

Welcome to the exhibition *Natures of Reality* at the Art Gallery of Regina. *Natures of Reality* is an immersive video and augmented reality installation by artist Lisa Birke and includes animations created with 16 community members through our partnership with Common Weal Community Arts.

The title of this exhibition, *Natures of Reality*, asks us to think about how meaning and truth are created by media and, alternatively, how democratic access to digital and social media allows people to share their profound experiences of meaning. In her digital artworks, Birke invites people to have experiences with technology through humour and a sincere desire for connection.

You've probably heard of computer-generated effects, augmented reality, digital sculptures, and motion capture, and you might think that these technologies are used to fake moving images, for example, in big-budget Hollywood movies. But, Birke's installation reveals that every costume donned, every action performed, every word spoken and every image captured is in some way constructed to tell a story.

We are familiar with how these stories can give unrealistic impressions of perfection, for example, photo filters on Instagram and Snapchat or only sharing the best moments on Facebook. Birke invites you to experience many different ways technology can frame, tell and share stories and create meaning in our lives.

I'm Sandee Moore, curator of exhibitions and programming at the Art Gallery of Regina, and I'm delighted to guide you through *Natures of Reality* in this audio tour.

We'll start with the large video project that stretches from ceiling to floor along the back wall of the gallery.

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This video is a genre of video art known as "performance for video," meaning that the artist is performing for the camera, not a live audience. The artist appears in the guise of a grinning spokesmodel prancing across a succession of scenes, out-of-place in her inexhaustible wardrobe of slinky gowns.

She holds a series of digitally composited 3D signs aloft, advertising these meaningless platitudes, such as those regularly posted on social media platforms like Instagram, to barren landscapes. Empty, prescriptive, and tongue-in-cheek, phrases such as "live large," "go with the flow," and "survival of the fittest" create uncomfortable juxtapositions, bringing up questions of entitlement. For instance, the text survival of the fittest is an incredibly insensitive slogan to place in a graveyard filled with people who did not survive. At the same time, other sayings, such as "enjoy your view," underscore the privilege of ownership that often permeates unfeeling, shallows posts on social media. These videos are glamorous and saucy while asking difficult questions: how is meaning created or demanded of our lives by society and mass culture, for whom, and at what cost?

In contrast to these laughably hollow, larger than life "affirmations," a series of videos shot by the artists over several years are projected on the floor, acting as a meditative reflecting pool. These videos invite visitors to experience small and extraordinary moments: falling snow, feet in melting ice, ladybugs on a branch in the wind, a dead deer. Such are the brief and insignificant moments that often are the source of joy and true meaning in our lives that we are so privileged to capture as video files, thus prolonging these treasured, fleeting moments.

The sixteen animations by community members created in collaboration with the artist present another side of digital media: that of democratic availability and sheltering anonymity. Community members share genuine stories of finding meaning in their lives delivered on TV monitors and augmented reality-enabled images encircling the gallery. I invite you to view each one in whole or in part, stitching together a unique narrative experience from fragments of each video.

Birke worked with Angel Hayden, Brita Lind, Claire Yacishyn, Damian Thomas, Dawn Thomas-Cameron, Deborah A. Stevens, Hani Rukh E Qamar, Joely BigEagle-Kequahtoway, Julie Gobeil, Kamilla Wolk-Lind, Karishma Joshi, Keshia Katie Hanson, Nicole Gaddie, Precious Tushabe-Torr, shimby, and Yvonne Niegas to create paper avatars that she animated using motion capture technology to speak their words. The artist had participants draw a face to represent them. Then, using motion capture technology, animated participants' drawings to precisely replicate the movements of the participants' faces when they shared their truths. These stories encompass diverse voices and perspectives.

Please see the instruction panels placed throughout the gallery to view works using augmented reality, which overlays graphical or video content over the real world as seen through a smartphone or other device's camera.

The first video on the wall to the right of the door is by Keshia Katie Hanson and can be viewed using the SharedSpaces app; it's also one of the videos on the small monitor to the left of the entrance door. Download the SharedSpaces app from the Apple app store or google play. Open the app and tap the square viewfinder icon at the middle bottom of the screen, then centre the image on the wall (in this case, a face with distinctive pointed ears like an elf or a fox) on your phone's screen. You'll see a short load message, then the face on your screen will begin to move and speak.

Keshia's chatty animation ranges over many topics, including her concern over real estate development occurring on sacred land, imperilling native animal populations. Keshia compares this destruction of prairie habitat to much-lauded efforts to repopulate charismatic animals, such as tigers.

The next video is by Joely BigEagle-Kequahtoway. Pick up the headphones to hear how Joely discovered her profound connection to buffalo as a focus for activism, learning and meaning. Citing communally-held knowledge, "Buffalo was our everything, and they still are everything," she thinks of herself as Buffalo Bird, although her name means morning bird. Joely mentions how grateful she is to the ones that came before, stating, "They lived through a difficult time, and

they passed their resiliency onto me." Further noting her connection to those that came before with the statement, "I am the manifestation of my ancestors' dreams." Joely also espouses the importance of ceremony to help community members through difficult moments and the reopening of traumas. Please be aware that she mentions residential school experiences and that these stories may trigger traumatic memories or feelings for some listeners.

A large monitor displays an animated photo of a toddler speaking. In this animation, participant Brita Lind's avatar talks about the meaning of life and reflects on death, including a severe illness Lind suffered when this photograph was taken.

Next is an animation by Hani Rukh E Qamar. A girl sketched in graphite pencil muses about brown and its lack of association with beauty. Hani rejects societies beauty standards, and she says via her hand-drawn avatar, "I forged my own path to find beauty within me."

Kamilla Wolk-Lind shares her enthusiasm for Marvel and DC comics and films through a character with a diamond embedded in their forehead. Often, we can find refuge, comfort and aspirations in stories of super heroes and how they gained their powers. " I'd like to have the power to stop time," Wolk-Lind confesses with disarming frankness, "like, when I'm running late." It's an experience of worry and regret that is infinitely relatable. This video can be watched using the Shared Spaces app.

On the next wall, video works by participants continue, beginning with Precious Tushabe-Torr's animation representing herself as a hybrid person/plant sprouting a growth of leaves from the top of their head. Ideas sprout just as vigorously from this character, who speaks on Precious's behalf about their plans for the future, their intention to reject negative stereotypes of artists and their dread of entering their teen years. This vulnerable stream of consciousness is punctuated by the starkness of their statement, "I'm lost right now..."

Yvonne Neigas' rainbow-haired avatar comes to life by using the Shared Spaces augmented reality app. They share challenges experienced and the differences they've noticed between Philippines and Canada. They acknowledge that their father moved her to secure a better life and better access to education for Yvonne while also mourning the joyful hubbub of being surrounded by relatives.

Two videos share a large monitor next: a leafy tree canopy with touchingly shallow roots shares Karishma Joshi's poetry about the impressive and impervious strength of a tree, while Angel Hayden's avatar's sunset-hued face hovers above an ocean.

Claire Yacishyn, a transwoman, wishes that were were more accepting of people's differences. Claire's animated self stares penetratingly at viewers and offers heartfelt desires to be a better person and see a more just society emerge. "I want us as a society and humanity to celebrate people being themselves, not who we want them to be."

Birds and butterflies hover around Dawn Thomas-Cameron's charmingly naive and colourfully rendered face. This self has flowers and grasses for hair; the iris of their left eye is the sun, while the iris of their right eye is the moon. In contrast to its cheery appearance, this avatar speaks about serious topics, including residential school experiences. Please use your discretion when choosing to engage with this potentially triggering content.

Next is a loveably guileless drawing on lined paper by Damian Thomas. This be-fanged avatar will come to life on your phone or smart device screen using the Shared Spaces App. The rambling desires and quick-fire witticisms of a child colour Damian's narrative. He talks about his love of video games, dismisses superpowers as unrealistic and yearns to teleport from place to place.

On the other side of the large projection is a monitor displaying a vivaciously speaking avatar with masses of curly purple hair. Julie Gobeil speaks frankly about relative privilege and their delight in dogs' unconditional love through their avatar.

Nicole Gaddie's wide-eyed, pencil sketched visage comes next. Shaking her doodled hair as she speaks, she talks about finding meaning in helping people as a paramedic and the devastating effects of MS. Although she had to give up her long-cherished career, she says that living with the physical limits of MS are "all about how you look at it." View the animation on the small, motion-triggered monitor to the left of the gallery entrance or use the Shared Spaces app.

A woman with close-cropped hair crowned with flowers declares, "I love colour." She then extends this declaration to all living things. Through this animation, Deborah A Stevens locates meaning in her family history of migration to this place, mentioning those who fled hardships abroad and experienced difficulties in Canada. From these struggles, she takes lessons of creatively re-using and helping each other out. Stevens notes that difficult circumstances have changed her perception of reality and have created the values she cherishes.

shimby's expressively rendered face springs to life when you view the image on the wall through the shared spaces app. Simply seeing other people creating inspires shimby, while having room and support for our artistic production can change our perceptions of reality. shimby asserts that approaching a space energetically can result in genuine connections as humans. These connections can include conversation or knowing others through their creative works; difficult points of inquiry can illuminate the past.

Gallery visitors are encouraged to walk between monitors and AR as the voices start and stop speaking, piecing together a personal narrative experience of *Natures of Reality*.

Finally, the artist has created an augmented reality sculpture. A series of granite blocks sprouting flowering tendrils can be viewed by pointing your phone or smartphone at the "Natures of

Reality" placard on the floor using the Shared Spaces app. The cubes, which spell out the word "reality," constantly shift and rearrange themselves to spell out new words, revealing the constructed nature of truth and reality in this virtual sculpture's immateriality and continual mutation.

The combined aspects of *Natures of Reality* reveal that meaning emerges not from airbrushed perfection but from acceptance and celebration of difference, tolerance, finding one's truth, and the power of community. Through the consumerist din of prescriptive norms and aspirational desires that saturate our media, Birke's *Natures of Reality* invites us to hear the truth about the meaning of life: beauty, magic, and wealth of meaning lie in complexity and nuance.

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The Art Gallery of Regina is a nonprofit, public art gallery that programs contemporary art that tells the stories of Saskatchewan artists and those from adjoining treaty territories.

We are grateful to our core funders, Sk-arts and the city of Regina, who enable us to make our exhibitions free to the public while compensating artists for their work. We are also grateful to Liz's Sweet Treats and Creations for providing snacks for the opening reception. We are truly grateful to SaskTel for sponsoring this exhibition.

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On behalf of the Art Gallery of Regina, I thank you for taking the time to listen to this audio tour and attend this exhibition. You can support the Art Gallery of Regina by becoming a member, donating, or both. Visit our website, [www.artgalleryofregina.ca](http://www.artgalleryofregina.ca), for details on becoming part of our gallery's community and more information about *Natures of Reality* and the AGR's other programming.