

Acknowledgements and Afterword

Since 1997 the Critic and Artist Residency Series has brought prominent artists, critics and curators to the Colorado State University Campus for exhibitions, public lectures, museum discussions and classroom visits. We are delighted to add Courtney Egan to our roster of participants.

New Orleans-based artist, Courtney Egan, received her M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1993. Since that time she has enjoyed a prolific career as an artist and teacher. Egan's projection-based sculptural installations have been shown in a number of group and solo exhibitions including *NOLA NOW Part II* at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, *Louisiana Contemporary* at the Ogden Museum of Art, and *The World According to New Orleans* in Marfa, Texas. The recipient of a number of grants, fellowships and awards, Egan has been honored by the Louisiana Division of the Arts, Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation, and with a Pollock-Krasner award in association with the Santa Fe Art Institute. She currently is on the faculty of the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts where she teaches in the media arts department.

We are extremely grateful to the artist for her enthusiasm for this project, one of a suite of three exhibitions comprising our *Garden in the Museum* summer series. Thanks are also due to Egan's collaborator, David Sullivan, for his installation assistance and to D. Eric Bookhardt for his insightful essay on Egan's work. Thanks are also due to metalsmiths Rachel David and Scott Chanove, glass artist Christian Stock, YAYA Creative Glass, and artist/woodworker James Goedert for their artistry and to Kathleen Kraus for her night-blooming cereus. We are also grateful to the Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans where we first became aware of Egan's work. The University Art Museum is once again highly indebted to our stalwart installation volunteers, Mickey and Dennis Bookstaber. Silvia Minguzzi kindly designed this publication and exhibition banners. As always museum staff members, Suzanne Hale and Keith Jentzsch, worked tirelessly on this project. We are also grateful to the University Center for the Arts public relations staff and the CSU External Relations Office for their assistance. Finally, our sincere thanks to the FUNd at Colorado State University, for making this exhibition, publication, and Courtney Egan's visit a reality.

Lizzy Frickman
Director
University Art Museum

**Colorado
State
University**
UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Exhibition Checklist:
Repercussions (Yellow Trumpet), 2010
Single channel HD video installation with sound
custom wood speaker cabinet
11 x 70 x 6 inches

Soft Spots (Japanese Magnolia), 2008
Single channel SD video installation, silent
dimensions variable

Sleepwalkers (Night-Blooming Cereus), 2011
Single channel HD video projection, silent
approximately 5 x 5 feet

Dreamcatcher (Single Cereus), 2013
Interactive single channel HD video installation, silent
webcam, infrared light, computer
approximately 4 x 4 feet

Crystal Gazers (Wisteria), 2014
Single channel HD video, ironwork, cast glass and wire
60 x 36 x 11 inches



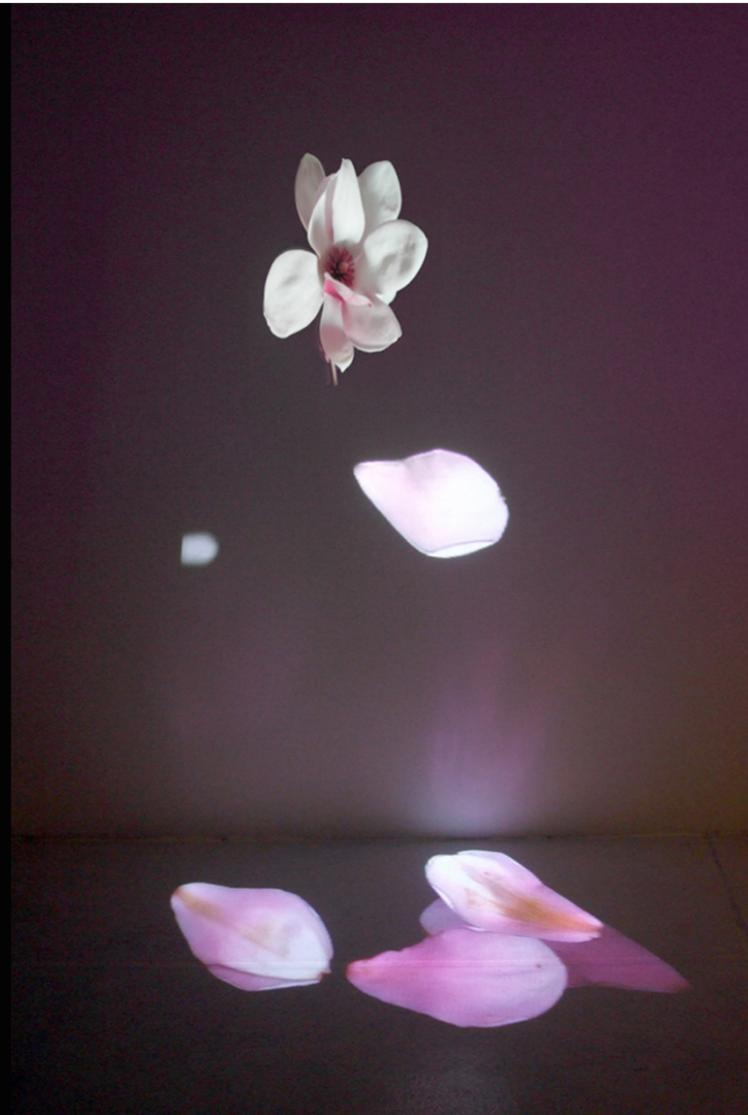
COURTNEY EGAN
CULTIVAR
June 3 - September 27, 2014



satellite exhibition in 2011. Located in a ramshackle, two century old residence and event space in the city's riverfront Bywater neighborhood, *Sleepwalkers* showcased Egan's flair for digital wizardry as unwary visitors encountered an antique clawfoot bathtub filled with oversize Night Blooming Cereus flowers that seemed to float like waterlilies in softly colored light. Continuously blossoming and closing in the measured choreography of a time-lapse ballet, it was one of the installation's more iconic iterations, and to stumble upon it unexpectedly among the nocturnal shadows of a moldering old house was the sort of otherworldly experience more often associated with fairy tales, myths, or the special effects of vintage surrealist cinema. (Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* comes to mind.) Unencumbered by monitors or projection screens, the flowers evinced an autonomous, if spectral, life of their own, and if a clawfoot tub provided an unusually serendipitous site, *Sleepwalkers'* luminously animated presence remains a hypnotic constant regardless of setting, context or venue.

The delicate "star" of the video, the Night Blooming Cereus flower, has long been associated with myth and magic in its own right. Its iconic *Selenicereus grandiflorus* genus blooms only once a year, and for a single night, so it was essentially typecast for this sort of leading role. Egan says, "Viewing the blooming is a slow affair that happens over an 8 or so hour period, and sometimes I've heard people say they have last minute parties in celebration, since the bloom deflates by the morning and will never be enjoyed again. I wanted to see all the blooms at once, repeating, and experience what it feels like when something so 'unnatural' happens. I think the things we do to see the world differently through technology is a perversity; it makes me think of time differently, and gives the illusion that time is somehow under my control. Overall, I am not optimistic about how this illusion, seen in many other ways everywhere now, affects humanity."

Egan's botanical series of the past several years stands in marked contrast to her earlier work that focused primarily on pop media. In her 2003 *Chaos Hags* series, female film stars' body parts were, as she put it, "...reorganized in the time and space of the digital video medium as unique reconstituted entities," in what amounted to a video deconstruction of the constituents of glamor and celebrity. But in the aftermath of the widespread flooding that inundated New Orleans and the surrounding areas as a result of Hurricane Katrina, her priorities changed. A native of the small Mississippi Gulf Coast town of Pearlinton just across the state line from New Orleans, Egan was



confronted with the devastation of both her childhood hometown and the city where she lives, and where generations of her ancestors had lived since emigrating from Ireland in the 1850s. Although her chosen medium, digital video, embodies the creative destruction typical of digital media technologies--the ability to readily reshape the world we see around us--nothing could compare with the near-Biblical ferocity of nature's own sudden and sweeping destruction of the familiar world she knew. And yet, uncanny parallels to digital technology's catalytic transformational aspects could be seen in the way certain

surviving examples of New Orleans' abundant tropical flora reacted to the devastation, for instance, by profusely blooming out of season in the autumn after the storm, a phenomenon that came to be known as the "hurricane spring." In Katrina's aftermath, the city's iconic tropical flora became the new focus of Egan's lens.

Soft Spots was the first of the current stand-alone series of video projections that function as light sculptures. Just as New Orleans was historically one of America's prominent port cities that attracted immigrants from all over the world, so too has a host of imported botanical species taken root in its famously fertile soil to become familiar fixtures of the landscape. The star of *Soft Spots* is the Japanese Magnolia, a delicate looking tree, native to east Asia, that in this city announces the end of winter by being the first to flower as its opalescent magenta blooms burst forth in profuse clusters even before the first green leaves of spring. It's softly delicate petals possess an almost fleshy texture that connotes vulnerability, and Egan



working on *Soft Spots* after the death of Helen Hill, a young and widely admired local filmmaker who was tragically gunned down in the anarchic aftermath of the storm, an event that informed her conception of the work: "Petals fall off of a continually dying and blossoming flower. As they float down the wall to the floor, projectiles whiz by, changing their path. These continual near-misses reference fleeting forces that can forever change lives."

Another exotic and somewhat hallucinatory looking ornamental is the Angel's Trumpet, so named because of the horn-like shape of its surrealistically large blossoms. In her 2010 *Repercussion piece*, a yellow Trumpet flower seems to shiver and shimmy in a gentle breeze. A bee furtively buzzes its bell-like mouth as it drips nectar into a receptacle below, containing an audio speaker. The luminous video projected droplets land with metallic pinging and plopping sounds, lending a kinetic aural dimension to the work that reinforces its quality of presence. Egan says it possesses "...an uncanny quality because, despite the fact that one knows it's all

virtual, the sound element combining with the visual drip on another plane--the speaker cone--makes the installation take on a strange quality of realism."

Dreamcatcher is a singular, 2013, variation on the multiple Cereus extravaganza that appeared in her earlier *Sleepwalkers* installation. It is interactive, with a ceiling mounted camera that senses motion. The motion triggers the blooming of the Cereus, and, as Egan puts it: "The more movement, the faster the flower blooms, and once the room is still again, the flower slowly begins to close... Small arm and hand movements can cause it to react as well, and if one plays with it a while, you can feel as if you are investigating the blooming and having a bringing-forth, miracle-inducing kind of controlling experience." Egan's partner and sometime collaborator, David Sullivan, wrote the program that activates the motion.

As with so many recent "labor saving" technologies, Egan's digital video processes are very time and labor intensive, requiring much trial and error to fully realize. As her oeuvre continues to expand and explore new possibilities, its range of interactions between electronic and physical media continues to multiply as we see in her newest work, *Crystal Gazers*, based on the Wisteria vine. Comprised of metal branches and cast glass medallions that transform into twirling, luminous, violet colored Wisteria blossoms, *Crystal Gazers* reflects the essence of our contemporary "new nature" as a hybrid, mediated experience. At its core is what Egan regards as a fundamental irony: "We get closer and simultaneously farther away from the natural world when we experience it through a technological lens. This new kind of sublime, in which human experience is mediated through a digital device, is enjoyable, illuminating, and disturbing." +++



The Botanical Video Art of Courtney Egan by D. Eric Bookhardt

Botanical art has been with us since the earliest days of civilization, turning up routinely in the ancient world, most notably on Egyptian tombs and Greek and Roman monuments. Because plants and animals are never static and always in a state of evolutionary flux, the artists of the past were a major source of information about species that are now extinct. Courtney Egan's botanical video installations build on that legacy and take it to another level through the introduction of her own new hybrid plant species that reflect the increasingly pervasive role of digital technology in 21st century life.

Although our newest technologies are more transformational than ever, the once common phrase, "man's conquest of nature," now sounds increasingly naive, if not apocryphal, as the effects of our longstanding industrial activities come back to haunt us in the form of environmental degradation and intractable climate change. Today the planet we once thought we mastered has revealed itself to be far more volatile in response to human activity than we anticipated, even as our ability to shape it with ever more fantastical technologies expands with every passing year. Both the wonder with which we have traditionally regarded the natural world, and the disorientation we now experience due to rapid technological and environmental changes, are reflected in Egan's video installations.

Wonder and disorientation were often apparent among visitors to a site specific version of her *Sleepwalkers* installation at a Prospect.2 New Orleans International Biennial