
Moderno Mori: Transcendence

A collaboration between the Arts & Natural Sciences

University of California, Santa Cruz

By Saul Villegas (Porter College, Class of 2021, University of California, Santa Cruz) **August 2021**

When arriving at UCSC in the Fall of 2019, exploring the libraries, special collections, and the Kenneth S. Norris Center for Natural History became an extracurricular activity while pursuing undergraduate studies in the Art department. Learning to view archives, their documentation, and their presentation became a way to stylize my artistic practice using research methods. With access to never before seen materials, the creative approach in exhibiting the findings landed important self-directed projects that later presented a new *view* for the university to explore as an interdisciplinary Art & Natural Science endeavor. A digital photography project [The Norris Center Archives](#), produced in collaboration with Alex Krohn (assistant director of the Norris Center) provided insight into the university system as a network for building ideas with new angles.

During Spring 2020 quarter, while lockdowns from the pandemic shut down essential facilities on campus, there was no access to the Norris Center, libraries, or computer labs located in the Cellar at the DARC. My ongoing connection to the museum was through Chris Lay (director of the Norris Center), whereas I assisted in designing materials for the [Naturalists](#) Exhibition.



In the Spring 2021 quarter, and with special permission from the university, I was able to

enter the history museum to recapture the specimens after a year-long pause from my project due to the pandemic. The result was a new perspective on the specimens and an opportunity to install a display at the Science & Engineering Library located across from the Natural Sciences building.

Moderno Mori: Transcendence

The present series *Moderno Mori: Transcendence* reimagines natural history specimens as an opportunity to visualize the abstract nature of taxonomies processes as they relate to the digital era. This project visualizes energy fields that depict the sublime and unimaginable. It aims to capture the audience's imagination and curiosity by presenting specimens in unrelated photographic poses not usually seen in the scientific way of illustration for taxonomy purposes. The ambiguity arrives when the specimens are captured in rare points of view, often leading viewers to question what they are seeing. At first, the subject will appear as recognizable, and the longer the viewer lingers, after images of the specimens appear. This shift is a disturbance in the visual field, that paired with pareidolia, allows an encounter to become an alternative experience. The circumstances that lead to this inquiry of questioning the subject matter, the coloring, and the positioning



further develop inquiry on art and scientific discovery. Photography and digital design serve as a tool for creative research processes. The final project serves as an extension to the library's physical library at the Norris Center, inviting the audience to encounter an aesthetic designed for inspiration. The artwork in digital and printed form provides evidence of artifacts that exist and is valid for students and researchers. This project aims to transcend scientific illustration and taxonomy boundaries to reinvent ways to view specimens and collections not seen in California's rural areas.

Extracting the information from the museum's flat files and cabinets and bringing them to life creates a bridge to the student learner's curiosity about Natural History and Art. The extension of observation through an artistic lens provides a view of taxonomic specimens not

currently widespread in use by educational institutions. While this series serves as an artistic research inquiry for a project, it allows viewers to become visitors, who may become Naturalists with the artistry presented and vice-versa. These photographs represent specimens at the Kenneth S. Norris Center for Natural History located in the Natural Sciences 2 Building at the University of California, Santa Cruz.



Science & Engineering Library, University of California, Santa Cruz exhibit display August 11, 2021.

[Norris Center Student Award Proposal](#) is located here. For more information about the project, please check out the center where you will see materials that include photographs, a look book, and bookmark designs.



Above are pictures of the series *Moderno Mori: Transcendence*, Digital photographs, 2021.



Above is the preliminary mockup of the 2x8 inch Bookmark design, Digital, 2021.



Saul Villegas has been inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Society for his *breadth and rigor in liberal arts and sciences coursework*. He graduated with honors from the Art department and received Summa Cum Laude upon graduation.

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