

Melanie Barnett

FROGS' RETURN





Melanie Barnett, *Both Ways of Life*, 2025. Ceramic, cone 6 oxidation. Collection of the artist.

About the Artist

Melanie Barnett is a ceramicist whose work draws upon themes of mycology, agronomy, and climate science to create sci-fi worldbuilding experiences that speculate upon the future. She holds an MFA from NSCAD University and a BFA Honours in Ceramics from IshKaabatens Waasa Gaa Inaabateg Department of Visual Art, Brandon University.

Melanie's work has been included in national and international publications and has been exhibited across Canada. Her work has been generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts (2024), The Elizabeth Greenshield's Foundation Grant (2022), the Nova Scotia Graduate Scholarship (2023), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) Canada Graduate Scholarship-Masters (2023).



Melanie Barnett, *Frogfae*, 2025. Ceramic, cone 6 oxidation. Collection of the artist.

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When was the last time you felt truly connected to the land you live on — when your feet sank into mud, or your fingers traced the surface of a running stream? Today, nature often appears only in passing — glimpsed through windows, blurred in transit — existing more as concept than lived experience. Melanie Barnett's sculptures call us back to a quieter, more instinctive empathy with the natural world. Evoking a sense of both familiarity and unease, her imagined landscapes are grounded in real studies of agronomy and climate science. Frogs — sometimes clearly rendered, sometimes amorphous — inhabit these scenes, becoming mirrors in which the viewer may catch a reflection of themselves. As you linger with the subtle, strange, yet unmistakably familiar details of each work, you may find yourself wondering: *When was the last time I heard the croak of frogs at night?*

The presence of Barnett's sculpture *When There Were No Frogs* is commanding: its layered form draws the viewer inward, lured by serene green glazes set in stark contrast to the gritty neutrality of its base. Its dense textures and meticulous detail anchor it in a striking physical reality — as though it were a core sample lifted from the earth and

extracted from the depths of a forest floor. As the substrata shifts into loamy greens, writhing worms emerge — nearly camouflaged within the foliage. Above this teeming underlayer, frogs swarm in overwhelming numbers, depositing their spawn en masse, their abundance tinged with urgency — as if reproduction itself has become an act of last resort or a collective, desperate insistence on survival in the face of extinction.

According to Barnett, this body of work is about “being from somewhere, and yet not having been there in nearly a decade.” The title suggests a specific rupture in time — one that differs for each of us. Where were you when there were no frogs? When you first realized that you were on your own, and that you had outgrown who you once were? When you realized that the future you were promised doesn’t align with the present reality: an ecological disaster.

The intricate sculpture *shelterbelt* likewise gestures the viewer toward memory. Shelterbelts are the man-made lines of trees that edge farmyards and fields; left standing to guard soils from relentless winds, and to catch drifting snow, storing water to grow crops in the spring. The artist recalls their own home landscape: “Homes are wrapped in skirts of aspen trees that were left to stand. Their roots stretch under the soil of the vast fields, reaching like fingers beneath the earth, waiting to grasp the hands of their kin.” Barnett’s ceramic *shelterbelt* embodies this same quiet interdependence.

From a distance, the work reads as a cluster of pale, amorphous forms, easily mistaken for a single, unified mass. But as the viewer draws closer, the illusion dissolves. Individual lives appear — flora and fauna alike — each one distinct, yet inextricably connected. Their intertwined bodies form a living network, a union that mirrors the ecological systems we so often overlook. In witnessing this intricate entanglement, the viewer, too, becomes part of the relationship.

The work stands as a quiet but insistent reminder of the vital importance of the natural world: that even its smallest, most easily dismissed inhabitants perform immeasurably vital roles. An even more urgent question remains: when was the last time we truly appreciated the land that gives us life?

Imagined futures often emerge from careful reckonings with the past. *Both Ways of Life* draws directly from the etymology of the word amphibian: “having two modes of existence; of doubtful nature,” from the Greek *amphibia*, meaning “living a double life.” In the work, the



Melanie Barnett, *shelterbelt*, 2025. Salt-fired porcelain, cone 10. Collection of the artist.

viewer encounters a human–frog hybrid reclining among dense foliage, surrounded by fully amphibian companions — perhaps friends, perhaps kin. His expression is serene, at ease within an environment that might cause discomfort for those estranged from the natural world.

The foundation for *Both Ways of Life* took shape while Barnett participated in the New Suns Worldbuilding Lab, hosted by Artengine in Ottawa, Ontario. Under the mentorship of science fiction writer Suyi Davies Okungbowa, eight artists from across Canada gathered to collaboratively construct speculative futures. From this process emerged a provocative question: what if humanity could alter its own genome — merging it with other organisms — to better survive in a post-climate crisis world? In this case, the frog becomes a symbol for adaptation.

Yet, the atmosphere of the work darkens upon this realization. This hybrid being exists not as a triumph of innovation, but as a consequence of human failure — collective inaction in the face of climate catastrophe. What first appears as peaceful symbiosis becomes a quiet indictment.

In this way, the work mirrors the dual existence many of us already inhabit. A part of us lives in fear of the accelerating collapse of ecological systems; the other part continues with the rituals of daily life — working, consuming, participating — despite the warnings that surround us. It is easier to ignore than to intervene, easier to adapt than to resist. *Both Ways of Life* asks us to question what version of ourselves we are actively choosing to become.

Together, Barnett's works act as both memory and warning. They pull us into landscapes that feel familiar yet changed — places that ask us to slow down and really look. Through frogs, shelterbelts, and imagined hybrid futures, we are reminded that we are not separate from the natural world, but deeply woven into it. These sculptures do not give us easy answers. Instead, they ask us to reflect on what has been lost, what is at risk, and what still might be protected. In the end, Barnett leaves us with an urgent question: when will we choose to truly listen, to care, and to act for the land that gives us life?

Cheyenne Mapplebeck,
Assistant Curator





Above: Melanie Barnett, *When There Were No Frogs* (Detail), 2025. Ceramic, cone 6 oxidation, high temperature wire. Collection of the artist.

Cover: Melanie Barnett, *When There Were No Frogs*, 2025. Ceramic, cone 6 oxidation, high temperature wire. Collection of the artist.

Exhibition runs January 17 to May 24, 2026

ISBN: 978-1-928022-88-6

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This exhibition is presented as part of the Emerging Talent Series and is generously supported by The Musagetes Fund, held at Waterloo Region Community Foundation and The Pottery Supply House.



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The Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of:



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 for the Arts
 Conseil des arts
 du Canada



Keith and Winifred
 Shantz Fund for
 the Arts

