

# Cold Light

written by Guest Contributor | August 12, 2020



*Cold Light* (detail): site-specific installation, hand-cut wallpaper, video by Summer J. Hart. Image courtesy of the artist, used by permission.

Confined to my Bermuda home thanks to a deadly microbe, an ocean away from most art galleries and forests, I look askance and through a screen, through a vast fog of electrical entanglements, and through the gossamer promises of my longings and dreams, to half-leaves in half-light. I met the artist Summer J. Hart at a reading in New York the day before they named COVID-19 a pandemic, rushing home when Bermuda decided to close the airport; and that night in New York, Hart read, "I've been warned about the unpredictability of half-things" from her poem about half-human Nadine: "Nadine belongs to an owl," Nadine is "like a fish" and speaks to birds. Hart told me that she makes "immersive" installations, places people can walk into and almost be somewhere else, where all our senses seem to tell us we've almost become half-something-else; only we're bound at the same time to remain liminally ourselves, body-bound to the here-place and now-moment.

It isn't that the jpeg is as good as the real thing, but even if I immersed "in real life" in *Cold Light*, my transformation, transportation, would be partial, that's the point; Hart wants us "somewhere between waking and sleeping," somewhere between the hazily-envisioned future and forgotten past. My visit is a visitation. I glide into the forest and slip between the trees, a pixie dust of little glows snow falling all around me, the leaves are lush and catch the sparkle, and I hear breeze in them. I am like a will-o'-the-wisp in an enchanted twilight wood, I weave between the trees in and out of view, I swim sinuous in the light, I dance with the forest like a water snake.

I'm the verso of this forest. Those with whom I dance delighting in their caresses, which feel to me half-kelp half-palmetto, are free-hanging floor-to-ceiling strips of wallpaper turned backwards. The breeze like breathing is a projector fanning its insides softly. The little lights feel like nothing on my face, like light not reaching me through the leafy canopy, withholding warmth: they're video projections of absent fireflies.

I'm actually in a hat shop. *Cold Light's* wallpaper is what they had left over after papering the shop with a leafy print. I think I glimpse all different

kinds of leaves, I think big broad leaves splashed with white, slender palm fronds, little leaves on vines . . . If I were “really” there, I could only obliquely peek at the “original” leaves, the leaves printed on the wallpapers: the frontward faces of the installation are the blank backsides of the suspended wallpapers. Hart has cut new leaves in them—really holes, gaps shaped like leaves—through which she’s bent the printed leaves *backward* to face me. So the lush and mobile green of the forest is are the fragmented *versos* of the long white *versos* rising before me like walls.

When cities are dead, the hat shop shut up and abandoned, weeds make cracks and break through; leaves tiny and then bigger, bigger, break through and walls crumble; and when we’re all gone, the forests will be home again. But we’re not there yet, the leaves haven’t turned yet: here and now where *Cold Light* is, Hart’s work can only allude to the ghosts of once-were-forests, to divinations of after-us-forests, *through* allusions to elsewhere-forests, elsewhere-fireflies, as the wallpapers and projector remember them—and like all memories, their nonhuman recollections are fragmented and sidelong, to some extent secondhand—the enchantment is indirect, cold light happens when air passes through the body of a firefly, it is as Clarice Lispector wrote: “atop the stem it too was untouchable, the indirect world.”

That’s what I mean when I say I’m the verso. Whether I’m here or there, there are barriers between me and the realities of the artwork; and its realities include its enchantments. I don’t bring the magic with me, it’s the non-humans which are there and remembered there: the fireflies make the light, the wallpapers promise secrets by being themselves as they are. But I’m the one who, here or there, lets their influences work on me, I’m the one who gives permission to be entranced. I give myself permission to buy into the illusion that I’m dancing with trees instead of paper in a hat shop, the illusion that I’m playing with paper and not the dead bodies of trees. The artist said, “part enchantment, part cautionary tale,” and to hear these not-just-fairy-tales I must make myself as fluid as Nadine, part wild, part domestic. For it is I, not showing my face and without touching leaf or axe: my species is what happens between leaf and paper, between forest and city. A member of the Listiguj Mi’gmaq First Nation, Hart wrote, “I am a girl & also a ghost”: we are the ghosts that haunt *Cold Light*, we are the anonymous other side of what has happened here.

For *Cold Light* to reveal me as the haunting that I am, I must let its papers and projections infect me with their cold imaginings and, here or there, I must infect the artwork right back with my imaginings . . . like in a kiss, like in a shamanic transference. This mutual unconditional acceptance is sometimes called sympathy: seeping out of self and into other, always-already vice versa and not-just human. Sympathy as a kind of living force, spooky action at a distance, and magic or the hope of magic as a kind of medicine.

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Mandy-Suzanne Wong is the author of the award-winning chapbooks *Awabi* (Digging Press) and *Artificial Wilderness* (Selcouth Station Press) as well as the exhibition catalog, *Animals Across Discipline, Time, and Space* (McMaster). Her multi-award-winning novel, *Drafts of a Suicide Note* (Regal) was a Foreword Indies Book of the Year Award finalist and a PEN Open Book Award nominee. *Listen, we all bleed*, her first essay collection, is forthcoming from New Rivers Press. Her work appears in *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Permafrost*, *The Spectacle*, and elsewhere.