

Alien Invasion: (Un)Familiar Forms in Contemporary Art

Alien Invasion features objects and images from RAM's collection that are both fantastical and familiar. The contemporary artists whose works are featured—many of whom use the natural world as inspiration—do not shy away from the oversized, dramatic, or intriguing. They understand the value of things that are rooted in the real yet are rendered mysterious with an artist's manipulation. Most of these artists do not use the word alien to describe their interests or their work but they talk about friction and tension, usually in organic forms.

The organizing principle for this exhibition, inspired by a walk through RAM's collection storage spaces, encourages imaginative and fanciful interpretations of objects, images, and adornment.

Whether human-sized baskets, pieces made of recognizable materials used in unexpected ways, or paintings and jewelry that feature organic forms that might challenge expectations, these works offer new perspectives for looking at the sometimes blurry boundaries between natural and artificial or recognizable and strange.

As is typical with any work of art, there are numerous possibilities for how the pieces in this exhibition could be understood. **Alien Invasion** consciously highlights the potential ambiguities of these multiple readings, spotlighting works that operate in between concepts like natural and unnatural, organic and manmade, or familiar and strange. The word invasion is not used to suggest a conquest or domination but to offer the option of a fantastical narrative—maybe even one where the artworks come alive and take over the space.



(above)
Jeffrey Lloyd Dever
Seeking Solace, 2011
Polymer, plastic-coated wire, and steel wire
Racine Art Museum
Polymer Art Acquisition and Care Fund Purchase
Photography: George R. Staley

(bottom left)
John N. Colt
Tide Pool, 1984
Acrylic on cardboard
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Ruth Kjaer
and Kohler Foundation, Inc.
Photography: Jon Bolton

Select Featured Artists

Desiring bright colors and atypical shapes for his jewelry and small sculpture, **Peter Chang** (1944–2017) experimented with various methods and materials, including acrylic from the shop signs of a Chinese neighborhood in Liverpool, England. Frequently using the natural world, urban environments, and everyday encounters as inspiration, Chang played with color combinations and the potential of hues to encourage certain responses. Plastics in various forms, such as the acrylic used for Chang's works in RAM's collection, are a plentiful and malleable resource but also exemplify the artist's goal of using "something that would reflect the age we live in."

John N. Colt (1925–1999) created paintings, drawings, watercolors, and prints that underscored his interest in the natural world at a cellular level. With a poetic color palette, he sometimes



combined imagery in a surreal, dreamlike way—as if actually looking through a microscope. He stated: "My work consists of ideas about metamorphosis, change and transformation—life processes eventuated through colored water." RAM's extensive archive of works by Colt includes several examples that feature creatures vaguely resembling starfish, sea anemone, tadpoles, worms, and other insects—the ambiguity of their identity giving them an otherworldly quality.



Celebrated fiber artist **Kiyomi Iwata** uses her upbringing in Japan as a resource for her work, stating: "I explore the boundaries of East and West through absence and presence, void and volume." What this means practically, as evidenced in the works in this exhibition, is that Iwata crafts silk organza into loosely structured volumetric shapes that poetically evoke elements of the natural world such as water, earth, sky, fungi, and unnamed creatures.

Jennifer Maestre, who uses pencils to make sculptures that were initially based on sea urchins, highlights how two relatively common items (pencils and sea urchins) can be transformed into something mysterious. Cutting the pencils and then stitching them together so that they look spiny and on the verge of moving, Maestre plays with viewer expectations. She states: "The alluring texture of the spines draws the touch in spite of the possible consequences. The tension unveiled, we feel push and pull, desire and repulsion...Paradox and surprise are integral in my choice of materials."

Interested in making viewers more aware of their own bodies, **Masako Onodera** creates jewelry and small sculpture that magnify sensuality and that turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. For example, Onodera's *Eruption (Bracelet)* made of felted wool and plastic looks like an organic form in a moment of transformation. The fact that it is meant to be worn encourages contemplation of not only what it represents but what it would feel like to wear the bracelet. Her sculpture, *Apprehension*, also plays to emotion. Here, repurposed leather and found silver are combined to create an object that has recognizable parts that add up to something unrecognizable.

This ambiguity is unsettling and—as noted in the piece's title—might encourage a viewer to feel uneasy or apprehensive about its purpose or associations.

Linda Kelly Osborne's large baskets—basically, upright organic forms—are potential metaphors for the human condition. She states; "on the surface, they are hollow vessels displaying a balance of tension and flexibility under changing conditions; within, they house an unseen interior...A balance of tension and compression... encountered in mass yet a uniquely individual presence, power, and mystery... hollow yet with a memory for what they have held, the thin outer skin both revealing and concealing an unknown interior."

Playing to an attraction to things that are decadent, saturated, or luscious, **Natalya Pinchuk** creates oversized wool neckpieces and brooches with floral-like appendages. Meant to hang from the body in a way that makes them seem like growths or attachments, this adornment reveals Pinchuk's interest in the "friction and blurring between the natural and the artificial" as well as alluding to "unfamiliar growths and developments within our bodies."

The artists whose works are included in *Alien Invasion* investigate the mysteries of the natural world, the complexities of the human condition, and/or the possibilities of materials. In this way, they are not so very different from other artists who have taken on nature as subject matter in one form or another. This exhibition, in particular, includes works that hint at or embrace ambiguity or metaphorical possibilities. Rather than focusing on one particular reading, the show underscores that artworks are open to interpretations that may change in relation to other influences such as physical environment and arrangement, comparisons and contrasts with other objects, as well as personal knowledge and preferences.

This exhibition has an online counterpart, the second *RAM Virtual Community Art Show*, which may be viewed on the iPad in the museum gallery and through the RAM website at ramart.org.



(top left)
Natalya Pinchuk
Fruits of Paradise, 2005
Dyed wool
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Gail M. Brown
Photography: Jon Bolton

(above)
Peter Chang
Bracelet, 1993
Acrylic resin
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Gail M. Brown
Photography: Jon Bolton