THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

HARBINGER:

ECOLOGICAL DYSFUNCTION AND
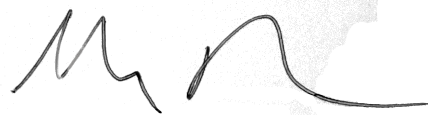
GAMESCAPE FAILURE

By

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A Thesis submitted to the

Department of Art
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with
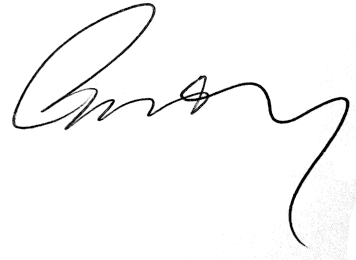Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded:
Spring 2026

The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Audrey Lendvay defended on December 1st, 2025.

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Abstract

To be human in 2025 means to navigate a world highly saturated in spectacle, technology, and human regimes of order. Evolutionarily, we are a young species, but as we adopt and seamlessly integrate new technology into our lives at an accelerating pace, our animal history can feel increasingly abstract, unnecessary, or discarded. Our dissociation from the land that sustains us exacerbates the climate crisis as we attempt to live separately from it. My body of work investigates Florida's ecological dysfunction as a result of human intervention through the language of software limitations, video games, and computer bugs. Each sculptural assemblage is a hybrid digital object composed of layered, intersected, suspended, and painted wooden panels. My sculptural assemblages analogize ecosystems with software, reimagining the complex interactions between species and environment as a program of coded steps that sustains itself within parameters on a hardware that accommodates the needed resources. Both systems support only a predetermined number of outcomes and are susceptible to disruption by human interference that risks cascading system failure. Video game environments manifest these disruptions visually, and I borrow from the language of broken video game wildernesses to represent real environmental harms that often go unnoticed or represent long-term harms that have yet to manifest.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Florida Climate Change and Meeting the Future

As someone who grew up among the many landscapes of Florida, I feel an indelible love and sense of responsibility for the care and preservation of the region's biodiversity. Consisting of numerous unique freshwater wetland, coastal, and upland ecosystems, Florida is an exceptional ecological hotspot of North America, home to numerous species incapable of surviving anywhere else in the world (fig 1.). It remains the state with the

highest number of plant families in the US, and the only continental state to have an extensive shallow reef system. For its uniqueness, Florida faces its own myriad of environmental challenges driven by human activity. The Keys and the Everglades, especially, are imperiled by rising sea levels on account of their low elevation, and 25% of the 1,200 species tracked by the Florida Natural Areas Inventory are already expected to lose half or more of their current habitat because of sea level rise. Even for those species that live inland, large-scale drainage and modifications to the surrounding areas, going back to Florida's 20th-century development boom, have made it virtually impossible for animal species to migrate away from increasingly unsuitable environments (Stys & Beth, 2017).
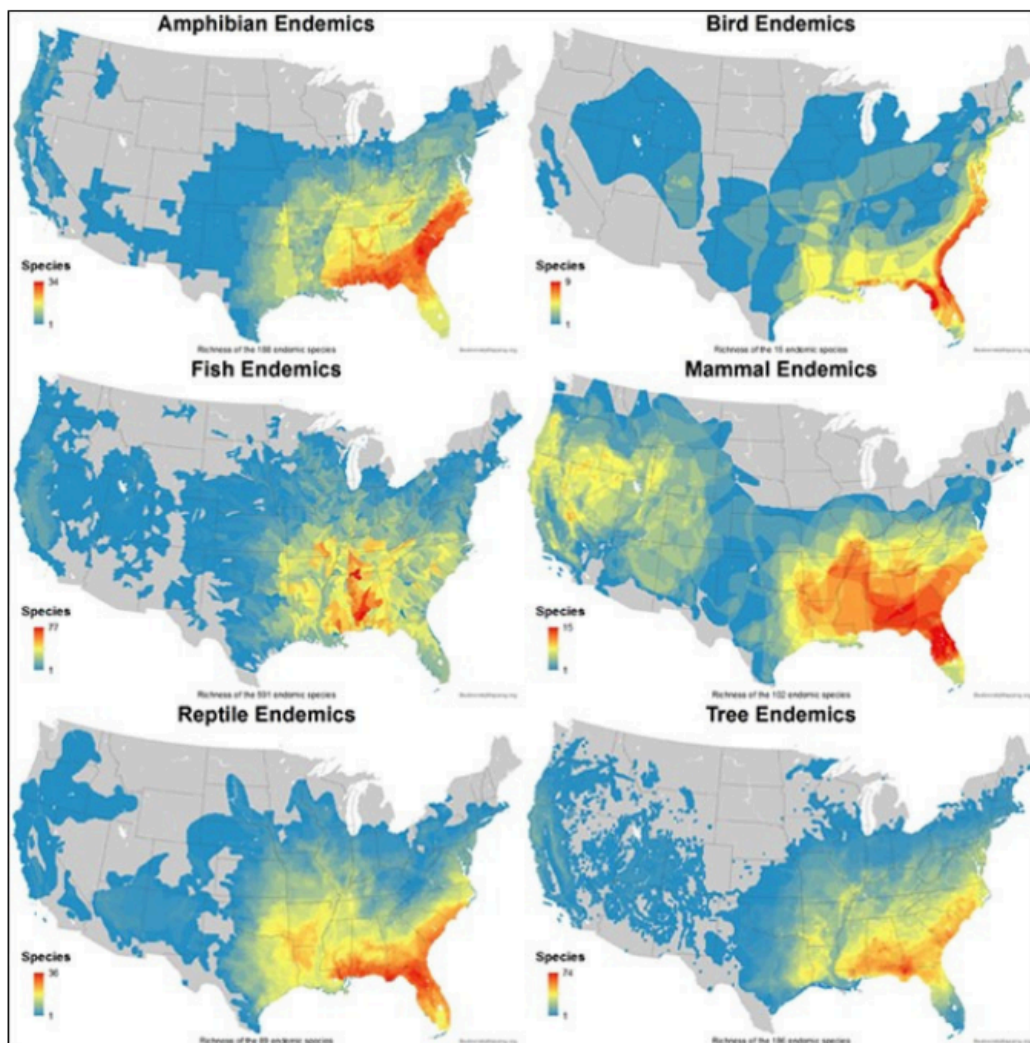

Figure 1: Maps of endemic species demonstrating Florida's importance as an ecological hotspot (Stys & Beth, 2017).

While species displacement is a visible consequence of climate change, other expected outcomes will be less noticeable at first. Changes to weather patterns are likely to affect plant and animal phenology, referring to the timing of life cycle events such as migration or tree flowering. Changes to these events can upset important coevolutionary relationships between species, such as those between plants and pollinators (Stys & Beth, 2017). Rising sea levels are also likely to have cascading effects inland, creating changes in vector-borne illnesses associated with standing water and introducing polluted water into the water supply (Jacques, Peter, et al., 2017).

Having already exceeded greenhouse gas emission projections set by the International Plant Protection Commission and facing obstacles like national resistance to climate science, it becomes necessary to anticipate change, support our communities, and to reevaluate the human societal structures that feel inherent to our lives but that have produced severe inequity between species (Jacques, Peter, et al., 2017). Academics, creatives, and community leaders are hard at work to actualize mitigation efforts; the part of artists becomes more important than ever for bringing communities together, raising awareness, sustaining hope and motivation, and generating new solutions in order to synthesize a more sustainable and equitable world.

1.2 Living as Animals in the Digital Age

Donna Haraway is a seminal scholar in ecofeminism and posthumanism. Her work challenges long-standing anthropocentrist assumptions, urging us to imagine more equitable ways of living by reconfiguring our relationships to technology, other species, and to one another. In her 1985 text A Cyborg Manifesto, she describes our social reality as a "world-changing fiction" whose parameters are constantly in flux and are competitively generated. Under this framework, she calls into question the social constructs that have produced an unsustainable world and illuminates their impermanence at once.

Contemporary and American popular culture favors itself as separate from nature as it perpetuates a marketplace of overconsumption, ultimately creating a world in which sustainable living becomes less accessible as we act with less consideration for our interdependence on the natural world. Harraway argues that in order to repossess the narrative and responsibly build a better future, we must begin to reimagine the boundaries that construct the human fiction of the world. Specifically, she is making "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction." She is not advocating the disavowal of our histories, but rather a greater awareness of their fabricated qualities and increased curiosity and play with the idea of what it means to be human, in pursuit of a better future that takes all living things into consideration (Haraway, 1985).

In Haraway's 2016 book Staying with the Trouble, she addresses the reality of climate change more directly, arguing for radical community-making and creativity as sustaining forces in uncertain times. The text's title refers to her goal of advancing educated and collaborative resilience as well as a renewed sense of interdependence on the natural world and its many inhabitants. This task "requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (Haraway, 2016)."

This goal is echoed by environmental researcher Melanie Challenger in her book How to be Animal: What it Means to be Human, in which she deconstructs the history of human exceptionalism and argues that our refusal to accept our reality as organisms creates many of our most common beliefs. The animal part of ourselves has never left us, but we grow increasingly dissociated from it, particularly so with the aid of rapid technological advancements (Challenger, 2022). Her work is a staunch defense of our animal nature, and

quoting American Poet Galway Kinnell she echoes, "sometimes it is necessary/to reteach a thing its loveliness."

When examining human regimes of order and our relationships to technology and one another, I am particularly drawn to the research of Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux in "Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames." Boluk and Lemieux offer a compelling argument for the radical potential of videogames as sites of creative, philosophical, and political experimentation. Through metagaming- simplified as the creation of games within games- video games present unique opportunities as "sites of resistance" against the corporate appropriation of play with a rich ongoing history that the authors revisit and recontextualize through an academic lens. Their philosophy aligns artists in the video game space with a long tradition of conceptual and performance art, which continues to evolve with a rapidly changing technological world. Boluk and Lemieux deconstruct their medium, emphasizing the difference between rules and game mechanics within the virtual space: "videogames do not have rules. Rules are voluntary constraints and social contracts (2017)." With this understanding in mind, video game software has the capacity to become powerful equipment for critically examining human systems and regimes of order within virtual microcosms and for imagining new world-changing fictions.

2. Influences

2.1 Artists

I regard the Swedish surrealist artist Kristoffer Zetterstrand as a pioneer of video game paintings and return often to his works for inspiration on how to creatively manipulate space in my compositions and design digital references. Zetterstrand's early works are particularly influential to me. Paintings from the 2000's like *sunset_average* and

de_aztec (fig 2-3), completely reinvent the landscape by using the visual language of virtual spaces as a tool for abstraction, interrupting an illusion of three-dimensionality with two-dimensional areas that result from the first-person perspective of a player character in an unintended area of a game map. This positioning of space gives the viewer the impression that they are looking through walls or that they are placed outside of time, as outsiders looking in. Painters like Alex Colville have played with flatness before as a means to distort and defamiliarize images of the everyday throughout the 20th century (fig 4), but Zetterstrand's elusive spaces represent a new frontier of hybridity in painting through the playful manipulation of virtual geometry. Zetterstrand describes an early iteration of the game Counter-Strike as an initial site of inspiration and as a playground for collecting imagery. The online multiplayer game is a tactical first-person shooter played in rounds during which teams compete to complete various objectives; when your character is eliminated in a match, the player's perspective is separated from the player character's deceased body. This out-of-body perspective temporarily gives players unique outlooks of the map, viewpoints that in the game's early maps often shattered the illusion of three-dimensionality by allowing players like Zetterstrand glimpses into the game's virtual construction and geometry. These after-death visions inspired Zetterstrand's first body of work, and by extension, my own explorations in Fallout 4.
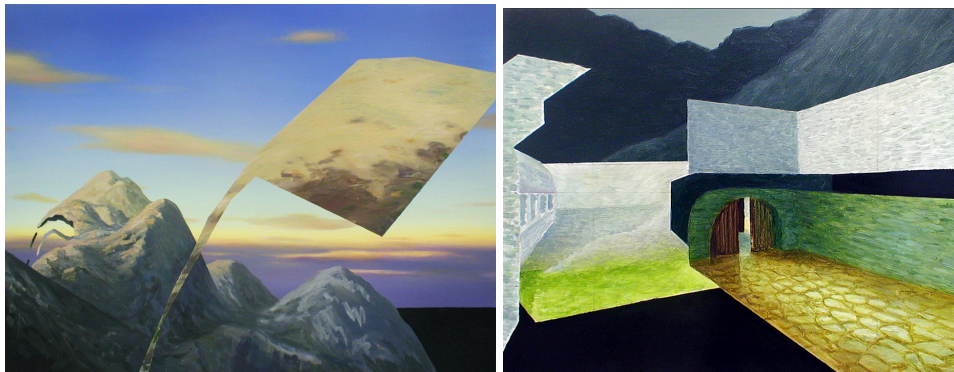
Figures 2-3: Kristoffer Zetterstrand, *sunset_average* (2003) and *de_aztec* (2002), oil on mdf.

Figure 4: Alex Colville, *Dog and Bridge* (1976), acrylic paint.

I also refer to Alan Kaprow, an influential 20th-century performance artist and co-creator of the "happening," referring to a movement involving an immense variety of creative works that sought explicitly to play with the boundary between art and life. To Kaprow, the most meaningful happenings arise from "doing life" consciously, an ongoing effort of attention that facilitates a greater awareness of the ways our daily lives, and perhaps Harraway's world-changing fiction, are generated. To Kaprow, this shift in attention makes life "strange" again, and the playful works that arise from this mindset, like *Yard* (fig 5) in 1961 which recreated a junkyard environment in a sculpture garden setting and encouraged audience experimentation, tend to "mix things up: body with mind, individual with people in general, civilization with nature, and so on (Kaprow, 2003)."

Figure 5: Alan Kaprow, Yard (1961), performance.

Kaprow's happenings were always tied closely to their cultural and environmental settings in the 50's, and in order to faithfully imagine how one might adopt the philosophy of his happenings in the 21st century, it becomes necessary to recontextualize what "doing life" would entail differently. Contemporary media offers a poignant opportunity to explore humanity's continued dissociation from the natural world. I believe that we can learn a lot from digital performance artists like Angela Washko and Second Front, whose virtual happenings and interventions are directly inspired by the history of performance artists like Kaprow and who have also pioneered modes of creative and participatory experimentation with new media, particularly video games. Angela Washko first inspired me to conduct virtual world explorations of my own through her ongoing project *The World of Warcraft Psychogeographical Association* (fig 6), in which she recontextualized the Situationist conception of the dérive into a massive multiplayer shared experience from numerous gallery settings. In these explorations, Washko abandons the quest structure of the game

and invites other players to follow her as she deeply explores the game's fantasy landscapes, invisible boundaries, and the movements of its animal occupants.

Figure 6: Angela Washko, *The World of Warcraft Psychogeographical Association, CITYDRIFT* (2012), game intervention.

My discovery of Washko's catalog of game interventions led me to various other pioneer artists in the game space such as Second Front, the first performance art group to convene in the MMO Second Life beginning in 2006 and continuing until 2009. These artists were similarly inspired by the art-historical canon, notably reenacting AL Hansen's seminal 1958 Fluxus work *Car Bibbe* with virtual participants in 2008 (fig. 7).

Figure 7: Second Front, *Car Bibbe* (2008), game intervention.

2.2 Relevant Works

I initiated my investigation into the landscapes of Fallout in 2024, producing two preliminary bodies of work and several individual paintings. This inquiry ultimately led me to extend the project beyond the traditional pictorial surface, culminating in the *Harbinger* series. In *Open Worlds: An Exploration of Unacknowledged Spaces* I synthesized my first in-game photos with real world explorations to produce a series of six 4' by 6' oil paintings (fig 8). To inform my creation process I drew inspiration from the Situationists' dérive and asked the question: How can critical exploration of video game spaces facilitate meaningful creative practices that enrich my understanding of play and of place?

Figure 8: Selected works from *Open Worlds* (2024), acrylic and oil on canvas.

In the months to follow, I attempted to reintroduce animal subjects into my developing practice with the series *Superposition (Ghosts)*. In this body of four 4' by 6' oil paintings

(fig 9), I asked myself, "How can the unique properties of video games be used to explore the displacement of species and the loss of habitats in a hybrid landscape painting series?"

Figure 9: *Superposition (Ghosts)* (2024), Oil and acrylic paint on aluminum composite panels

Concurrently, during the ideation and production process for *Harbinger*, I have been refining my visual interpretation of animal subjects in virtual settings through two smaller 18" by 24" oil paintings (fig 10-11). My recent paintings and sculptures have informed one another through research and by facilitating new in-game discoveries during ideation phases.
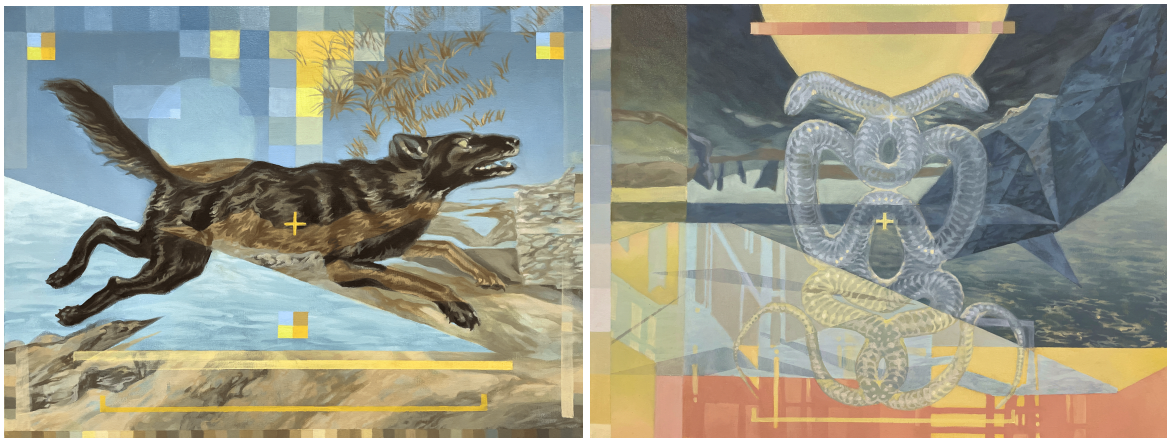
Figures 10 & 11: *Black Wolf Haunting* (2025) and *Erytrogramma* (2025), oil and acrylic paint on canvas.

3. Methodology

3.1 Reinventing The Wasteland

Interplay Entertainment released the first Fallout game in 1997, launching a video game franchise that was later licensed by industry monolith Bethesda Softworks in 2004 and has since expanded across more than a dozen platforms. The series is an ongoing exploration of an alternate world history taking place after a war between the United States and China ended in nuclear disaster, crystalizing the world's cultures and shaping the irradiated American wasteland and its surviving inhabitants many years later. The games frequently examine and satirize American capitalism, nationalism, and militarism using the 1950's American worldview, aesthetic, and chromatic vision of the future that dominated the culture before the bombs fell. Usually, as open-world role-play games, Fallout attempts to provide the player with as much autonomy as possible, encouraging them to explore the wasteland's settings in any order, to be any kind of person, and to pursue many different character relationships and storylines within the game's immersive and vast landscape (fig 12). Games with scopes as large as Fallout have garnered a reputation for producing a myriad of bugs and glitches, manifesting when a player acts unpredictably or if the player's hardware cannot support the demands of the game. My work is directly inspired by the visual language produced by these computer bugs.

Figure 12: Bethesda, Walking around the Red Rocket Truck Stop, Fallout 4 screenshot.

The developers of Fallout have notably included debugging features in their games, extending to players knowledge of and use of developer commands and allowing them to change game parameters at will. I use these commands in my creative practice, conducting in-game interventions to generate new ideas and compositions. By turning off collision to pass through objects and by manipulating visual components like weather and field of view, I regularly explore the wasteland to collect landscape photography from out-of-bounds perspectives. Doing this, I turn the Fallout games into tools for abstraction while taking particular interest in virtual wildernesses and wastelands as venues for conversation about our relationships to nature and technology (fig 13).


Figure 13: selected screenshots taken in Fallout 4 from 2024-2025 using console commands.

I am interested in the visual language of software errors because it represents a useful analogy for understanding ecological pressure. Like any computer program, most ecosystems have a finite set of resources and a limited ability to adapt to human actions. When an environment can no longer naturally sustain itself or support human activity, we

rarely notice right away. As in a coded program, the error may not manifest itself noticeably at first but can eventually prevent the system from running altogether.

3.2 Harbinger: Ecological Dysfunction and Gamescape Failure

I used this framework in the creation of my series *Harbinger: Ecological Dysfunction and Gamescape Failure*, coalescing from many interchangeable components into a body of four sculptural assemblages. Assembled, these works produce hybrid digital-physical objects representing real-life glitches as unseen harms of climate change. I have chosen to construct them out of plywood, a reconstituted natural resource packaged and sold as a product, now a facsimile of its origins. Each piece is rendered by hand in acrylic paint on one side, resembling a detailed asset derived from the virtual landscape. On the other side, halftone screenprints resemble disordered pixels upscaled from Florida Highway magazines of the 40's and 50's (fig 14-16). This time period corresponds both with the state's largest developmental boom, which has enabled ongoing habitat and biodiversity loss as well as the crucial time period that informs the world of the Fallout games. When exhibited, these sculptures form displaced landscape remnants that exist with precarity and demand attention, something not afforded to many failing ecosystems.
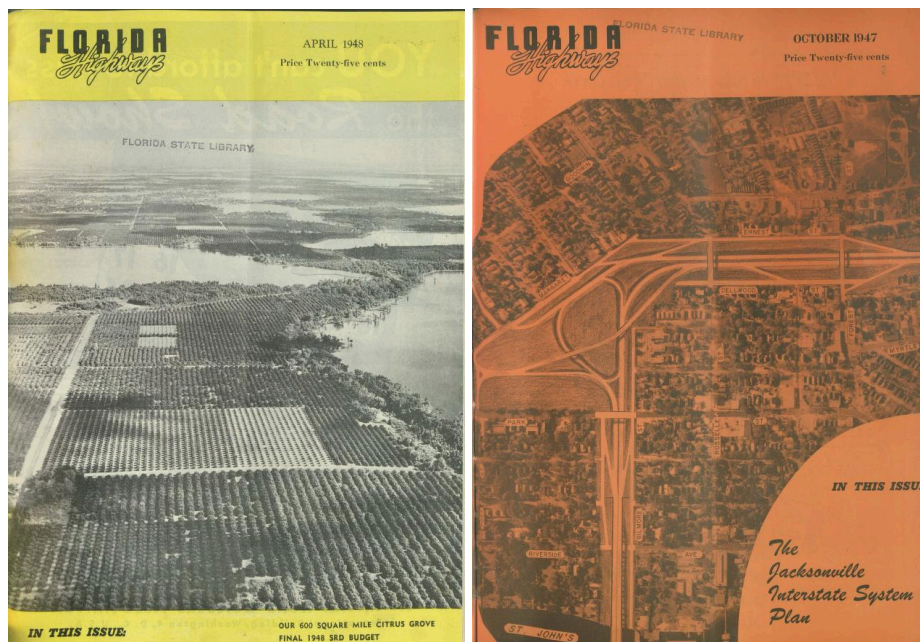
Figures 14-16: *Florida Highways April 1948 and October 1947*, Florida State Road Department, Internet Archive; screenprint onto plywood from *What Atom Requires*.

The works in *Harbinger* began digitally through many virtual explorations. After curating many screenshots, they first materialized in the real world as small paper maquettes. I created digital silhouettes from my selected collection of virtual assets and exported them to my Cricut machine, which cut them onto cardstock paper. Here, they underwent many iterations and recombinations before I landed on a handful of

compositions. The silhouettes of my favorite compositions were next upscaled and recreated in plywood using a CNC router (fig 17). It was here I also created intersections where the paper models connected with one another. The plywood forms were then methodically primed, printed, and painted, using a synthesis of real-world and virtual-world imagery. The intersections were lined with felt, and the plywood edges were sanded with a dremel to emphasize the texture of the wood. Each artwork is assembled slightly differently each time, adapting to the space and recombining with new landscape pieces.
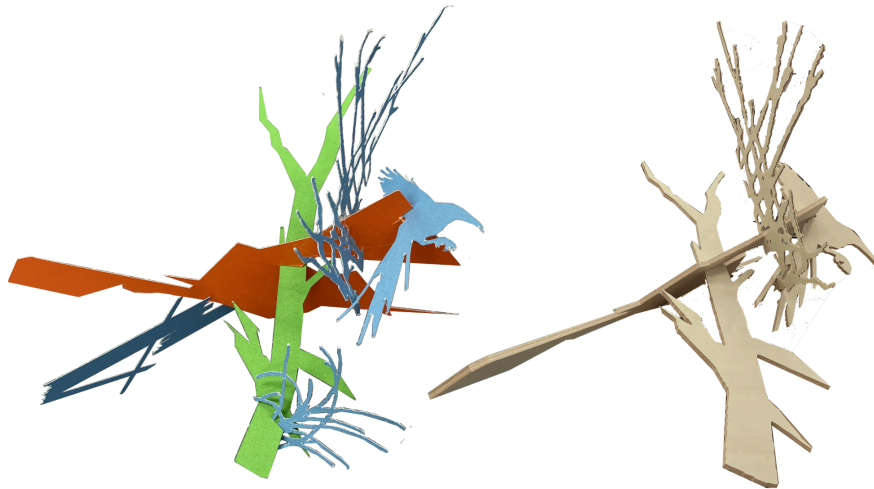

Figure 17: The components for *What Atom Requires* are first arranged on paper and then upscaled and constructed with plywood.

Each of the assemblages in *Harbinger* contains an animal subject that belongs to a threatened species in Florida (fig 18-21). The role of animals within game spaces has always interested me: in games like Fallout, they are rarely afforded NPC status and are subject to the violent whims of the wasteland and its human inhabitants. They are either vengeful and monstrous opponents or wild game, opportunities for the player character to scavenge more resources in a scarce landscape. In my work, animals become the main characters, and we are made to see the environmental harms we have not yet noticed through their eyes: a landscape barely holding its shape.
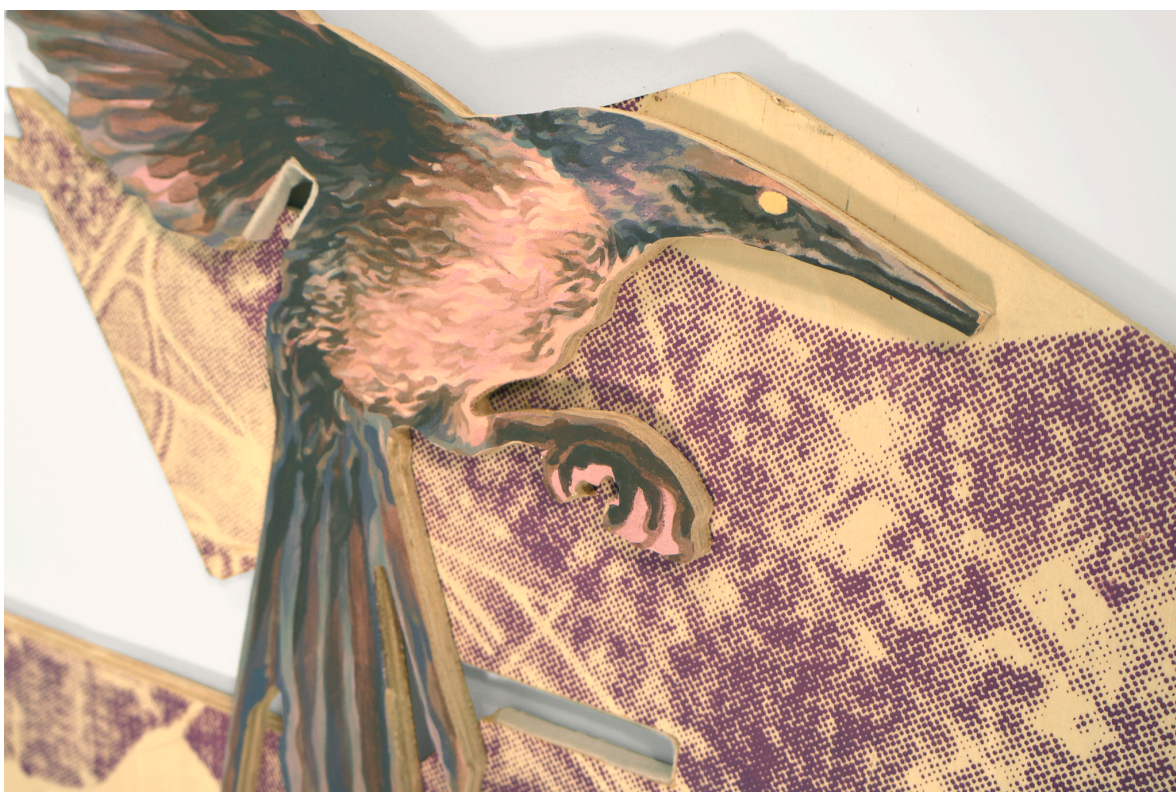
Figure 18: *What Atom Requires (Florida Scrub Jay)* (2025), 47"x27"x16.5", acrylic paint and screenprint on plywood, adhesive felt.

Figure 19: *Mass Fusion (North American Crocodile)* (2025), 38"x19"x47", acrylic paint and screenprint on plywood, adhesive felt.

Figure 20: *Burning Cover (Lower Keys Marsh Rabbit)* (2025), 48"x31"x12.5", acrylic paint and screenprint on plywood, adhesive felt.

Figure 21: *Data Recovery (Eastern Indigo Snake)* (2025), 18.5"x13.5"x22.5", acrylic paint and screenprint on plywood, adhesive felt.

4. Reflection

4.1 Findings

I continue to learn from my work even after its material completion with every opportunity I am given to share it. Its core components – the glitch, the Fallout wasteland, and the Florida biome – become entry points for engagement with viewers through recognition. First time viewers often make pertinent observations about dysfunctional ecosystems, the qualities the work shares with virtual objects, and the displacement of Florida species within it and they arrive at similar interpretations from different starting points or areas of knowledge regardless of their familiarity with the Fallout games. In this way, *Harbinger* succeeds at facilitating challenging conversations about climate change and our relationships to nature and technology. I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity to engage so thoughtfully with my committee members, and our valuable conversations across disciplines have expanded my creative research far beyond the virtual space that it began within. Just as the speculative future of the Fallout franchise maps intricate game worlds over the nuclear ruins of Massachusetts, California, Washington DC, and so on, *Harbinger* attempts to realize the ways in which our species has altered and glitched the natural geometry of the Florida landscape.

Figure 22: Harbinger as exhibited for defense in Phyllis Straus Gallery on December 1st, 2026.

4.2 Conclusion

For me, painting and artmaking are how I meaningfully discover and navigate the world, and what I learn through these bodies of work I hope will accompany me into my future as an aspiring educator. In times of uncertainty, I have learned that artmaking and creative research become critical means for self-education, building stronger connections with others, and for meaningfully working through discomfort and fear to foster greater creative problem-solving skills and readiness to help our communities.

The virtual world is a very human one, but in my artwork, it is haunted by numerous species that no longer have a place in their own world. Their ghosts have no choice but to haunt our networks, living on in digital archives, online forums, and virtual

spaces. Ghosts of the anthropocene, they are at once reminders of what we have lost and

avenues for reconnection with the animal we have buried so deep within ourselves.

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