

Luis Valenzuela

Extinct in the Wild

SVA MFA Fine Arts, Class of 2024

Artist Statement

In my work I think about the ways digital media affects my ability to empathize with nature. The sheer scale of both the ecological crisis and our oversaturated media environments can be overwhelming. Digital technology not only bombards us with information, it integrates everything—animals, land, images, viruses, humans—into data that can be systematized and compared. Rather than diminishing or flattening the world around us, I choose to see this as an opportunity to enrich the sense of the continuity between human and natural worlds.

I work with painting, collage, and digital media to pair natural and digital aesthetics. Nature and the digital do not fuse, but I place them in a contested space through collage. I'm interested in representing the sense of the uncanny associated with new technology, where there is a sudden shift and the familiar becomes strange. Like the rise of AI-generated images or the proliferation of bots on the Internet, the differences between human and nonhuman sources often become less clear. I think the emotional space of the uncanny can help open up and reorient our understanding of the world as more alive, rather than fatigue us. I visually represent this kind of unsettling doubt by iterating images in a sequence in different media, suggesting my hand, but focusing on a sense of mutating repetition. Only a dense tangle of digital artifacts, paint, biomorphic shapes, and landscape remains. By creating moments for curiosity and disrupting expectations of immediate recognition of the natural or digital, intuitive connections between forms may start to appear for the viewer, allowing for the possibility of a novel form of vitality that is neither natural or digital, but along a continuum of life.

Extinct in the Wild

Extinct in the Wild is an ongoing series of collage paintings on canvas and an installation of transparent plastic prints paired with a digital projection. The title is taken from the scientific category for endangered species that only exist in human captivity. In this project, I think about how I can articulate empathy for these species by representing their uncanny entanglement with humans and the systems that maintain them. I am doing this through abstraction.

Like most people, I only interact with these obscure species through images and archives online. I want to represent this distance and disconnection, rather than focus on the direct visual appeal of a creature. Each piece forms a kind of habitat inspired by my research, with the species camouflaged into the scene. I apply my visual language of iterative collage—fragmenting and remaking images with both digital editing and painting— to create a sense of overwhelming information. In this way, I represent the real life implications for these species, which often change morphologically due to captivity.



Kihansi Spray. 2024

Inkjet canvas print collage. 24" x 36"

Kihansi Spray (2023) is inspired by the Kihansi Spray Toad, a species native to a single 5-acre area at the base of the Kihansi River waterfall in Tanzania. Adapted to this unique habitat, the species was nearly eradicated due to the building of the Kihansi Dam in 1999. Artificial sprinkler systems mimicking the waterfall spray were not functional at the time of construction, leading conservationists to create a captive breeding program at zoos in North America. Creating the specific conditions for these toads proved difficult; out of six zoos, only the Bronx Zoo and Toledo Zoo managed to create stable captive populations. By 2017, efforts to reintroduce the species have begun to show promise, though it remains difficult as the toads must now readapt to living outside of managed environments.



Kihansi Spray

Detail view, middle left



Sedillo Spring. 2023.

Acrylic collage on inkjet canvas print. 36"x24"

Sedillo Spring (2023) is inspired by an isopod species native to a hot spring in New Mexico. They were almost wiped out when pipes feeding its artificial pools were blocked by plant roots. The remnants of this pipe form a hovering darkness above the scene, with the artificial pool set up for the isopods depicted in the center. Tiny scraps of text from scientific archives show up from behind the collage, which is mostly small circular cuts reminiscent of the isopod itself. Like other species, these isopods experienced morphological change in captivity, due to increased selection forces in mating and cannibalistic behavior.



Sedillo Spring
Detail view



Brugmansia. 2024.

Inkjet canvas print collage on acrylic painting. 24" x 36"

Brugmansia (2024) is a genus of seven tropical flowering plants native to South America. They are one of the most toxic types of ornamental plants, containing compounds that cause delirium and hallucinations. Because of these properties, they have been used traditionally by indigenous groups across South America as a sedative, anesthetic, and as part of ritual practices. Today, many of the compounds produced by these plants are now synthesized artificially for medical use.

They are grown ornamentally across the world, and persist within their native ranges in South America, but are under threat. Categorized scientifically as “extinct in the wild”, they have never been found growing outside of human cultivation. It is believed the animal that dispersed the seeds of *Brugmansia* species died out during the Pleistocene, and the usefulness of these plants to humans ensured their survival across time.



Brugmansia

Detail view, center

Extinct in the Wild (2024) is an interactive installation of plastic prints with a projection cast through multiple layers. This piece reflects on the extinct in the wild category as a whole, using images from the paintings and projecting moving images of each species to create a kind of digital-analog 'tank'. The projection is a dynamic set of abstract pixelated images that leave trails of themselves as they move across the space in different patterns. These 82 elements represent each species currently categorized as extinct in the wild.

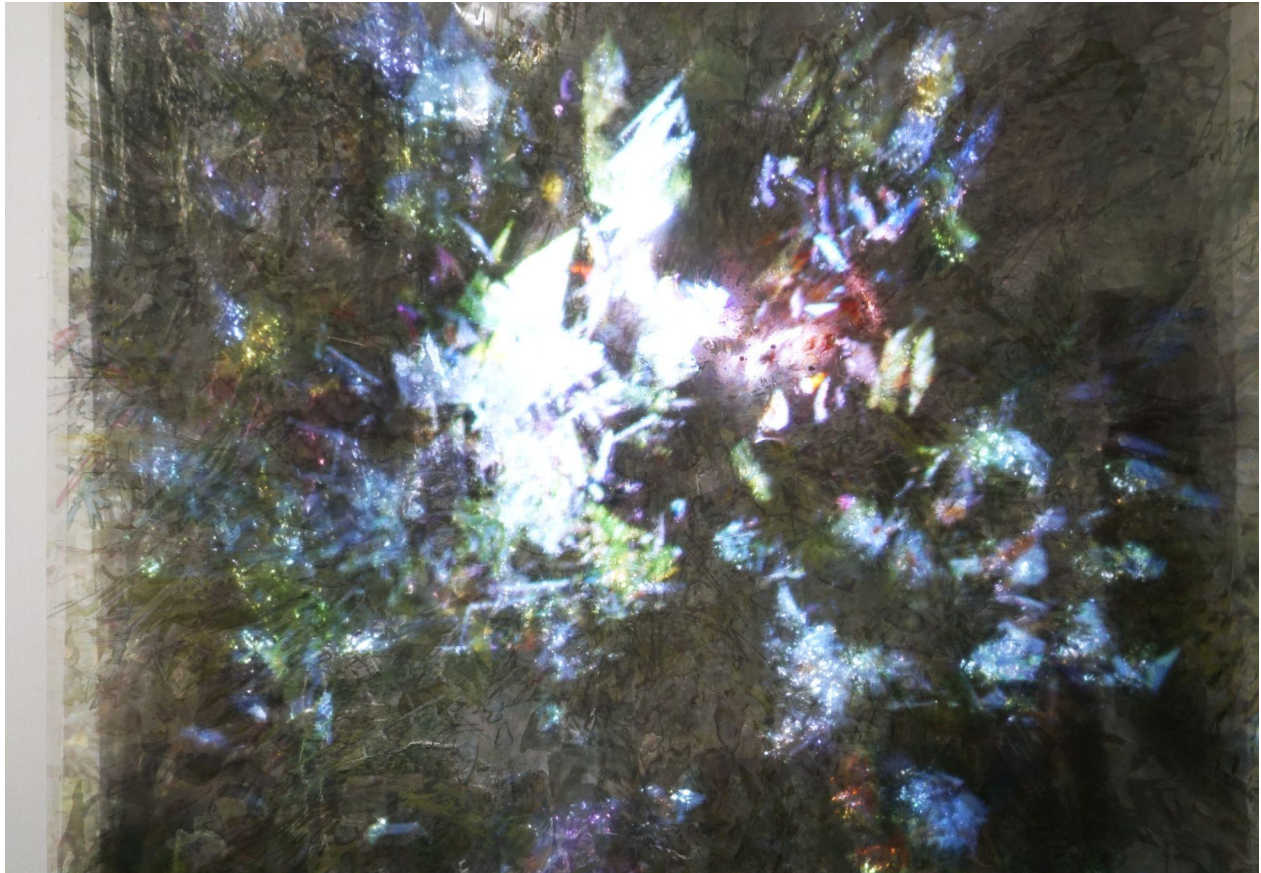
In this installation, I was focused on the ways these species exist as digital objects that are consistently replicating and changing over time. As a viewer approaches the piece, a webcam hidden behind it creates motion in the projection, both activating and disrupting the image. By placing *Extinct in the Wild* alongside the paintings, I reinforce the role of the viewer's desire and the sense of both trepidation and wonder inherent in our mediated interactions with endangered species.



Extinct in the Wild. 2024.

Six inkjet plastic sheets, reflective mylar, digital projection. 44"x44"x5"

vimeo.com/931894862



Extinct in the Wild

Detail View