

Silhouette murals by James Prosek and, in the far gallery, a piece by Courtney Mattison are among the artworks featured in "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art" at the Florence Griswold Museum.

Flo Gris House is bugged

INSECTS, REEFS AND BIRDS ARE ELEMENTS OF AN ENVIRONMENTALLY FOCUSED FLORENCE GRISWOLD MUSEUM EXHIBITION

By KRISTINA DORSEY
Day Staff Writer

The title of the latest exhibition at the Florence Griswold Museum, "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art," might sound a little scholarly, a tiny bit esoteric.

In actuality, while it does deal with weighty environmental issues such as climate change and pollution, the show's artwork is cool and different and visually striking.

When visitors stroll into the first room of the museum's Kriebler Gallery, they see, painted onto the expansive facing walls, silhouettes of various birds — some in flight, some perched on a tree limb (an enormous tree is also in black shadow), some settled into a nest, and some walking on the ground. They each have numbers painted next to them, a nod to the field guides of the late Roger Tory Peterson, who was a famed ornithologist and an Old Lyme resident.

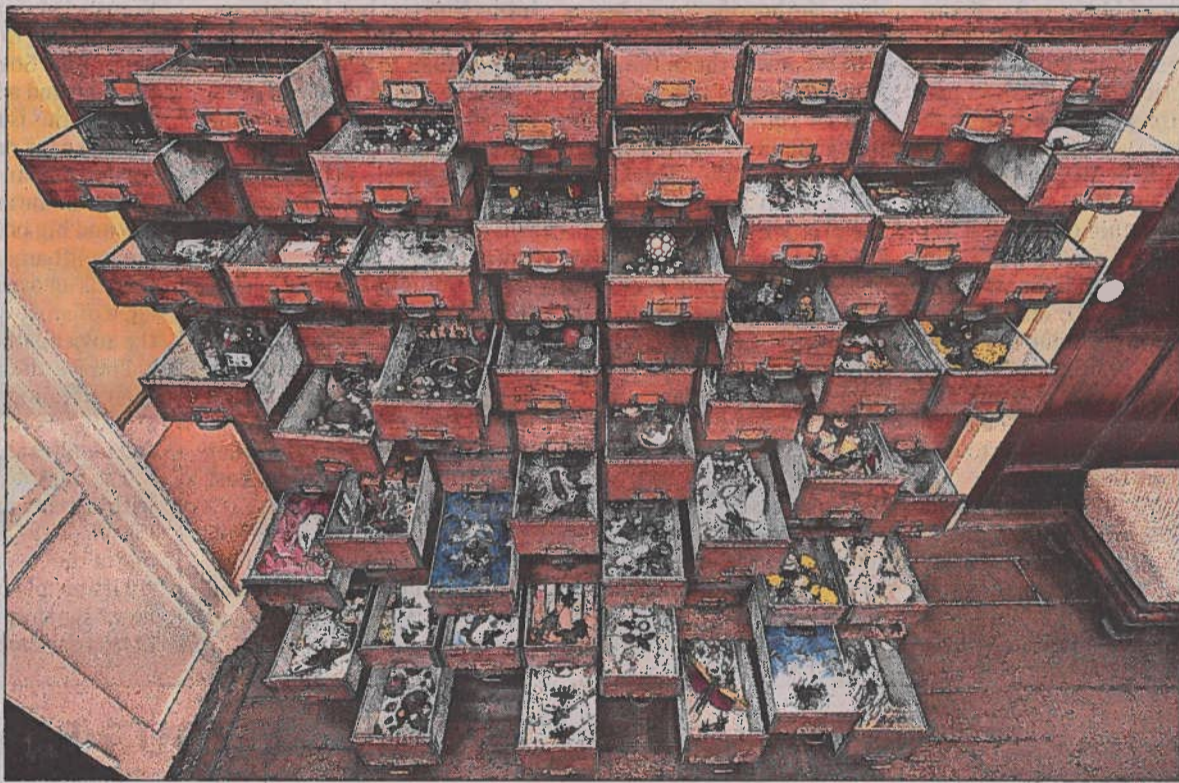
Museum-goers wandering into the second room will be drawn to a colossal three-dimensional version of a bleached coral reef that seems to emerge from the left wall.

In the final room: a cabinet full of neatly arranged detritus that had been found on New England shores, from cigarette lighters to a plastic dish-wash-liquid container.

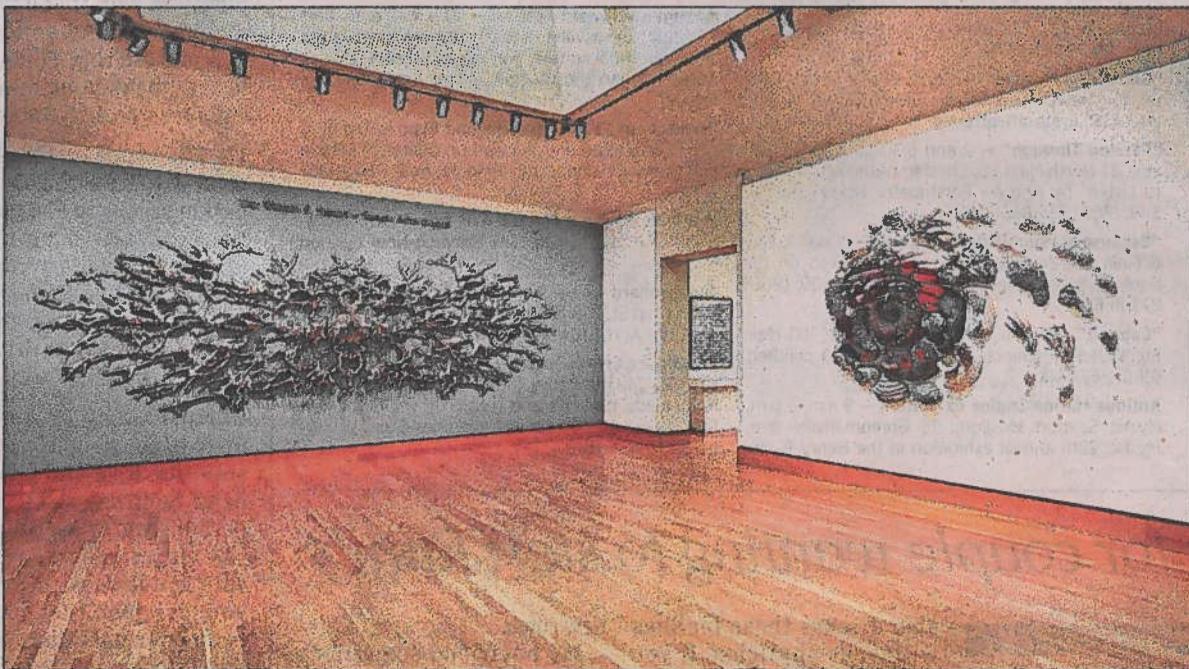
And there's more!

The iconic Florence Griswold House, a short walk across the property, has become part of the exhibition, too, thanks to (deceased but colorful) insects that have been creatively and whimsically placed around the abode. Preserved cicadas and grasshoppers are artfully arranged on the hallway walls, looking like wallpaper patterns. Placed under glass in cabinet drawers are iridescent green jewel beetle carcasses.

While perusing insects on view throughout the Flo Gris House's first floor, visitors hear Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" playing over a speaker system.



Jennifer Angus' Cabinet of Curiosities is on view in the Florence Griswold House, as part of "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art."



Installation view of "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art," showing work by Courtney Mattison and, in the distant gallery, by Mark Dion at the Florence Griswold Museum.

IF YOU GO

What: "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art"

Where: Florence Griswold Museum, 96 Lyme St., Old Lyme

When: Through Sept. 8, though Jennifer Angus' installation in the Florence Griswold House will remain on view through Nov. 10; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily, but closed Mondays

Admission: \$10 adults, \$9 seniors, \$8 students, free for ages 12 and under

Contact: (860) 434-5542, www.florencegriswoldmuseum.org

A quartet of creative artists

"Fragile Earth" highlights four contemporary artists whose work is about the environment.

Artist-naturalist James Prosek explores how humans identify and categorize nature. The idea with his silhouette mural here is to question the way that humans tend to name and order nature.

Courtney Mattison is a sculptor and an ocean advocate who creates ceramic wall reliefs that, while showing how stunning coral reefs are, also educate the viewer about how endangered they are.

Mark Dion, whose cabinet of marine debris is one of his pieces on view at the Flo Gris, pioneered "an interdisciplinary approach that combines installation, appropriation, and performance art with scientific methodologies," the exhibition text notes. Much of his work comments on humans' treatment of the environment.

Jennifer Angus, a professor of design studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, uses insects in her art, getting many of them from insect farms in Malaysia and Madagascar, among other locations. She repairs and reuses the insects, often for more than a decade.

Angus' installation marks the first time a contemporary artist has done an exhibition or installation in the

SEE THE CHOICE PAGE G6

'The choice is ours — nature's fate is in our hands'

FROM GI

historic Florence Griswold House, the boardinghouse where many Lyme Art Colony artists spent time in the early 1900s. Angus is also the museum's first artist in residence.

While "Fragile Earth" runs through Sept. 8, Angus' installation in the house will remain up and open to the public through Nov. 10.

Naturalists, past and present

Jennifer Stettler Parsons, the museum's associate curator who curated "Fragile Earth," says, "The show is really drawn from the inspiration of the museum's history of our core story and also our collection. So it was inspired by the fact that so many of the Lyme Colony artists were attracted to this (area) because they themselves were environmentally conscious. They wanted to immerse themselves in nature."

In fact, Willard Metcalf and Harry Hoffman were both artists and naturalists. The 2017 Flo Gris exhibition "Flora/Fauna: The Naturalist Impulse in American Art" explored that past. "Fragile Earth" is, in a way, a sequel to "Flora/Fauna," showing how contemporary artists are continuing the traditions started by those Lyme Art Colony figures.

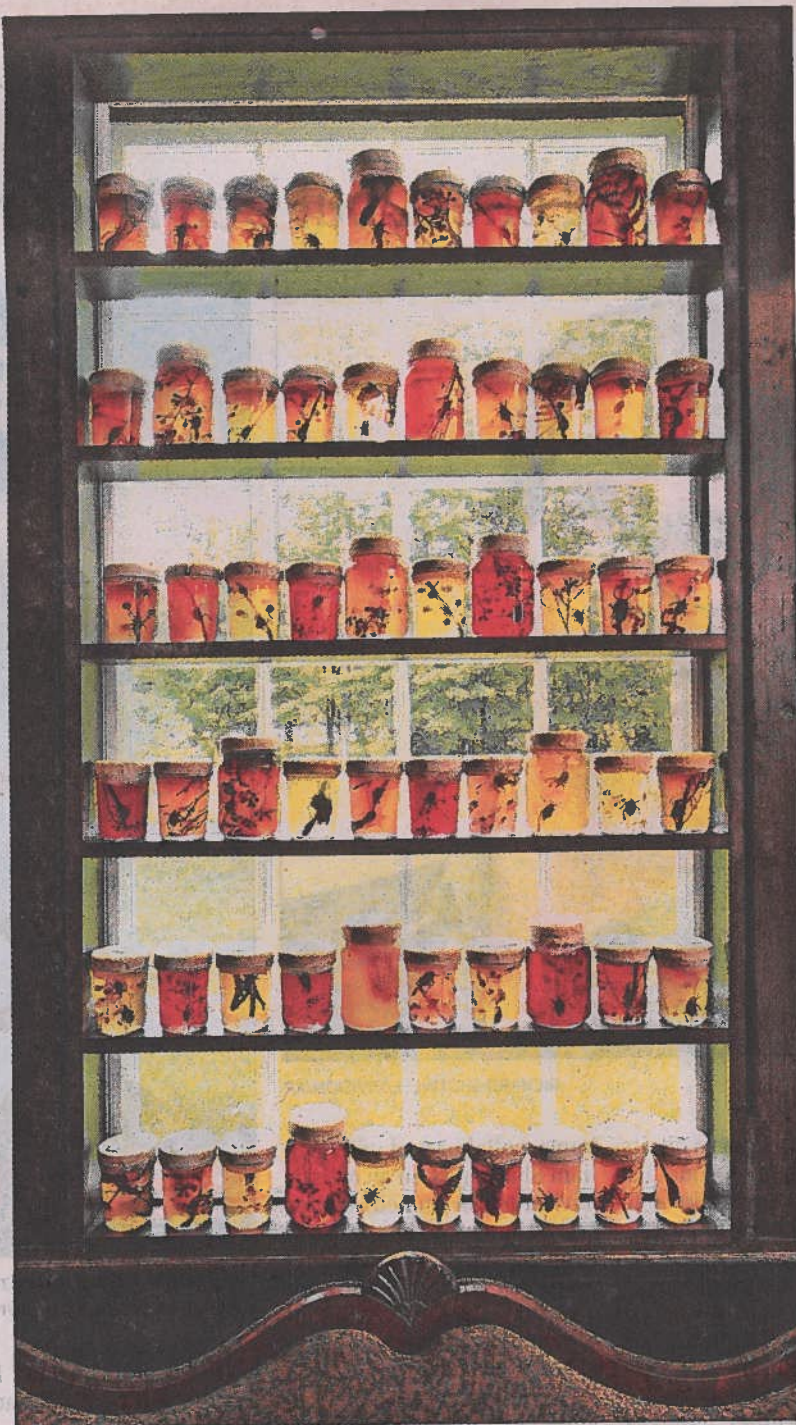
When Dion visited the Flo Gris, he saw Metcalf's naturalist collection chest, which contains butterflies, moths, bird eggs, nests and more. Dion proposed creating his own cabinet of curiosities. Both are on view in "Fragile Earth."

A tale of 17-year cicadas

When Angus visited the Florence Griswold House, she decided she wanted to do an installation there.

"Fantasy is very important to her work. She's really inspired by the Victorian era. She loves this aspect of layering history, layering narrative and patterns. In so many ways, her work seems just perfect for the aesthetic of the Griswold House," Parsons says. "It is a 19th-century home, but there are also so many layers of history in that house, from the time when it was built in 1817 and then the time when it was the Griswolds' family home. Then it was a girls' school, and finally a boardinghouse and an art colony. All those histories live together in the house."

Angus embraced all that and was inspired to add her own historical



Jennifer Angus' insect bell jars from her "Silver Wings and Golden Scales," which is part of the exhibition "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art."

narrative. She wrote a fantastical fiction, imagining the Lyme Art Colony artists being here during the emergence of the 17-year cicadas. It's presented as if it's a missing chapter from Arthur Hemings's memoir "Miss Florence and the Artists of Old Lyme." In her tale,

which accompanies the show in lieu of the usual exhibition wall text, the artists decide to throw an insect-themed party.

"Normally, you walk into the boarding house, and we want you to feel that you're a guest at the boarding house. ... For Jennifer, she

wants you to come in and feel additionally that you are a guest at this insect-themed party," Parsons says.

Angus would love for visitors to imagine that artists put up the insect wallpaper and created the cabinets of curiosities and the insect bell jars on display.

"By being lured into this fantasy, she also wants you to absorb the message of environmental conservation as well. She thinks of insects of ambassadors for their species," Parsons says.

Angus wants people to consider all the ways that insects are helpful to the environment, ranging from being pollinators to providing us with silk and honey, Parsons says.

Birds in shadow

Prosek grew up and lives in Easton, Connecticut, and he is a fisherman, taxidermist and author, in addition to being an artist. During his childhood, he'd head out into ponds, fields and salt marshes on the Long Island Sound.

His silhouette mural at the Florence Griswold responds to the museum's environment, Parsons notes. The left side is a view of the Lieutenant River, which flows by not far from the gallery doors. The right side is a version of the nearby forest that boasts one of the oldest trees in the state, the Barbizon Oak, which was featured in paintings by Lyme Colony artists including Henry Ward Ranger.

"James was really inspired by both the age of this tree and that it has survived all of these generations," Parsons says, adding that the tree shows the resilience of nature.

Bleached reefs

Mattison, who is based in Los Angeles and has interdisciplinary degrees in marine ecology, sculpture and environmental studies, hopes, through her art, to increase people's understanding of how climate change, overfishing and pollution are endangering reefs.

That is evident in the works she has on view at Flo Gris, particularly "Malum Geminus," which, as Parsons notes, gives the viewer the sense of floating above a dying reef. The coral reefs here are sick and bleached, and, the exhibition states, "The clusters of white polyps appear to have had their supportive skele-

tons dissolved by acidic seawater."

"That work illustrates not only coral bleaching but also ocean acidification. The pH levels of the ocean are changing because of global warming," Parsons says, noting that as the ocean becomes more acidic, it's affecting not only coral reefs but also organisms like clams and lobsters, who are having trouble keeping their hard shells.

Her art reflects one of the themes of "Fragile Earth," which is the interconnectedness of nature.

"We not only rely on the environment, but we are also changing it through our daily actions," Parsons says. "She hopes we can connect with something we might not have thought about on a daily basis before but (now) recognize how important it is. ... She hopes you'll have an emotional response (to the fact) that so many things we do are filtering through our environment and then coming back to impact us."

Washed ashore

Dion, who grew up in New Bedford and now lives in upstate New York, and his assistants found items that washed up on New England shores.

For "Fragile Earth," Flo Gris also offered him remnants of Lyme Art Colony artifacts that had been unearthed in site excavations in 1989 and 1998-99 and debris from the Lieutenant River.

"The resulting cabinets display discarded objects of New England's past and present in order to encourage contemplation of what types of 'curiosities' we're leaving for future generations, and what legacies," the exhibition states of Dion's "New England Cabinet of Marine Debris (Lyme Art Colony)."

Discussing the exhibition as a whole, Parsons says, "I hope that the work on view will remind visitors of the vast wonder of nature, and allow themselves to be immersed in the kind of encounter that some of us might not have experienced since childhood. With that emotional response, I hope that people will recognize that the environmental crisis is not just a science problem, it is everyone's problem. These artists help us to see that we are all connected. Our daily choices, both large and small, contribute to the environment's recover or demise, and the choice is ours — nature's fate is in our hands."