The Diorama of Coexistence Hypnagogia: The Liminal Space between Dream and Reality

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The Diorama of Coexistence
Hypnagogia: The Liminal Space between
Dream and Reality

by

Yunseok (Andy) Song
Studio Art MFA | May 2024

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art in the
Department of Art + Architecture at the
University of San Francisco, California.
To my parents, whose caring and unconditional support made this journey possible, thank you.
To my God, for providing strength and resilience when I needed it most, I am truly grateful.

Special thanks to Professor Nico van Dongen for his invaluable guidance, advice, and inspiration throughout this process.
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Abstract
The “Diorama of Coexistence” explores the imagined spaces where humans and animals share the same environments, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. This year-long photographic project is inspired by my Christian faith and the Genesis creation narrative, where the world was originally harmonious and unspoiled. Through my work, I aim to reimagine the natural world, not as it is, but as it could be a place where animals and humans coexist peacefully.

In researching human development and its impact on nature, I found that animals are often confined to spaces like zoo, far from their natural habitats. This led me to question what it would be like if these animals were part of our everyday surroundings on urban trails, in neighborhood streets, or among the familiar landscapes where we live and work. The concept of “Hypnagogia,” the state between wakefulness and sleep, guides my approach, allowing me to create images that capture a dreamlike coexistence. Through these compositions, I seek to depict animals not as victims of destruction, but as participants in a world where they find comfort and harmony alongside human environment.
Introduction
As an artist, my work is deeply influenced by my Christian faith. Genesis 1 tells us about a world that was initially perfect and untainted: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” This divine vision of a pristine creation is the foundation of my artistic inquiry. However, the world we live in today bears little resemblance to this original perfection. Urban sprawl, climate change, and the endangerment of countless species are evidence of the degradation of this divine gift. My project seeks to explore this dissonance, inviting viewers to consider the impact of human activity on nature and the creatures that inhabit it.

One of the core concepts that guide my work is “Hypnagogia”—the liminal state where the real and the imagined coalesce. This concept reflects the Biblical essence of faith, as described in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Just as faith brings the unseen into reality, my images visualize a dream-like yet impending symbiosis between humans and nature.

Through “The Diorama of Coexistence,” I aim to challenge conventional perceptions of nature and explore the potential for coexistence in a world where reality and fantasy intersect. This series is both an artistic exploration and a spiritual journey, seeking to capture the beauty and complexity of our shared existence with the natural world. By blending photographic elements with surreal compositions, I create a space where the boundaries of reality are fluid, inviting viewers to engage with these themes on a deeper level.
Chapter 1 - Research on Nature’s Rights
My journey into the rights of nature began with a desire to understand the impact of human development on the environment. As an artist and a human being, I was moved by the destruction of ecosystems and the resulting climate change. This research led me to confront the harsh reality of species extinction, where countless animals face the threat of disappearing due to habitat loss and environmental degradation.

The catalyst for this project was my growing awareness of the suffering experienced by animals in captivity. While exploring various sources, I was struck by the plight of animals in zoos. During my visit to the San Francisco Zoo, I observed the anxiety and restlessness of many animals. The snow leopard <Fig 01>, for example, displayed signs of distress, pacing back and forth in its enclosure. This observation, coupled with reports of animal abuse and neglect in poorly managed zoos, further fueled my commitment to this project.

The alarming accounts of malnourished animals and endangered species in captivity, along with the broader issues of climate change and habitat destruction, underscored the need to address the rights of nature. It became clear that while humanity and nature must coexist, this coexistence often comes at a significant cost to the environment and its creatures.
In a blurry photograph I took, <Fig 01>, a snow leopard was observed moving rapidly back and forth within its cage, which I considered to be abnormal behavior potentially signaling stress or anxiety. After conducting further research, I found support for this observation in a journal article titled “The Different Physical and Behavioural Characteristics of Zoo Mammals That Influence Their Response to Visitors” by Marina B. Queiroz and Robert J. Young, which indicates that such repetitive movements in zoo animals can indeed be considered signs of anxiety.

As I was keep researching, I came across even more alarming news. It was a report from MBC, a South Korean broadcaster, about the conditions at a private zoo in Daegu, South Korea. The story described how the zoo was essentially abandoned due to a lack of funds for maintenance and operation, leaving the animals in a state of neglect. The more I learned about it, the more saddened I became. In <Fig 2 - 4>, you can see a lion with unfocused eyes and absolutely none of the wild majesty you’d expect, confined to a cramped cage. It even had a severely injured leg, which showed clear signs of neglect.

The deplorable state of this zoo made me question the purpose and real function of zoos. It also led me to deeply reflect on animal rights, natural rights, and what it means for an artist like me to try and restore the happiness of these animals. Throughout this project, I seriously considered how to return these creatures to a more open, natural environment rather than keeping them locked away. This led to a series of works depicting what it would be like if these animals were not caged but instead existed in open spaces among us, exploring how they might appear if they were free to roam.

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-(Reporter) There are large red scars on the male lion's legs, and similar scars are visible in various places on the feet and abdomen.
The larger issue isn’t just limited to zoos and the neglected animals living there. It’s the fact that the population of living organisms is declining. According to the World Wildlife Fund’s (WWF) Living Planet Report 2020, the global population of living organisms has decreased by 68% over about 50 years, from 1970 to 2020.

I believe the primary reason for this decline is habitat destruction and uncontrolled development driven by human activity. All the consumption and leisure activities that we, as humans, engage in require development, which in turn threatens the survival of wildlife. This is likely the main reason why the number of endangered species continues to grow. The Earth, which was once beautiful in the eyes of God, is gradually becoming ill, and realizing that someone has to bear this sacrifice weighed heavily on me, not just as an artist but as a person striving for coexistence. This sense of responsibility might have driven me to dig into these issues, explore them, and transform them into visual images as part of this project.
Here, the stark reality of environmental degradation comes to life. These images show animals, symbols of nature’s innocence and purity, amidst the backdrop of human waste and neglect.
Chapter 2 - Biblical Research about Genesis: An Analysis Through Artistic Interpretations
The Bible, a compendium of profound theological insights and historical narratives, presents Genesis as a cornerstone for understanding the moral and spiritual genesis of humanity. The dichotomy of pre and post-transgression events in the Garden of Eden, as delineated in Genesis, offers a vivid tableau of innocence and fall, symbolically rich and widely explored both in scriptural exegesis and visual arts.

In the narrative arc of Genesis, particularly in the opening chapters, there is a stark contrast between the idyllic existence before the Fall and the profound moral transformations afterward. Initially, Eden is portrayed as a paradisiacal haven, where abundance and peace prevail. Descriptions of a land flowing with milk and honey, where humans and animals coexist in serene harmony, evoke images of an unspoiled world order unlike chapter 1 of this thesis. This primordial landscape has been a compelling subject for artists throughout history, who have often depicted Eden as a lush, vibrant locale teeming with life. Such representations can be seen in classical paintings, which not only capture the beauty of Eden but also underscore the symbiotic relationship between nature and humanity, as suggested in Figures 5 and 6.

<Fig 5> JAN BRUEGHEL THE ELDER
Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden 1615
Oil on copper | 48.6 x 65.6 cm
<Fig 6> Jan Brueghel the Elder & Peter Paul Ruben
The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man, 1615
Oil on panel | 74.3 x 114.7 cm
Genesis 1:27-30 encapsulates the divine mandate given to Adam and Eve, highlighting themes of fertility, stewardship, and dominion: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Genesis 1:28). This passage not only reflects the responsibilities entrusted to humans but also sets the stage for the theological and ethical dilemmas that will arise with their failure to uphold these duties.

The subsequent narrative shift, post-Fall, introduces a world marred by human transgression. The fall from grace is not merely a descent into sin but a transition into a complex reality where human actions have irreversible consequences on the natural world. As I elaborate in the subsequent chapters, the proliferation and advancement of humanity come at a significant cost to the environment. This period of human history is characterized by exploitation and ecological degradation, a theme that resonates with contemporary concerns about environmental sustainability and ethical stewardship.

Through the lens of biblical stories and their artistic renditions, my thesis projects “Diorama of coexistence” explores the profound impacts of these foundational narratives on our understanding of human nature, ethical responsibility, and our relationship with the world.
Chapter 3 - Format & Medium Research / Aesthetic Decision
In my series, the mediums and formats used were digital photography and the transformation and combination of these photographs. Discussing digital photography as an artistic tool, it has been influential since the 1990s, which some have called the ‘digital revolution’ due to its significant impact on image production. Particularly, digital photography rapidly diverged from analog photography to the extent that the term ‘post-photography’ was coined. Analog photography was considered a trace of reality as it records light reflected from subjects onto a photosensitive plate. On the other hand, digital photography is accepted as fictional or virtual due to its ease of image editing and compositing. While analog photography had instances of fictitious images like photomontages, digital technology blurs the line between reality and fiction with its superior compositing abilities.

Combination printing, or photomontage, is a method used to represent situations not found in reality by printing two or more photographs on one screen simultaneously. Although this method had only technical differences and no specific name historically, combination printing has been attempted since the early days of photography.

Oscar Gustave Rejlander, in 1857, used a combination printing method in his work “The Two Ways of Life” (Fig 07) to express two different worlds on one screen. In this work, the left side symbolizes a path of disorder, debauchery, and evil, while the right side symbolizes harmony, order, and goodness.

To create this photograph, Rejlander used about 30 negatives of people and backgrounds. He first drew an outline, divided each part, and photographed each section. Then, he placed the negatives on the photographic paper, covering the rest with black cloth and exposing light sequentially, allowing him to print 30 images onto one sheet of paper.(Edgar) Although enlargement printing was not available at the time, combining several close-up prints allowed him to achieve a relatively large photograph of about 80x40 cm. Today, digital technology allows easy compositing through image editing software like Photoshop. The most important aspect of this expression method is to clearly convey a message through the montage of images and ensure that viewers can clearly understand the message. In conducting this series, I also focused more on the message and story than on the technique.
Post - Visualization and Compositing

One of my another key inspirations for this project was the work of photographer Jerry Uelsmann, known for his innovative photomontage techniques. Uelsmann’s use of darkroom processes to create composite images resonated with my approach to post visualization. While his methods differed from modern digital techniques, his concept of “Post Visualization” and “Pre Visualization” aligns with my process. Uelsmann <fig 9, 9.1> often combined multiple negatives to create a single image, allowing for a complex and layered visual narrative. Similarly, my work involves compositing digital images to create scenes that challenge the boundaries between reality and imagination.

Surrealism

In creating “The Diorama of Coexistence,” my work is deeply informed by the historical contexts and aesthetic principles of surrealism, particularly as seen in the works of Salvador Dalí and Jerry Uelsmann. These artists have significantly influenced my photographic style and conceptual framework, especially in how I engage with surrealism to explore the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

Salvador Dalí, <Fig10> renowned for his striking and bizarre images, utilized surrealism to delve into the subconscious, revealing the dream-like landscapes that lie beneath our conventional reality. His work inspires my approach to disrupt the ordinary, positioning animals within human environments in ways that challenge and expand the viewer’s perception of reality. Dalí’s ability to combine everyday objects in unexpected configurations encourages me to create scenes where animals and urban landscapes coexist, crafting a visual language that speaks both of the absurdity and the possibility of these interactions.
Jerry Uelsmann’s influence comes through most prominently in my postvisualization techniques. Uelsmann, a pioneer in photo manipulation, used darkroom techniques to layer multiple photographs into seamless, dream-like images. His method of creating composite images without the use of digital technology challenges me to push the boundaries of traditional photography and explore the potentials of digital editing. My work builds on Uelsmann’s foundation, using digital tools to achieve similar surreal effects, blending elements of nature with urban life to create a cohesive yet startlingly ethereal world.

By incorporating the surreal into my photographic practice, not only pay homage to these historic artistic movements but also position my work within a broader narrative that questions and critiques the separation between humans and nature. This surrealist approach allows me to create a space where viewers are invited to reimagine the possibilities of coexistence and reflect on the impact of human actions on the natural world. The historical and artistic contexts provided by Dalí and Uelsmann enrich my work, offering a complex, layered experience that moves beyond simple visual representation to engage with deeper cultural and ecological issues.

<Fig 10> Salvador Dalí. Illumined Pleasures. 1929. Oil and collage on composition board, 9 3/8 × 13 3/4” (23.8 × 34.7 cm)
**Black and White & Sky Blue**

The choice to work in black and white was deliberate. By removing color from the images, I could focus on contrasts, textures, and the emotional depth of the scenes. Black and white photography has a timeless quality, allowing me to connect with viewers on a deeper level. It also serves as a reminder that the issues of nature and environmental conservation have historical roots and ongoing implications. The monochromatic palette helps convey a sense of clarity and simplicity, guiding viewers to consider the fundamental truths behind the complex environmental themes I explore.

In the development of my artistic project, I began with a series of black and white photographs. <Fig 11> This choice was driven by a desire to focus the viewer’s attention on the core subjects of my work—animals and their interactions with human environments. By eliminating color, I aimed to strip down the distractions, allowing the audience to engage more deeply with the issues at hand and empathize with the animals’ narratives. Black and white also inherently provides a timeless atmosphere and emphasizes the stark contrasts within the compositions, which effectively depict the plight of animals trapped in darkness.

As my project evolved, I introduced sky blue into the compositions, <Fig 12> creating a nuanced blend with the original black and white images. This choice was designed to enhance the dream-like, surreal quality of the photographs, evoking a sense of “Hypnagogia”—where reality and dreams blur into one. The addition of sky blue not only enriches the visual experience by offering a glimpse into a more surreal and immersive world but also signifies a transition to a second phase of coexistence. This phase suggests a shift from the starkness of black and white to a more hopeful and harmonious coexistence, symbolized by the serene quality of the blue tones.

By integrating these color schemes, my work navigates the viewer through a visual journey from the grim realities depicted by black and white to the potential tranquility and harmony symbolized by sky blue. This approach not only deepens the aesthetic and emotional impact of the images but also reinforces the thematic exploration of coexistence and transformation within the natural world.
Panorama

Panoramic photography offers a unique perspective on landscapes, allowing me to capture the grandeur and detail of the natural world. By using this technique, I could provide a comprehensive view of the environments where humans and animals coexist. The panoramic format enabled me to emphasize the scale and scope of these spaces, illustrating the vastness of the natural world while also highlighting the human impact on these environments.

Hypnagogia

The term “Hypnagogia” refers to the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep, where the line between reality and dreams becomes blurred. This concept is central to my project, as the images I create often evoke a sense of dreamlike ambiguity. By incorporating this idea into my work, I aim to explore the intersection of faith and illusion, suggesting that the coexistence of humans and animals can sometimes feel like a dream. This approach allows me to convey the surreal quality of these scenes while also inviting viewers to question their perception of reality.
Chapter 4 - Photographic Practice
To bring this project to life, I turned to photography, my primary artistic medium. I sought to capture two types of images: portraits of animals and human-made environments. This required a multi-faceted approach, involving three primary methods. First, I photographed animals in their natural habitats around San Francisco. Second, I visited the San Francisco Zoo to document animals in captivity. Finally, I captured dioramas from various museums to use as compositional elements in my post visualization work.

By combining these images, I could create a visual narrative that explores the juxtaposition between the natural and artificial. For example, in my piece “Giraffe in the Golf Course,” I merged images of a golf course with a giraffe from the San Francisco Zoo, illustrating the incongruity of such a scene. In “Backyard Giraffe,” I used the same technique to place a giraffe in my backyard, challenging the viewer’s perception of space and coexistence.

These photographic practices allowed me to create a compelling series of images that reflect the complex relationship between humans and animals. Through post visualization, I could bring animals into human-dominated environments, emphasizing the surreal and often unsettling aspects of this coexistence.
Diorama of Coexistence “Giraffe in the Golf Course”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Backyard Giraffe”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Peacock”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Anteater”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Grey crowned crane”
Diorama of Coexistence_ "Zebra"
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Untitled”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Isolation”
Personal Background and inspirations
Living as an international student in San Francisco has profoundly shaped my perspective and approach to “The Diorama of Coexistence.” San Francisco is a city of dreams for many artists, known for its vibrant culture and stunning landscapes. However, it is also a place of contrasts—exorbitant living costs, widespread homelessness, and drug issues are part of its reality. Initially, the stark reality of these social challenges was a shock, forcing me to reside in the outer Mission area to save on living expenses. This situation led to long commutes but inadvertently became a catalyst for my project.

Residing on the outskirts allowed me to experience a different aspect of San Francisco that isn’t felt in the downtown hustle. The quiet and often overlooked spaces became my canvas, where I imagined animals thriving in urban settings—questioning if these places could offer happiness to its non-human inhabitants. This reflection drove me to continuously photograph these areas, pondering effective placements for animals within these urban landscapes. Each journey through these places made me think deeply about coexistence and the potential happiness of these imagined inhabitants.

This personal experience also ties back to my childhood in Gwacheon, a small city near Seoul, South Korea, where nature was not merely a backdrop but a vital part of my daily life. I grew up surrounded by mountains and valleys—sanctuaries that offered wonder and exploration. Yet, witnessing the relentless development and loss of these natural habitats was heart-wrenching. It underscored the urgency of considering nature’s rights and the impact of human encroachment on natural spaces.

This series has thus become a deeply personal endeavor. Drawing from Martin Scorsese’s notion that “the most personal is the most creative,” this project reflects my personal narrative and creative vision, blending my experiences in both San Francisco and South Korea. It has led to a unique synthesis of personal space and artistic expression, making “The Diorama of Coexistence” not just a project but a narrative of personal growth and ecological awareness.
Yunseok (Andy) Song
Outer Mission, San Francisco, CA 2024
Yunseok (Andy) Song
320 Guttenber St, San Francisco, CA, 2023
Chapter 5: The Diorama of Coexistence

Hypnagogia: The Liminal Space between Dream and Reality
The final project, “The Diorama of Coexistence,” represents the culmination of my thesis journey. In this chapter, I sought to combine the three essential elements of nature: sky, sea, and land. The use of panoramic photography allowed me to capture the grandeur of these landscapes, while the inclusion of blue-sepia tones added a unique aesthetic that reflected my vision for this project.

By infusing the images with elements of hypnagogia, I aimed to create a sense of transition from darkness to light. This approach mirrors the subtext of my project, where the boundary between reality and unreality becomes fluid. The panoramic scenes were shot at locations like Mansell Heights, San Bruno Trails, and Twin Peaks, providing a diverse backdrop for the surreal compositions. The intentional use of blue-sepia tones helps convey the idea of emerging from darkness into light, symbolizing the potential for positive change and the journey toward a more harmonious coexistence between humans and animals.
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Lion”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Zebra”
Diorama of Coexistence_ “Hartebeest”
Conclusion
Throughout this project, I’ve explored the delicate balance between nature’s rights and human development. As mentioned earlier, I’m not an environmental activist or an ecologist; I’m an artist. My goal is to use my art to shed light on the often overlooked aspects of coexistence and to invite reflection on our role as stewards of the Earth.

Just as darkness is necessary to appreciate light, my images aim to bring the unseen into focus. I hope that through my work, even a small part of the suffering and silence endured by animals and ecosystems might come into the light. A perfect transition to harmony is unlikely, but through “The Diorama of Coexistence,” I seek to spark conversations about the beauty and necessity of coexistence.

Ultimately, I hope that my images inspire people to think about the relationships between humans and nature and encourage a greater sense of responsibility toward our shared world. By embracing the concept of coexistence, we can begin to restore the beauty and balance that was once a hallmark of creation. My thesis is an invitation to reimagine our place in this intricate and interconnected ecosystem, to consider a future where humanity and nature can thrive together, rather than at odds with each other.
Main works Installation View

Installed in my studio at the University of San Francisco.

- MBCNEWS. (2024, March 26). 문 닫은 동물원 가봤더니.. 동물들 울부짖는 소리만 (2024.03.27/뉴스투데이/MBC) [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnCHoBlgXng


Terminology
hypnagógic
di'or-a-ma ,di-ə-'ra-mə -rə-
diorama

“"The hypnagógic state is that heady lull between wakefulness and sleep when thoughts and images flutter, melt, and transform into wild things,” wrote Boston Globe correspondent Cate McQuaid (October 1, 1998).”

(In Merriam-Webster Dictionary)
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