

## **Matt Hale's True-Fictive Nature**

### **John Roberts**

Matt Hale's new work recalls the taxonomies of naturalistic scientific display. Working from found trunk and bark fragments, branches and roots, foraged from the small wood close to his studio in the London suburbs Hale has transformed them into a range of seemingly-artificial and vaguely hypertrophic specimens of a diseased nature. Some of the organic materials are dipped in acidic green paint-infused copolymer emulsion, 'sealing' them, and then speckled and dripped with a range of confectionary-toned yellows and olives and mould-like green-blacks; some of the longer trunk sections, dipped and painted, have delicate orange and lime green copolymer leaves or fungi protruding from the bark, or in one case, large blue-green fin-like copolymer protuberances; one long trunk section, which has a deep split, has been stuffed with plastic objects – a bottle, a spray-can cap, lids and pieces of Perspex – and covered down the back and over the top with glistening resin; one smaller trunk section, dipped and painted, has been given two bulbous natural excrescences, two large plant tubers, stuck on and painted in decay-toned green-blacks and yellows; and some trunk sections or branches have actual plastic objects inserted into their surface or moulded on; in one instance, a plastic jar with a light green cap filled with light green paint; in another, a frond of electric cables; and in another, a plastic tube has been inserted into the end of a similar-sized branch, sprayed over, *sfumato*-like, in electric lime green, disguising the join and the plastic-organic interface; an electric two-volt motor, has been jammed over the top of the black-painted branch.

Yet, even if this range of intrusions is rich, it is uncertain whether these specimens, with their kindergarten 'natural' colours and sickly mutations, can be seen strictly as abnormalities. In an obvious sense the remnants can be read as toxic hybrids removed from an irreparably diseased earth, but they can also be read as recovered samples from a wondrous and alien *Avatar*-like planet of blue and orange trees, of glowing and communicating plants and monstrous talking creatures; or conversely, and more prosaically, they can be seen as examples of a benign 'second nature' on planet earth itself, in which human intervention into natural processes has produced a controlled plasticized and technologically-embedded natural

world. In this respect it is actually unclear where we stand temporally and historically as viewers: are these specimens from a failed and degraded present or, are they the exotic ‘becoming future’ of our world governed by the capitalist penetration of nature (a controlled transgenic nature)? Or, are they, rather, evidence of a petrified past, the deadly scientific evidence of a destroyed earth or even - further back in time - a collection of strange *arche-fossils*<sup>1</sup> from an unknown ancient pre-human civilization, in which living wood and plastic appear indivisible? In other words: are we the privileged viewer of a world that has been thankfully superseded and are viewing the evidence with a naturalistic scientific distance and becalmed equanimity, or are we the threatened and fearful viewer of a present world that feels outside of our control? In a way, we don’t need to have this confirmed, or, rather, it doesn’t matter in order for the work to establish its sense of estrangement. For it is the generic ‘sci-fi’ character of our viewing relationship to the objects – the fact that we are looking at world living or dead that is *external* to us - that determines the overall eeriness of the work, and creates the ‘charmed’ true-fictiveness of the objects.

And this is why what lies at the heart of this true-fictive eeriness and nature-human interface, is the work’s reliance on a fabricated mimeticism: that is, the fact that the ‘denaturalized’ and ‘abnormal’ nature on display has been created by Hale himself from the remnants of these foraged natural materials (as opposed to being a form of imaginary 2-D representation of the ‘natural world’), creating accordingly - given the work’s visual proximity to the nature we know on earth - a sense that this is a newly transformed nature, and not a wholly imaginary one without reference to our known world. Here Hale-as-artist has become, if not Dr. Frankenstein, then, at least the Promethean experimenter mixing up ‘unmixables’ in his studio to create a rupture in the continuum of natural appearances. But, this breaking with appearances is not evidence of rupture in the ‘natural order’ of things. Hale’s transformative work *denaturalizes* nature, certainly, but it doesn’t point mournfully to a loss of nature as such. If the work of intervention is Promethean in spirit, it is also domestic and habitual as well, and consequently much closer to the ‘artificial’ skills and techniques of the gardener and horticulturalist intervening in and building a newly cultivated natural realm, and to the

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<sup>1</sup> This is Quentin Meillassoux’s term for the material evidence of a deep ancestral reality anterior to terrestrial life. See *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, with a preface by Alain Badiou, translated by Ray Brassier, Continuum, London and New York, 2008

contemporary scientist creating new biogenetic forms, as opposed, that is, to the image of the corporate scientist in his or her lab - familiar from popular culture – preparing maliciously or blindly for nature’s destruction. Hale-the-Promethean here is also the skilled creator of new breeds and forms, new colours and textures, unconcerned with the purity or continuity of nature; and this is why, the eeriness of the work is not derivable solely from our technophobic fears; and, therefore, however we situate ourselves temporally in front of it – whether we are looking at a petrified world or evidence of new life - it is difficult to feel with any certainty that the work is purely dystopic. This is why, I think, the question is, not whether the true-fictiveness of the work is disaffirmative or affirmative, but, rather, how Hale’s plasticized nature stands in for humans’ own true-fictive intervention into a de-substantialized, no longer ‘natural’, nature. This means that this expanded ‘secondary nature’ presented here is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, but, rather, the continuing site of conflicting forces into which the control and development of nature is inscribed, forces that will define to what ends humans’ Promethean ambitions will be directed. This is where the fear actually enters: because if capital is no respecter of the ‘natural’, it also no respecter of the external costs of this process of denaturalization as well. As such, Hale’s plasticized forms are neither ecological disaster zones nor striking and colourful exemplars of Life 2.0. Rather, they stage the current crisis of nature as an unresolved relationship between nature as a threatened repository and nature as a human-directed process simultaneously, but crucially, without the *myth of a substantialized nature*.

In this respect, from a wider perspective, the abnormalities of Hale’s objects take their distance from a transcendental ecological holism, perhaps best represented by the deep ecology of Arne Naess, in which, in order to secure the future of human well-being and flourishing, he calls for nature to be protected from large scale human intervention.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Hale’s denaturalized true-fictive nature is closer to what Slavoj Zizek has called (following Timothy Morton), an “ecology without nature.”<sup>3</sup> That is, ecological practice is pursued without recourse to the idea of a substantialized and stable natural world, and,

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<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology of Wisdom*, edited by Alan Drengson and Bill Devall, Penguin Books, London, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Zizek, ‘Unbehagen in Der Natur’, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Verso, London and New York, 2008, p445

therefore, without the idea that ecology preserves us from the unmitigated destructiveness of the synthetic. “This is what the “end of nature” means: synthetic life is not just supplementing natural life, it turns natural life itself into a (confused, imperfect) species of synthetic life.”<sup>4</sup> Hence Hale’s objects can be seen as the contingencies and imperfections of a synthetic life, as opposed to being the distressing abnormalities of a suffering spontaneous and natural life. Indeed, Hale’s true-fictive objects presume an immanent freedom *to* the synthetic – a freedom internal to human-manipulated form - even if the synthetic under the rule of capital indisputably threatens the continuity of the biosphere. A social order based on deep ecology and the vigilant protection of ‘natural life’ from the synthetic might be, as Morton, puts it, “the most coercive and oppressive space ever. The association with fascism is obvious.”<sup>5</sup>

Is Hale’s work then part of the growing body of a global art addressed to a post-Spinozian type of flat ontology, in which humans, trees and rocks, are held to have the same material value? Are his true-fictive ‘second-nature’ objects a manifestation of what is commonly called, these days, a post-anthropocentric intimacy with nature? Hale’s denaturalization of nature, certainly suggests this: his interventions into nature distance science and human creativity from the notion that nature is mere matter. Nature is not a dead externality populated by sentient beings that only serve humans’ transcendence and superiority over the nonhuman; on the contrary, humans enter into a living and interconnected complexity with the sentient and non-sentient nonhuman, without which there would be no ‘human’ at all. “Humans and nonhumans are deeply interconnected.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Hale’s work shares its critique of the instrumental domination of nature with Theodor Adorno and Marx Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944),<sup>7</sup> and with Naess, Morton and other ecological thinkers. But Hale’s ‘second nature’ is not post-anthropocentric in any banal sense, insofar as the objects’ processual entanglement of the natural and the synthetic refuse

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p440

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, Verso, London and New York, 2017, p25

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p16

<sup>7</sup> Theodor Adorno and Marx Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming, Verso, London and New York, 1997

any imaginative concession to denaturalization as the destruction of nature as a process of steady homeostasis, that humans must respect at all costs. Humans cannot just be in ‘balance’ with nature as justice for the non-sentient and sentient world, otherwise, in order to truly honour this justice, and remove the privileges of human consciousness and ‘ego’, they would willingly allow themselves to become foodstuffs for other animals, or suffer passive obliteration. Indeed, perhaps this is the secret death-wish of deep ecological post-anthropocentric thinking and (Morton’s) speculative realism: a world in which the human (in penitence) is re-integrated into matter in mortal time, before all sentient and non-sentient life - after the implosion of our sun - is reintegrated into the void. But humans - if humans are committed to freedom, as opposed to willingly degrade their independent powers for a life without pain – cannot be in homeostatic balance with nature, for the human must ‘exit’ nature, as a condition of humans freeing themselves from the nonhuman necessities of a nature that would restrict freedom and its, becoming. This is not a subtle defence of industrial progressivism, as if the deepening crisis of the fossil economy<sup>8</sup> and techno-sphere, do not continue to shake capitalist anthropocentrism and the value-form to the very core, and therefore the very meaning of industrial progress. “The relentless pursuit of relentless life.”<sup>9</sup> But, rather, the radical break with this historicist vision cannot be based on a false solidarity with the nonhuman as a condition of non-growth: let us diminish the value of human sapience and upgrade nonhuman sentience, and, as such, non-anthropocentrically invert their respective values: active human sapience is increasingly stupid, nonhuman sentience is, in its non-labouring passivity and adaptability, surprisingly smart. But even if we accept this, this seems largely one-way traffic: humans may learn to offer solidarity to nonhumans, but most sentient and non-sentient nonhumans are indifferent or even antagonistic to the presence of human life. Solidarity with the nonhuman, therefore, is a *non-reciprocal* consciousness of

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<sup>8</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital*, Verso, London and New York, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Morton, p47

interconnectedness;<sup>10</sup> and any reciprocal consciousness of interconnectedness would be a nightmare for humans if elephants, locusts and crocodiles could actually speak, and organize their own interests, and start forming elephant-societies, locust-societies and crocodile-societies. In such a world, humans would soon value non-reciprocity (beautifully staged by Neill Blomkamp in his film *District 9* [2009]). Locust Union leader: “if you think of culling our numbers, we will destroy your crops, like a thousand plagues.” Perhaps in this ideal world there would be non-culled, non-crop eating locusts, living in harmony with humans, but this is not a world in which locusts would be locusts; they would be small, high-maintenance, short-lived, humanoids. In this sense solidarity with the nonhuman is a *default* post-humanism (not a productive one), in which the deconstruction of nature degrades human agency and sapience.

In a world then, in which the crisis of nature is not isomorphic with the end of human freedom and nature, Prometheanism is an ideology of non-homeostatic change that still has value. And this is what Hale’s ‘second nature’ draws on. As such this is not a blind-Prometheanism, one that reasserts the hubristic privileges of science over the nonhuman at all costs. But rather, a creative Prometheanism, one that accepts a responsibility for human creativity and its problem-solving capacities as the very condition of a denaturalized, ‘second nature’. Accordingly, there is evidence of a new materialism in art working its way out in Hale’s plasticized objects; evidence of a discernible shift away from the still widespread eco-spiritualist humanist uses of natural materials in contemporary art, particularly the natural adaptation of foraged materials, as in Richard Long’s and Andy Goldsworthy’s work. Hale bypasses natural form as an inert material to be carved, shaped or moulded, or, as prepared units to be used in a fabrication process, by disregarding the formal integrity (and immanent

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<sup>10</sup> That is, solidarity, quite obviously, is always produced from the position *of* the human; humans retain the power to cull animals, divert rivers, excavate rocks, move mountains, and destroy disease-carrying pests; whatever solidarity we are talking about here it is certainly not post-anthropocentric, or even holistic, given it is impossible for humans to reproduce themselves without transforming or even destroying sentient and non-sentient worlds. The issue of solidarity as the non-dominative agency of a flat ontology and post-anthropocentric life is simply false; an empty piety, that deconstructs ‘first nature’ in order to reconstitute our living relationship to the contingency of nature as ‘second nature’ as an internalization of the ‘other’; a weak non-reciprocal act, indeed an act of charity. Anti-anthropocentrism is simply a deflection of human egoism into guilt and shame, and as such an unconscious wish to see an earth without humans, or with as few humans as possible.

beauty) and productive potentiality of the foraged materials. As ‘second nature’, nature here is a series of *readymades*, insofar as human labour and conceptualization have already touched and shaped natural form. The natural integrity of the materials has already been worked over; there is, therefore, no symbolic space in which a threatened ‘first nature’ is identifiable with the loss of freedom. On the contrary, freedom, here lies in problem-solving, in the overcoming of the pathologies and divisions of the human *in* nature as ‘second nature.’ Thus, although it is easy to see these plasticized objects as a familiar version of ecocatastrophism (a nature choked by microplastics in which plastic particles fall from the sky and degraded plastic bags clog the digestive systems of fish and turtles) <sup>11</sup> these works defy the pathos of Romantic mourning, so comfortably attachable to the present ecological crisis. Indeed, these objects inventive grotesqueness releases a new kind of beauty from ‘second nature’; but importantly, this is an artificial and hybrid beauty, that, despite its strangeness, is in fact, not unknown in the present, that is, it represents a beauty of the impure that rose breeders and other horticulturalists can broadly testify to. As such, Hale’s work’s offers a non-*pathétique* nature: nature is not an abstract, continuous and pure ideal to be protected and conserved out of fear, but the unstable, denaturalized space for the productive and collective flourishing of humans as ‘second nature’, in which human sapience and sentient and non-sentient nonhuman life, sustain each other. ‘Ecology without nature’, for the artist, consequently, is about finding a *new language of production*, in which the denaturalization of nature, is the freely creative presence of humans in nature. Hale’s new work opens up a space for thinking this.

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<sup>11</sup> Approximately 335 tonnes of plastic are produced each year, which degrades very slowly. There is now evidence that plastic particles are in the water supply, having been swept up by the wind and fallen with the rain. See, Michael Sander, Hans-Peter E. Kohler and Kristopher McNeill ‘Assessing the environmental transformation of nano-plastic through C-labelled polymers’ *Nature Nanotechnology*, Vol 14, April, 2019, and Laurent Lebreton and Anthony Andrady, ‘Future scenarios of global plastic waste generation and disposal’, *Palgrave Communications*, Vol 5, January 2019