

AURA

In Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the philosopher postulates that objects in the real world, including artworks, have an aura. He describes this aura as a factor or spirit of uniqueness attached to real objects, which sets them apart from reproductions or copies. In the essay he is critical of increasingly pervasive methods of reproducing real life - like film and photography - which were still relatively new in 1936, though becoming more affordable and available at the time. While these methods of mechanical reproduction could democratize an image by allowing it to be experienced by a larger audience, Benjamin argued that it also destroys the unique aura of the original object by allowing it to be widely disseminated, as well as copied, spliced, and remixed to create further iterations.

86 years after the publication of this art-historically significant essay, we are still grappling with ideas of originality, ownership, and access to images. As new forms of technology continue to emerge which alter our relationship to creative expression and commodification of artistic products, we are continually in dialogue with the idea of uniqueness. What makes a NFT different from a .jpg? What makes a painting more coveted to art collectors than a projection? When we frequently maneuver in and out of digital spaces throughout our day to day lives, why do we fear the idea of a metaverse?

AURA explores the interdisciplinary territory of art and technology – presenting a mix of traditional and experimental art forms that challenge the possibilities of creative innovation to enlist technology as new modes of valuation and expression in cultural production and critique. AURA seeks to challenge the preconceptions about art on the forefront of innovation, in what is next and to inspire new ways of creative thinking. The artists in this exhibition explore the ways that we live in digital worlds and physical ones, challenging the idea that only "real" objects possess an aura.

Alex Branch's practice is made up of objects, time-based pieces, collected sounds, musical architecture, and attempted collaborations with the natural world. She creates architectural musical sculptures from salvaged materials that dually function as gathering spaces for the communities in which they are built. Her piece sculptural piece **Fallen Tree** consists of a wooden log with an embedded monitor flashing tree related images in the manor of an old projector. Employing humor and material modification, Alex's *Fallen Tree* examines both the delicate and fraught relationship shared between man and the natural world using binary elements of representation.

Abscission is a sculptural video and sound-based installation triptych by interdisciplinary artist, researcher and founder of Manifold Labs, Sam Grabowska. Utilizing components of rendered sculpture shelter, landscape and soundscape, *Abscission* explores the way our bodies respond to trauma and regrowth after disconnection in multi-sensory space. During the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, the artist asked friends to send short videos touching their own skin as a way to transmit some degree of intimacy. A small selection of these videos were edited together with 3d models. Sam describes their process, "Hair, mud, flesh, bone, and glass clad these modeled micro-architectures. They are structural echoes and literal tracings of our bodies in repose (lying down or sitting). The sculpture sited between the videos is a literal tracing of two people holding one another, gutted and split into two. The viewer is invited to briefly inhabit this void."

Six Eye Pop is an NFT animation and installation made by multidisciplinary artist Esther Hz derived from her series of animated NFT loops on the Tezos marketplace. *Six Eye Pop* NFT is based on a failed sketchbook idea for performance art. She says about her process, “although my work is usually performative and installation based, I’ve been exploring digital animation as a result of pandemic restrictions. Most of the animations I created during the pandemic address my own limitations around labor, exhaustion and stress. *Six Eye Pop* speaks to media and news overload. I was struggling with an invisible illness at the time and needed a less physically demanding outlet for creativity and a way to lighten the mood. By bringing to life sketches from my journal, I am able to engage with my practice in a new way that can have a life of its own in the digital marketplace.” Esther Hz’s creative practice revolves around constructing experiences that make her feel alive and doing things outside of her comfort zone. She uses performance, video, installation, sculpture, ritual and people as her mediums.

Flux and Fuse is a hyper-realistic charcoal drawing featuring a candle sculpted with melted wax made by artist, educator and curator Anna Kaye. The drawing is superimposed with a video projection of a continuously looping candle flame. Anna shares about her piece, “a candle—one of the earliest inventions of the ancient world—is juxtaposed with modern technology—in the form of projected light—to further the act of illumination and the transcendence of a symbol through time. These illuminated forms have been used since ancient times and throughout the world. In India, people boiled cinnamon to create wax for their temple candles, the Romans used rolls of papyrus dipped in tallow, candles were made of wax extracted from tree nuts in Japan, and tribes in Alaska and Canada used eulachon fish as a candle. Candles provide light & warmth, are a part of our cultural rituals & ceremonies, and can be used to produce fragrance and alleviate stress. *Flux and Fuse* invites viewers to meditate on their own personal associations with this ancient and modern form of light.”

Christine Nguyen practice is devoted to the natural world and its curiosities. Her work draws upon the imagery of nature, the sciences, and the cosmos not limited to a conventional reading of realms. Christine Nguyen practice is devoted to the natural world and its curiosities. Her work draws upon the imagery of nature, the sciences, and the cosmos not limited to a conventional reading of realms. Her work **Dark Matter and Algae** is a salt crystal photo-based painting created using a combination of digital and analog technology. Christine says about her process, “every plant in the world had its own equivalent star in the firmament which I saw as every plant has a corresponding star in the cosmos, in which direct connections were made between the microcosmic earth and the macrocosmic celestial space.”

Jodi Stuart’s **Forma Futura** is a virtual sculpture – an Augmented Reality (AR) artwork, created using 3D scanning and XR technology. The artist shares about her concept, “I am interested in ideas surrounding ‘Tele-presence’ and Virtual vs. Physical experience, both of which have gained new importance in the aftermath of the pandemic. I am also interested in how virtual objects/experiences manipulate us (the viewer/consumer) physically, in altering our behavior, natural gestures, and ways of seeing to accommodate the virtual experience; as well as the sense of ‘gamification’ and performance any virtual experience elicits from the viewer.” Jodi’s practice explores the aesthetic of the digital technologies which saturate our lives, in relation to tactile and sensory experience. She subverts the materials and tools of high-tech culture through her chosen materials, laborious and tactile processes. Her woven sculptural forms are made using the plastic filaments intended for 3d digital printing. By using a ‘3d-pen’ she has replaced the computer with the human hand in a nostalgic gesture towards tactile experience. Her combination of two-dimensional background prints and three-dimensional forms combines to activate an uneasy virtual/optical space between the two formats. A space where craft traditions such as weaving, knitting, basket making are juxtaposed with abstracted virtual space and biomorphic forms.

3rd Eye Musing is a suspended wooden circular ring sculpture with natural engineering rotation created during the pandemic by interdisciplinary artist Autumn Thomas currently working in wood sculpture. Her work challenges the boundaries of visual literacy by transforming wood into soft, twisting forms, mimicking the endurance required to thrive amidst the oppression and marginalization of women of color. Autumn shares about her process, “3rd Eye Musings is the heart of a labyrinth, the destination of which the lost souls search for enlightenment. Each section of this sculpture individually rotates a full 360 degrees, its entirety representing the 3rd eye, or innermost intuition.”

DLCrushpack is a an algorithmically generated landscape populated with 3D assets, created by *Clemmons & Loyd*, a collaboration between Melanie Clemmons and Zak Loyd since 2009. The assets consist of 3D models and textures captured using warped photogrammetry during Clemmons' 2022 residency in Akureyri, Iceland. The models, which include snow-laden geological features and flora, traverse the space and are rendered at monumental scale. The resulting vignettes suggest the journey of planetary bodies across and through virtual landscapes digitally fragmented by impossible camera placements.

A collaboration between Denver Film and Union Hall, AURA is a prescient to our current moment, as the pandemic is changing how art is being created, seen, and sold. With the ever-growing presence of digital communication platforms and the increasing dissonance of the impersonal, these artists are questioning and bridging these gaps in their practice. As we observe the art industry embracing a massive shift towards technological space, artists are coping and pivoting with technology shift in their individual practices, and reevaluating what it means to possess an aura.