The Renwick Invitational is a biennial juried showcase for midcareer and emerging craft artists who deserve wider recognition. The makers selected for Forces of Nature: Renwick Invitational 2020—Lauren Fensterstock, Timothy Horn, Debora Moore, and Rowland Ricketts—explore how craft’s complex relationship with the natural world helps us understand our place in the order of things. This feels especially important right now during a transformative global pandemic, when nature can provide us necessary refuge, understanding, and hope. It also exposes a shared resilience. The cycles remain—spring turns to summer, summer turns to fall—and we, too, find ways to move forward, even imperfectly.

For these artists, nature and art serve to reframe perspectives while offering release. Fensterstock looks to prophetic weather events, while Horn fuses nature and culture by linking the style of European courts with biological drawings of lichen and coral. Moore’s suite of flowering glass trees is informed by her personal exploration of the natural world, and Ricketts’s indigo-dyed installations begin with planting, harvesting, and composting.

Creating new kinds of “natural” environments for human consumption, these makers ask: What does it mean for each of us to have a relationship with nature? This query is both at the core of craft and vital to our rapidly changing world.

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Rowland Ricketts
born Manchester, CT, 1971; resides Bloomington, IN

For the past two decades, indigo has been Rowland Ricketts’s primary medium and subject matter. Ricketts uses natural dyes and historical Japanese processes to create contemporary artworks that engage visitors in multisensory experiences and embraces indigo’s depth of meaning. Using an approach that inextricably links process and outcome, Ricketts works with a “farm-to-gallery” concept, an idea more often associated with the craft food movement. He farms his indigo on six acres in Bloomington, Indiana, where he also serves as associate dean of the Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture, and Design at Indiana University.

Techniques Ricketts learned during apprenticeships in Japan, and while operating his own indigo farm there, drive his woven objects and installations. These often incorporate soundscapes composed by frequent collaborator Norbert Herber, which use documentation of the process—crinkling of leaves, wind in the field—or tones derived from the variation of shades of indigo as sonic building blocks. Ricketts also integrates participatory engagement from non-artists into his practice, making the case that indigo belongs to everyone.

Ai no Keshiki – Indigo Views
with Norbert Herber and 450 participants
2017–18 and 2020
faded indigo cloth and sound

Ai no Keshiki – Indigo Views was originally developed in Tokushima, a Japanese prefecture where Ricketts spent time apprenticing with indigo farmers and dyers in the late 1990s. Reconfigured for the Renwick Gallery, this installation is the result of many collaborators. In the summer of 2017, 450 people from ten countries volunteered to live with a small length of cloth dyed with Awa indigo, a varietal native to Tokushima. Now in this gallery, the indigo cloth was placed in hand-crafted wooden boxes with a small central opening to allow light to penetrate, bearing witness to the everyday moments of each participant’s life. Variations in color, resulting from the intensity and frequency of light exposure, are a testament to this diversity of experience.

These subtle distinctions tie directly to the work’s title, which roughly translates as “love for keshiki,” a Japanese philosophical concept centered on the landscape or “scenery” of an object. Through the lens of keshiki, the fading of bright blue indigo isn’t a loss. Instead, it speaks to the way things inherently change over time, offering new scenery with each engagement.

Collection of the Citizen’s Cultural Division, Tokushima Prefectural Office, until each cloth is returned to participants
Indigo as Sound

The sound for Ai no Keshiki – Indigo Views comes through speaker cabinets repurposed from the boxes used to fade each indigo-dyed cloth. What you hear isn’t pre-recorded and played back, but an algorithm composed in real time. Notes are shaped by the same factors that impact the visual construction of this installation. For example, data in the form of ambient light measurements impact the tempo of the piece. “Bright” values increase tempo while “dark” values slow the composition down. The sound is shaped by the infinite variation in color and light in this very room.

The composer, Norbert Herber, describes the sound this way:

This music contains opposing sonic volumes. One is opaque and heavy; it fills the space around your body and would feel warm to the touch. Another can be heard just “above” that is lighter and semi-transparent, marking the passage of time with rhythmic pulses. Yet another floats above the rest. It sounds bright, almost brittle, and is in dialogue with the other voices telling a story of this moment, and the next, and the next, with no end.”

Lauren Fensterstock
born Towson, MD, 1975; resides Portland, ME

Trained as a metalsmith, Lauren Fensterstock’s current practice places her in the role of unconventional landscape architect. While designing the garden at her home in Portland over a decade ago, Fensterstock began researching garden history and discovered the variety of ways humans have manipulated the natural world to express their own culture, views, and values. Fensterstock takes inspiration from historical moments, creating objects and installations that are labor-intensive and materially seductive. She uses techniques with long histories in the decorative arts, including paper cutting and quilling, mosaic, and shellwork.

Largely constructed in monochromatic black—a choice that speaks to her diverse influences, which range from twentieth-century minimalism to the Claude glass, a seventeenth-century drawing tool named for painter Claude Lorraine—Fensterstock’s landscapes express at once a void and the entire world, and invite us to take a closer look. Craft enables her to explore ecology—the study of relationships that form between organisms and their environment—in its truest sense.

The totality of time lusters the dusk
2020
glass, Swarovski crystal, quartz, obsidian, onyx, hematite, paper, Plexiglas, wood, cement, lath, and mixed media
This site-specific installation, created for the 2020 Invitational, transforms the Renwick’s galleries into earthly and heavenly realms. Rain clouds and a comet, complete with streaming tail, hover over a richly detailed garden. Fensterstock encrusts the objects that make up this glittering, yet ominous, skyscape with a dazzling mosaic of obsidian, glass, and crystals. She harnesses these elements to refer to scrying, a practice that uses dark reflective surfaces to see visions of the future.

The totality of time lusters the dusk is Fensterstock’s first work to explore how weather and celestial activity have been used as metaphor, an especially potent idea in our current age of extreme weather and changing climate amid a devastating global pandemic. Although this new direction came before the appearance of the 2019 coronavirus, the foreboding and destabilizing beauty of Fensterstock’s work takes on additional meaning in a reality where the myth of certainty has been exposed as fallible.

Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery

Finding Inspiration in the End of the World

The newest addition to Fensterstock’s rich catalog of influences is The Book of Miracles, a sixteenth-century luxury manuscript. It belongs to a larger category of apocalyptic albums, a type of publication that became popular as more and more people began reading the Bible in the wake of the development of the printing press. The Book of Miracles details a wide range of events marked by extreme natural conditions, believed to be the result of divine intervention: the deluge that necessitated Noah’s ark, plagues of locusts, skies with multiple suns, stars falling from heaven, snow in summer. One image—a fiery comet appearing at the time of Muhammad’s birth over the city of Constantinople—serves as a key reference for The totality of time lusters the dusk.

Augsburg Book of Miracles, folio 34, 1550, The Cartin Collection, reprinted by Taschen in 2017 as The Book of Miracles
Debora Moore
born St. Louis, MO, 1960; resides Seattle, WA

Debora Moore has explored the expressive potential of flora through glass since the late 1980s. She has focused largely on orchids, which are informed by her deep engagement with nature. Moore’s field study has taken her around the globe to observe and sketch specimens, including trips to India, Antarctica, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Moore’s work belongs to a long history of representing plants in glass that ranges from ancient renderings to the botanical studies of nineteenth-century Bohemian craftsmen Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka.

Even with her intensive study, Moore is interested less in realism than in how, through glass, she can capture and transport a personal experience with the beauty, wonder, and resilience of the natural world. Her ability to achieve this goal is a result of mastery cultivated across years as an integral figure in the storied glass community of the Pacific Northwest, home to the Pilchuck School of Glass. Moore began her study there in the 1990s and worked as a member of founder Dale Chihuly’s glassblowing team. A trailblazer in many ways, Moore was the first female and first African American resident at the storied Abate Zanetti on Murano, the Italian island that became a glass powerhouse starting in the thirteenth century.

Arboria Series

The Arboria series—a suite of immaculately crafted and evocative glass trees—is Moore’s most recent tour de force. The project began nearly a decade ago, as images of delicate, gravity-defying trees envisioned in the artist’s sketchbooks. Moore was able to bring these drawings into reality at the invitation of the Tacoma Art Museum, which commissioned her to produce work to mark the opening of its Benaroya wing in 2018. Arboria blends observations of nature from across Moore’s lifetime into four human-scaled trees loosely corresponding to the cycle of the seasons, titled Wisteria, Magnolia, Cherry, and Winter Plum.

The two-year process of creating these works began at a quarry, where Moore selected natural stones as bases. She then blew glass directly over the rock’s surface, using nature as her mold. Moore’s ingenious method for hiding her joins adds to the illusionary magic in her works: a “liquid skin” composed of silicone, crushed glass, and pigment is applied in irregular patches for a seamless finish. The finished trees are full of beauty in contradiction, composed of glass manipulated in ways that seem to defy the possibilities of the medium. They are strong and fragile, natural and fabricated, technically astonishing and seemingly effortless. Just like nature, their beauty derives in no small part from their persistence.

Winter Plum, from the series Arboria
2018
blown and sculpted glass and natural boulder
Courtesy of the artist

_Wisteria_, from the series *Arboria*
2018
blown and sculpted glass and natural boulder
Courtesy of the artist

_Magnolia_, from the series *Arboria*
2018
blown and sculpted glass and natural boulder
Tacoma Art Museum, Museum purchase with Art Acquisition Funds, 2019.8

_Cherry_, from the series *Arboria*
2018
blown and sculpted glass and natural boulder
Courtesy of the artist

**Timothy Horn**
born Melbourne, Australia, 1961; resides Provincetown, MA, and Burlington, VT

Timothy Horn's wide-ranging work centers on dialogues between nature and culture. He draws inspiration from historical objects, narratives, and ways of making, including European decorative arts and baroque adornment. A native of Melbourne, Australia, Horn has lived and worked in the United States since 2002, when a scholarship brought him to the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Trained in both sculpture and glassmaking, Horn has an uncanny ability to seize on the seductive qualities of his chosen materials.

The beauty in his work is made complex by his sense of the absurd and desire to create hybrid objects, infusing them with underlying narratives. His early work used decorative arts to play with notions of gender, sexuality, social structures, and power, and echoes of these themes reverberate through Horn’s more recent wall pieces. They speak not only to the inherent artistry and resilience of the natural world, but simultaneously remind us of our role in the fate of their existence. His dazzling constructions appear still, undisturbed and unaware of our presence, yet intent on continual, imperceptible growth.
Horn’s *Tree of Heaven* series is titled after the common name of *Ailanthus altissima*, a tree native to China with a long cultural history. The sculpture’s form, however, references the work of Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), a German zoologist, naturalist, and philosopher whose illustrated book *Kunstformen der natur (Art Forms of Nature)* is a regular source of inspiration for Horn. Echoing Haeckel’s images of lichens, *Tree of Heaven 7* has tiny branches and flat leaf-like structures arranged in bursting rosettes, adorned with opulent blown glass “pearls,” that spreads like a living creature across the wall.

Courtesy of the artist

The works in Horn’s *Gorgonia* series, named for a genus of soft corals, combine oceanic forms with designs for earrings and pendants from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Horn begins by drafting a pattern inspired by the silhouette of a historical piece of adornment, then overlays decorative elements from the natural world onto that base. Translated into wax, cast in bronze, and dotted with blown glass “pearls,” each sculpture hangs just far enough away from the wall to create evocative shadows that suggest the watery deep. Horn’s desire to create beauty by melding nature and culture, however, is complicated: other titles in this series, such as *Gorgonia 4 (Fukushima Fan Dance)* and *Gorgonia 7 (Sea Change)*, evoke human-induced disasters and the changing climate.

Courtesy of the Artist
Mother-Load  
2008  
crystalized rock sugar, steel, plywood, and shellac  

*Mother-Load* is part of a suite of works Horn created in response to the rags-to-riches life story of San Francisco art collector Alma de Bretteville Spreckels (1881–1968), whose fortune stemmed from the sugar trade. This half-scale carriage, inspired by the Neapolitan sedan chair Alma used as a telephone booth, is covered with rock sugar that has been “refined” into encrusting crystals, tendril-like scrollwork, and attenuated stalactites. The inherent brittleness of sugar speaks to human fragility—just as the carriage would fall to pieces at the first bump in the road so can people easily fall from power.  

Loaded with metaphor, the carriage’s color, luminosity, and opulence recall the Amber Room of Catherine Palace in Saint Petersburg, the lost “eighth wonder of the world,” where nature was displayed as commodity. This complex work also brings to mind capitalist society’s dependence on the mining of natural resources.  

Courtesy of the artist  

Girandole (*Rain of Hot Stones*)  
2008  
crystalized rock sugar, steel, plywood, shellac, and electric light fixtures  

The term girandole refers to a form of ornamental branched candlestick or light fixture that resembles a chandelier as well as the popular eighteenth-century jewelry form that features a large central design surrounded by smaller stones. As with *Mother-Load*, Horn hand-molded this exaggerated, sculptural form not from precious metals and gems, but from sugar. Through its fantastical scale and unconventional material, *Girandole (Rain of Hot Stones)* conjures a dreamy, yet slightly foreboding, fairy-tale atmosphere.  

Courtesy of the artist