

**WORKS ON LOAN FROM THE 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
May 27-June 21, 2008 – Members Gallery  
Riverside Art Museum**

**Gideon Barnett : Christine Frerichs : Alia Malley : Kate McPeak : Courtney Oquist :  
Alison Walker : Evans Wittenberg**

## **THE VIRTUAL NATURAL**

**Peter Frank**

Where does nature end and we begin? This is the existential question that, increasingly, drives our world view: it's the environment, stupid. But it's even more than the environment – it's what we do with it, and what we do with it does to us. This anxiety, physical and metaphysical, pervades art-making right now. Combined with the parallel existential crisis of virtuality, the crisis of the digital age that confounds our grasp of material – of materials, that is, and of the material universe itself – the natural crisis challenges us at once to situate ourselves in a world that sustains us and destroys us, and that we sustain and destroy in turn.

Who are we, however, to sustain and destroy the gods? The ancient Greeks had a word for such presumption, not to mention power: hubris. Our power is, finally, illusory – its exercise is our undoing, as it blinds us to our symbiotic, even dependent, relationship with nature (aptly nicknamed “mother”). Global warming is the ultimate blowback.

Contemporary art practice is filled with warnings against and samplings of our presumptuous, dangerous relationship with nature. So it is with the work on display here. Whether it documents natural or human destruction, proposes natural or human solutions, finds evidence of natural-human symbiosis or symbolizes natural-human conflict, the work of UC Riverside's MFA candidates reflects their almost allergic sensitivity to the relationship of their species to the ecosphere. Might this result from the fact that they work in an environment in which the results of the natural-human friction are so readily apparent? At the edge of the desert, with “civilization” chewing constantly at that edge – beneath a sky at once peculiarly benign and peculiarly lethal – artists working in the Inland Empire can feel as if they are caught in an ecological crossfire. The manifestations are not usually as dramatic as they have been in, say, the Gulf Coast region or the Arctic; but here they are constant, nagging, pernicious.

Is it, in fact, presumptuous even to determine a thoroughgoing theme among these MFAs? Certainly, they employ a wide diversity of media and formats and imagery. But you can't help but sense a spirit of worry and warning, a desire to testify to and amplify what they see and sense. Artists like these could be considered journalists of the spirit, formulating visual op-ed pieces out of their ineffable, otherwise inexpressible sense of the rightness and wrongness of the world.