

*Ruderal Consciousness* presents new works by Sam Schmitt exploring the strategies employed by vegetal life to reproduce in disrupted spaces. A new painting, an installation, and a responding video work from artist Monica Tolia were developed during this residency at hARTslane Gallery, which is the third part of the RELAY project supported by Arts Council England.

Ruderal species reclaim disturbed lands that were ravaged by natural events such as wildfires, but also those altered by human activity.

Wastelands, fallows, roadsides and forgotten urban lots... These inhospitable environments are taken over by so called 'weeds', which pioneer a space for other living species to join. They are the front line of biodiversity. The word ruderal comes from the Latin *rudus*, meaning rubble, accentuating their capacity to raise entire ecological communities from ashes.

The two-piece space has been altered by Sam Schmitt during this residency, encouraging plants to sprout in unexpected places, and a pool of water to establish itself in a corner of the concrete floor. In the back room, the installation *Crimson Clovers* invites visitors to enter the growing space, move across and enjoy, every step visible on the delicate sprouts. The clovers have been carefully grown over the past month of this residency, chosen specifically for their ability to enrich and fix nitrogen in the depleted soil.

2020 has brought a series of wrenching events that we still attempt to process. At a time where the balance of our societies and the natural world are in shambles, this exhibition encourages ruderal thinking. We must take the courageous first step into unknown territory during desperate times, and convert landscapes into places in which future generations can thrive. Observing the revitalizing operations of nature, this presentation calls for us to learn from the patient work of natural systems. It reminds visitors of what can emerge from disturbance, and that our actions are intertwined with the environment.

The video work *Low Murmur* by Monica Tolia documents the installation and superimposes it with a performance of choreography bringing this connection to the foreground. The vegetal life is used as a green screen, with her performance emerging through the brush of low-lying weeds. Here, Monica uses Taoist meditation as a tool to sense what slips through the cracks of fast-paced modernity, drawing attention to the details discovered and felt in their entirety. The accompanying soundscape bathes the entire exhibition in sounds of trickling water and electronica. Taoist thinking is aligned with a *Ruderal Consciousness*, proposing to follow the natural course of the Earth, living modestly in harmony with nature, and supporting biodiversity to thrive.

The painting *Golem (Old Furby™®)* towers above the elements of the show. Furbies are toys conceived during Sam's childhood in the 1990's and have sold millions of copies. Designed to respond to touch, sound and light changes, they are programmed to speak 'Furbish', developing their vocabulary as they 'grow' with words from human languages. Animalistic and yet weirdly anthropomorphic, the Furby was always a sort of mirror, going beyond representing a physical artificial pet in the Tamagotchi era to speak human languages and mimic our emotions.

Where are all these Furbies today? Many remain in their homes and dusty attics, but others have been disposed of and reclaimed by nature. This painting depicts a discarded Furby as a vanitas, questioning the fleeting consumption habits of late capitalism and reminding the viewer of the ultimate return to nature. The presence of this animatronic figure left dormant in the woods gives it a totemic aspect, as if inhabited by a guardian spirit of the forest that will resolutely never speak a human language again.

-Nikos Akritidis