

Fall 2022

TR 11 am-12:20 pm



Rebecca Zorach

368-0 Special Topics
in Modern Art

Art and the Place of Nature in Modernity

How did we get into this mess? The idea that human beings are separate from something called “nature” which they can and should dominate and control is one of the most pervasive ideas in modern Western culture—meaning European and North American culture since the end of the Middle Ages. Over hundreds of years, alongside and intertwining with the development of capitalism and colonialism (for the “indigenous” was often placed on the side of nature), Western culture produced artificial divisions between human and nonhuman nature. Artists and scientists alike aspired to equal nature’s powers and eventually exploit and “conquer” it—or “her,” since “Nature” has often been gendered female—with the tools of technology. How did this come about? How did nature push back? This course attempts an alternative, ecological history of Western art from the perspective of how art has depicted, defined, constructed, and reckoned with nature. What is nature and the natural? How do nature and art mutually define one another? What does it mean when art rejects nature? Without attempting to be comprehensive, the course will work through carefully selected case studies—some of them student-generated—in landscape, still life, and figure painting; scientific illustration; garden and landscape design; and photography. We will read accessible scholarship and primary texts in art theory and natural science. We will try (and undoubtedly not fully succeed) to come to terms with how this history is reflected in contemporary ecological and epidemiological crises. The course will be taught as a combination of lecture, discussion, and student presentations. It does not require prior knowledge but does hope for your attentive engagement and intellectual curiosity. Written work includes short papers, take-home midterm, and an 8-10pp final paper.

Required Textbooks: NA

Assessments: attendance, participation, mid-term exam, group project, group work, final paper, papers, writing assignments

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