. 1989) is an artist and photographer who is currently Visiting Lecturer on Art, Film and Visual Studies at Harvard University.

Nathaniel M. Stein (American, lives/works Cincinnati, Ohio, b. 1976) is an art historian and Curator of Photography at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Artwork Labels appearing with the artists' interventions in five of the museum's permanent galleries.

Gallery 103

African

Contemporary artists David Hartt and John Edmonds have removed two large, wall-mounted ethnographic photographs from this gallery. (See below.) Volunteer museum educators often refer to these pictures when talking about the making and use of African objects in their cultures of origin.

Hartt and Edmonds replaced one of the photographs with a new photomural based on their work for the special exhibition Natural World. One half of the image shows a scene from an 18th-century tapestry made for the home of a French aristocrat. The other half depicts a document from the museum's files. It is a 1969 picture of a wooden sculpture from Gabon, which a staff member annotated to record the sculpture's physical condition. The sculpture is on view in this gallery.

Look carefully at the old and new images. Consider what they show—and remain silent about—and what new conversations Hartt and Edmonds invite into this gallery. The new photomural broaches complex histories of wealth, ownership, representation, and violence in which present-day museums remain implicated. It also points to an intersection between Hartt's and Edmonds's artistic projects. In their own ways, both artists perceive that dominant ideas about nature play a role in the marginalization of humans.

This installation is part of the exhibition Natural World. An exhibition guide is available in the galleries across from the Terrace Café.

Gallery 106/107

Cincinnati 1800s

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

The Histories (after Duncanson)

2020

photogravure

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

The Histories (after Duncanson) is a contemporary photograph of the Blue Hole, a geological feature on the Little Miami River in John Bryan State Park near Yellows Springs, Ohio. Hanging behind you is the artwork to which artist David Hartt points: Robert S. Duncanson's Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River. Duncanson—a free Black American who established himself as an artist before the Civil War—painted the canvas in 1851. Unpeopled, symmetrically composed, and printed in carefully balanced shades of grey, Hartt's picture is different from Duncanson's even while it creates a close dialogue. The photograph suggests the development of new ways to see the world and parse old images, as well as a connection between two Black artists' acts of seeing over a century apart. In the broadest sense, Hartt's work underlines the ongoing presence of statements about the world by artists speaking from complex marginalized perspectives.

This installation is part of the exhibition Natural World. An exhibition guide is available in the galleries across from the Terrace Café.

Gallery 207

France 1700s

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

The Garden (Parietaria judaica / Tivoli, Italy / May 19, 2022)

2022

dye transfer print

Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum

Parietaria judaica—common name "pellitory-of-the-wall"—is considered a weed rather than a human-cultivated plant. It is known for growing in the cracks of stone constructions and among architectural ruins. Although Parietaria judaica is native to Europe and North Africa, it has established itself on several continents.

David Hartt's vivid, close-up picture of a Parietaria judaica plant growing amid the storied ruins at Tivoli hovers between a scientific illustration and an alien form of portraiture. Plant life is ubiquitous in the artworks and architecture of this gallery and the adjacent galleries of European art. There are even other depictions of Tivoli, Rome, and the Campagna that include flora. Consider the different approach and emphasis Hartt brings to these subjects. What voice is telling the story in the other representations of nature you see around you? In Hartt's?

This installation is part of the exhibition Natural World. An exhibition guide is available in the galleries across from the Terrace Café.

Gallery 208

Europe 1600s-1800s

David Hartt (Canadian, b. 1967)

Fragment

2014

cast bronze

Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery, New York

Motivated human representations of nature are everywhere in the museum and especially concentrated in this small gallery—from the geometry and ornament of the ceiling, to the artworks on view, to the materials and motifs that make up the floor.

In the center of the room, David Hartt has placed Fragment, a bronze cast of an acanthus plant. Acanthus leaves have been part of the structure and ornament of human-built places and things since at least the first millennium BCE. In modern buildings for learning and enjoyment such as museums, acanthus leaves point to classical architecture, the cultural accomplishment of Greece and Rome, and ultimately to social meanings assigned to the acanthus in human mythology. What if the acanthus began to assert its own force and logic within a human telling of its nature and meaning?

This installation is part of the exhibition Natural World. An exhibition guide is available in the galleries across from the Terrace Café.