

The background of the entire image is a piece of marbled paper with a complex, organic pattern of swirling colors including white, cream, light brown, and dark brown. Overlaid on this pattern is a faint, light-colored topographical map of the world, showing the outlines of continents and the intricate lines of latitude and longitude. The map is centered and covers most of the image area.

NATURAL DISCONNECT

Grace Potts, 2024

A discussion into how some contemporary photographers have responded to society's disconnect from the natural world, and in what ways their work interrogates this separation.

Nature is a language, can't you read?

Nature is a language, can't you read?

-The Smiths, Ask, 1987

Vatnajökull (The Sound of)

Katie Paterson

Katie Paterson’s work ‘Vatnajökull (The Sound Of)’ brings attention to the stark reality that we lack true connection to the natural world. Paterson describes her work as an “elegy to disappearing landscapes” (Katie Paterson, TED, 2022). She has said that with her work she wanted to “bring these distant landscapes closer to our lives in a visceral way.” (Katie Paterson, TED, 2022). Her use of a phone line to connect us to the ticking time bomb that is the effects of global warming, breaks into the normalities of our everyday life, with something extraordinary. We’ve had phone calls since 1876, (Borth (2024) but connecting a phone line to a melting glacier is an unfamiliar concept. A phone call is an intimate thing, you can call a partner, family or friends. It’s almost a private act to have a telephone conversation. So, there is a sense of poetic irony to have a phone call with part of the natural world that is dying out due to our own lack of intimacy with it.

In her work Paterson often explores the idea of ‘deep time’, it is defined as “Time as considered on a geological or cosmological scale rather than on the scale of human history.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023)

She states “Thinking about deep time keeps me hopeful. By expanding our time horizons, we can understand the bigger picture of where we are amongst everything else.” (Paterson, K, Blitz (2022) Paterson’s research and creative outputs explore the theory of ‘deep time’, concentrating on the world around us, making us look up and out in order to better understand the context of our existence and broaden our perspectives. She states, “It can give us a sense of rootedness...” (Paterson, K, Blitz (2022) Her work and study into the Anthropocene and the ‘bigger picture’ surrounding our current geological climate, in combination with her creative outputs, creates a bridge between the seemingly emotionless scientific statistics, and the emotional intensity artistic world, and gives a sense of grounding in where we are as humans today.



Vatnajökull (the sound of) | Katie Paterson.

Vatnajökull (The Sound of) provides a direct line of connection to these vast, ancient glaciers, that we go about our lives with little notion of, and that can be a **sobering reality**. This ‘visceral’ connection Paterson makes, speaks of a deeper connection than purely a phone line. The word ‘visceral’ in itself means “based on deep feeling and emotional reactions rather than on reason or thought” (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019) but also “relating to the large organs inside the body, including the heart, stomach, lungs, and intestines” (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019). Paterson’s work draws connections between our emotions as well as our physical symbiosis with these landscapes. She looks at our disconnection within the context of innate connection. Paterson states, “It’s my belief that we’re all deeply interconnected to the nature around us; we’re made of the same stuff, the same atoms.” (Paterson, K, Blitz (2022) The relationship between humankind and nature is meant to be harmonious, our bodies themselves mirror the world around us.

This echos the theory and beliefs of Posthumanism, “The posthumanist perspective... considers posthumans as an integral part of ‘the environment’- not separate from it – and as possessing rights to achieve their potential, as should be accorded to all matter.” (Fox and Alldred (2021)

You never call me when you’re sober
You only want it ‘cause it’s over, it’s over
How could I have burned paradise?
How could I?...
-Evanescence, 2006

Posthumanism, is a theoretical area of study that rejects the ideas of humanism and anthropocentrism. Humanism and anthropocentrism are different theoretical studies, but humanity and human life is the focus and priority, “In the humanist account, human beings are exceptional, autonomous, and set above the world” (Nasrullah Mambrol (2018) Posthumanism criticises the idea that humankind is above the rest of the natural world, but that we are rather a part of the world as equal as every other being and species. The anthropocentric approach is more widely adopted by governments across the world, for example, in 2015 all UN members adopted the ‘2030 agenda for sustainable development’ was created to “peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.” (United Nations, 2015) It consists of 17 goals in order to achieve this, of which only 3 pay attention to nonhuman subject matter. Anthropocentrism and human centric ideals, especially in politics, can be seen as contributing factors to the exacerbation of disconnect between humanity and the world we in which we live.



Vatnajökull (the sound of) | Katie Paterson.

Humanism discourse is integrated into various photographic approaches. Possibly most notably overshadowed by Edward Steichen’s controversial exhibition ‘The Family of Man’. Though “there is no formal humanist canon or school of humanist photography” (Lewandowski and Moravec (2021) humanism in photography follows a belief of showcasing the idea of humanity and exploring the human experience. However, this approach, especially in Steichen’s exhibition, has been greatly criticised, by theorists like Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. Sontag opposed the notion of human focused photography all together, she referred to it as an act of violence a “soft murder.” (Sontag (1977) her thought was that taking a person’s photograph was a violation, that turns people into objects to be possessed. And Barthes “criticized the exhibition for an essentialist depiction of human experiences such as birth, death, and work, and the removal of any historical specificity from this depiction” (Tifentale (2018). In an attempt to connect humanity, the nuance, unique attributes and experiences in each individual pictured at the exhibition, was removed. And simultaneously, from a Posthumanist perspective, emphasised the idolatry of the human above all other species on earth.

Paterson’s work critiques this way of thinking, by creating an almost human connection to a nonhuman subject. A glacier cannot make a phone call, but Paterson, as a human, can. This acknowledges not the superiority of the human, but the diversity in capability, the use of the ability to “alter... behaviour in order to reduce the negative impact of climate change on the environment or to positively counter its effects.” (Fox and Alldred (2021) And she does this by manufacturing a connection in a way that, as stated before, humanity finds somewhat intimate, but also conveys a sense of awe and wonder, and this was emphasised through the images she took of Vatnajökull, it gave a ‘face’ to the other side of the phoneline. A feeling of sublimity but also emotional connection is cultivated toward the prehistoric glacier. By bridging the gap between us and the world, Paterson makes these climate issues more present or more ‘real’, as it confronts the indifference of people by bringing these issues close so that they cannot be ignored.

Look Up

Grace Potts

In my own photography, I explore the disconnect between humanity and the world surrounding us. In my latest project titled ‘Look Up’ I wanted to engage with the way that relational gap works itself out geographically, while also reconnecting it to our makeup as human beings. In my research I was looking at the affects a capitalist structured society has on our ability to connect and empathise with the environment around us. Capitalist, neo-liberalism, in which the West lives, prioritises the economic expansion, of the individual. This constructs unfair systems of wealth and prioritisation of financial gain over general wellbeing (Bell (2015) This is referred to as an individualist approach, also a policy and philosophy prevalent in the West, “the elevation of individual interests above those of the collective.” (Lukes (2016) This societal structuring has seen to an increase of production and consumption. “Progressive scholars recognize the serious damage that results from a global capitalist drive. Endless efforts of private owners to expand and increase their profits force a “perpetual treadmill of production and consumption” relying mainly on fossil fuels or alternative sources of greenhouse gas emissions (Baer 4). (Pollock (2020) The prioritisation of wealth over well-being generates a detrimental and unilateral relationship with the natural world, rather than a homogeneous symbiosis. And in my images, I have tried to represent the effects of global warming, created by this structuring, on our planet, whilst drawing links between our physical makeup and the earth’s, to try and re-establish the idea of the tie we have to it.

Though heavily digitally manipulated, the ‘Look Up’ images have an organic feel to them because of the natural forms that make them up. The patterns are abstract, the blue and white lines are tree branches, the dark patches are clouds, and the beige background is the sky on a sunny day. The editing process that was used, created abstract, textured images that could be read in many ways. As I started producing them, I wasn’t sure what to make of them and it was suggested to me that they looked like cracked and burnt desserts, so I asked various people what they made of them, I was given similar answers, but some people said they also looked like lightning storms or ice formations. I did this to further confirm that the terrain like qualities I saw in my images were translated to others as well. And so, all of these environmental aspects I’ve tried to represent through this piece of work, to bring attention to aspects of global warming. Because to for me personally it’s something that I find not only provocative but also terrifying. At the time I was making these images, Spain was hit by huge storms and flooding causing hundreds of casualties, and the cause of such horrific weather was the increase in ocean temperatures fuelling the storm. “They found global warming, driven by fossil fuel pollution, made the torrential rainfall that hit Spain about 12% heavier and twice as likely.” Tanno et al. (2024) And now, as I write this, LA is suffering some of its worst wildfires in years. “US government research is unequivocal in linking climate change to larger and more severe wildfires in the western US.” (FitzGerald (2025).

“This planet has - or rather had - a problem, which was this: most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movement of small green pieces of paper, which was odd because on the whole it wasn’t the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.”

-Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, 1978



Look Up | Grace Potts.

Work by artist Victoria Lucas', called PostNatures, greatly inspired this piece of work. She explores ideas of nature in relation to “political and social imaginary, with a particular focus on how gender is produced, reinforced and can be undermined through the self-representation of women within the landscape” (Velvick, 2023) PostNature Glitch II uses digital manipulation to interrogate the effects of capitalism on the natural world. The ‘glitch’ in Lucas’ work, disrupts our notions of the ‘picturesque’ within the context of the climate crisis. She interrogates the idea of perpetuating an idyllic landscape today where “Everything on earth has been tinged by human activity, so that the ecological balance of the natural world has ended.” (Lucas (2014) The world is no longer as ‘natural’ as we are so often led to believe by imagery, so as photographers are we to responsibly respond. As Lucas states, “We are living in post-natural times...” (Lucas (2014) Postnatural theory is centred around the idea that humanity has permanently changed the environment around us, and “suggests that human beings have colonized nature in a degree that has irreversibly altered the functioning of planetary systems.” (Arias-Maldonado (2015)

In my work I've digitally reordered a natural landscape, much like Lucas did in her PostNatures work, PostNature Glitch II, in order to engage with the effects of climate change in the wake of capitalism and the way the land has been shaped by it, to create this faux-natural environment we've become accustomed with.

POSTNATURES



PostNature Glitch II | Victoria Lucas, 2022



Look Up | Grace Potts.

My images were also inspired by the 2021 film ‘Don’t Look Up’ by Adam McKay, they are titled ‘Look Up’ in reference to it. The film follows the story of two astronomers who try to warn humankind of a comet that is approaching and will destroy the earth. (Netflix. (2021) And the overwhelming response to their claims is disregard, people are so distracted that they just don’t seem to care.

The government and other large corporations have seen the Armageddon event as a way to make money, they seek to mine the minerals from the comet. The film was a satirical take on the overwhelming complacency toward the climate crisis. McKay states “I was so disturbed by not only the lack of the action about the climate emergency—the seismic global climate emergency that we’re in—but I was also noticing people were barely even talking about it.”

(McKay, A. Current Affairs. 2025) The media is mostly directed by what people are talking about, what’s socially relevant, and McKay is stating that people are mostly disinterested in this “seismic global emergency” its perceived as the norm, so it isn’t spoken of enough in the media coverage. Social media and media in general also has the ability to shape our thoughts and get in the way of us being aware of the world around us, so the cycle of disinterest is perpetuated. And photographic media is also responsible for this. Vitoria Lucas questioned “Can we continue to perpetuate the tropes of the picturesque without question, and celebrate nature without the niggling call of climate-change anxiety? How do we redefine nature, in the context of the unnatural?” Lucas (2014) The way I saw to do this was to not perpetuate the stereotypical landscape but remodel it in a way that felt more appropriate to the current state of the planet.

‘Look Up’ is meant to represent the building blocks of the human body itself, neuron networks, electrical currents or impulses, alveoli and veins, all things that without, the body would not function. Scientifically, our cardiovascular and nervous systems are supported by the environment, from the oxygen we breathe, produced by trees and the ocean, (Team (2024) to the chemical production in our brains when we spend time connecting with our surroundings, “Our results show that our brain structure and mood improve when we spend time outdoors. This most likely also affects concentration, working memory, and the psyche as a whole.” (Kühn (2024). So, when aspects of the natural world are degraded, overall quality-of-life is degraded. This research is consistent with the theory of the Posthumanistic approach, that we are not superior or separate to the natural world, but a part of it, the two function in tandem. ‘Look Up’ is an attempt to try and visually describe and reconnect, as Katie Paterson coined, the ‘visceral’ connection and interwoven nature of humanity and the world; despite flawed systems and iconisation of humankind over recognition of our need for and reliance on the environment.

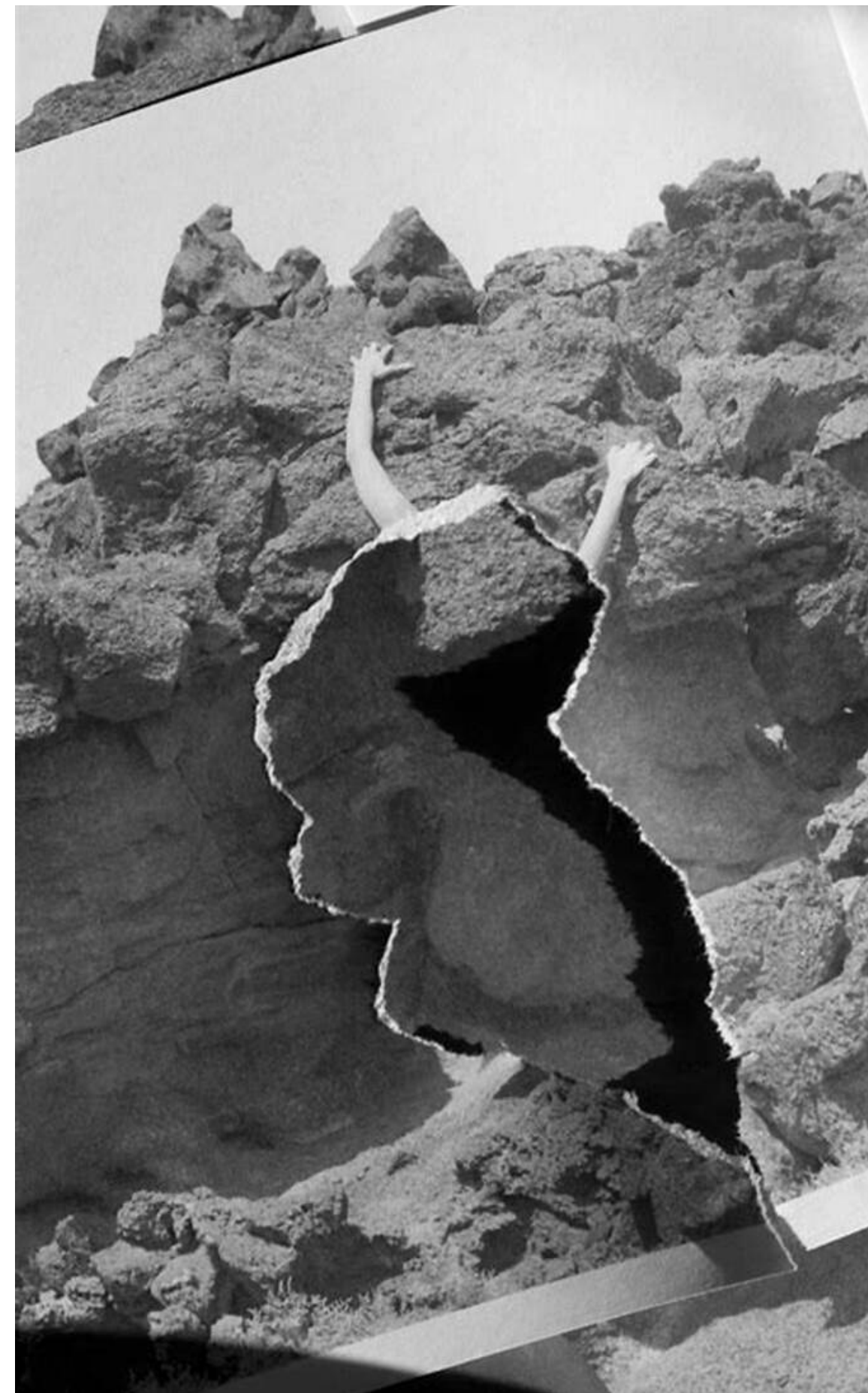
The Body is a Revelation of the Landscape

Sofia Masini

Another artist who challenges the separation between humanity and the earth is Sofia Masini. Her work ‘The Body is a Revelation of the Landscape’ uses collaging techniques to intimately connect fragments of her own body into the context of a photographic landscape, creating a ‘hybridisation’ of nature and human. The text that coincides with Masini’s work, written by Elisa Medde, ponders the idea that the earth itself is “the ultimate body”. Her collaging of the two beings is referred to as a “dance”, “a back and forth between two bodies” (Medde (2023)). However, it is also noted that “there is no complete fusion and reunion.” (Medde (2023) its stated that Masini’s work is ‘pre-reunion’, that there is longing for reunion and in that suffering is produced in the striving

for this unification. That is mirrored in the almost violence of some of her images, the torn-up body parts mingling with the harsh and jagged natural formations. There is a sense of gore or horror in the way some of the collages create hybrid human-nature cyborgs. It is almost simultaneously a contemplation of death, once a person dies, their body is placed in the ground, in one way or another, creating a final connection and integration into nature. This is mirrored throughout many religious texts, biblical imagery in Genesis 3:19 says “till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis 3 KJV (n.d.) The physical connection and unification with nature has been long pondered in human history.

The Body is a Revelation of the Landscape | Sofia Masini





The Body is a Revelation of the Landscape
| Sofia Masini

Masini “presents an alternative form of connection to the environment, a bond which does not seek to change our landscape but be changed by it.” (Dooley (2024) She visually represents a symbiosis between the body of the human and the body of the land. “Masini breaks apart the foundations of the body and land, laying rocks and limbs together where there is no superior or inferior.” (Dooley (2024) The symbiosis of the two, were neither is more important than other, pertains to New Materialist ideas, that not one piece of matter is above another, all have their own weight in the world, it “undermines human exceptionalism” (Allen (2023) as seen before in the discussion of Posthumanism. New materialism views everything as matter, without exception and calls all matter powerful in its own right. We rely on the environment to survive and thrive, as much as any other living organism. This thought is shared by New Materialists, Jane Bennet in her book ‘Vibrant Matter’ stated, “One can note that the human immune system depends on parasitic helminth worms for its proper functioning or cite other instances of our cyborgization to show how human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like.” (2010)

The body in the landscape is a fluid and ever morphing connection. It transforms our static relationship with nature into one that is constantly being transformed and renewed by the rearrangement of the two, the land shapes the body. The images convey a desire to be reconnected to the environment around us, that many people feel. The structure of society, and the media, as previously discussed, tears us from the acknowledgement of our connection and relationship with the landscape and consumes the natural land taking its resources and stripping it of its own dignity as a body in and of itself. Masini’s work shows us that yearning for connection and the struggle to achieve it while simultaneously displaying the “raw power of nature and its ability to alter our forms, destroying the sinew which hold together our mind and body” (Dooley (2024) suggesting that rather than we seek to control it, we seek to re-establish our bonds with it and preserve the respect due it.



The Body is a Revelation of the Landscape | Sofia Masini

Following the idea of the earth as a body, throughout history it has been common to refer to the earth as a female, was 1551 (Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2025) the concept of ‘Mother Earth’ or ‘Mother Nature’ arose due to the associations with the nurturing, life sustaining attributes of motherhood, also attributed to some aspects of the natural world, this is one of many metaphorical illustrations made to connect the human body and the landscape, specifically the female body. Masini integrates her own body into the earth, drawing connections to these ideas and themes, and in doing so also raises the subject of objectification and fetishisation that is too often associated with the female body in contemporary and historic culture “Popular culture is an effective medium to exhort the attributes of femininity, which boxes them within a limited parameter, often subjected towards sexual objectification.” (Bhandari (2016) In some ways that lack of regard and usage of the female body, can be assigned also to the usage a degradation of the land, the two are connected by the attributes affiliated with them and by the treatment of them.

However, The Body is a Revelation of the Landscape simultaneously refers to the idea of “decluttering and

shedding from all these metaphors” and instead enter a “ancestral and timeless relationship between the body and the earth” where “there is no clear limit or division between the two.” (Medde (2023) regardless of gender. This is a proposition to reject the previous associations that defined the earth, and its attributes, and instead find an ever growing and changing personal connection to the land that we live in.

In summary, Katie Paterson’s art creates a digital connection relating us to global warming in a familial way, breaking into our day to day, in order to bring a sense of reality to us. My work, with inspiration from Victoria Lucas and Adam McKay, represents the impacts of our lack of connection to the environment, in the context of our visceral connection with it. And Masini joined herself to the land, and her hybridisation with it creates a metaphor for the longing for connection with the land but recognition that it is a fight to get it. All of these artists use their work as an expression of their own personal engagement with the land and use it to interrogate aspects of our society that have a hand in manufacturing disconnect between the two.

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