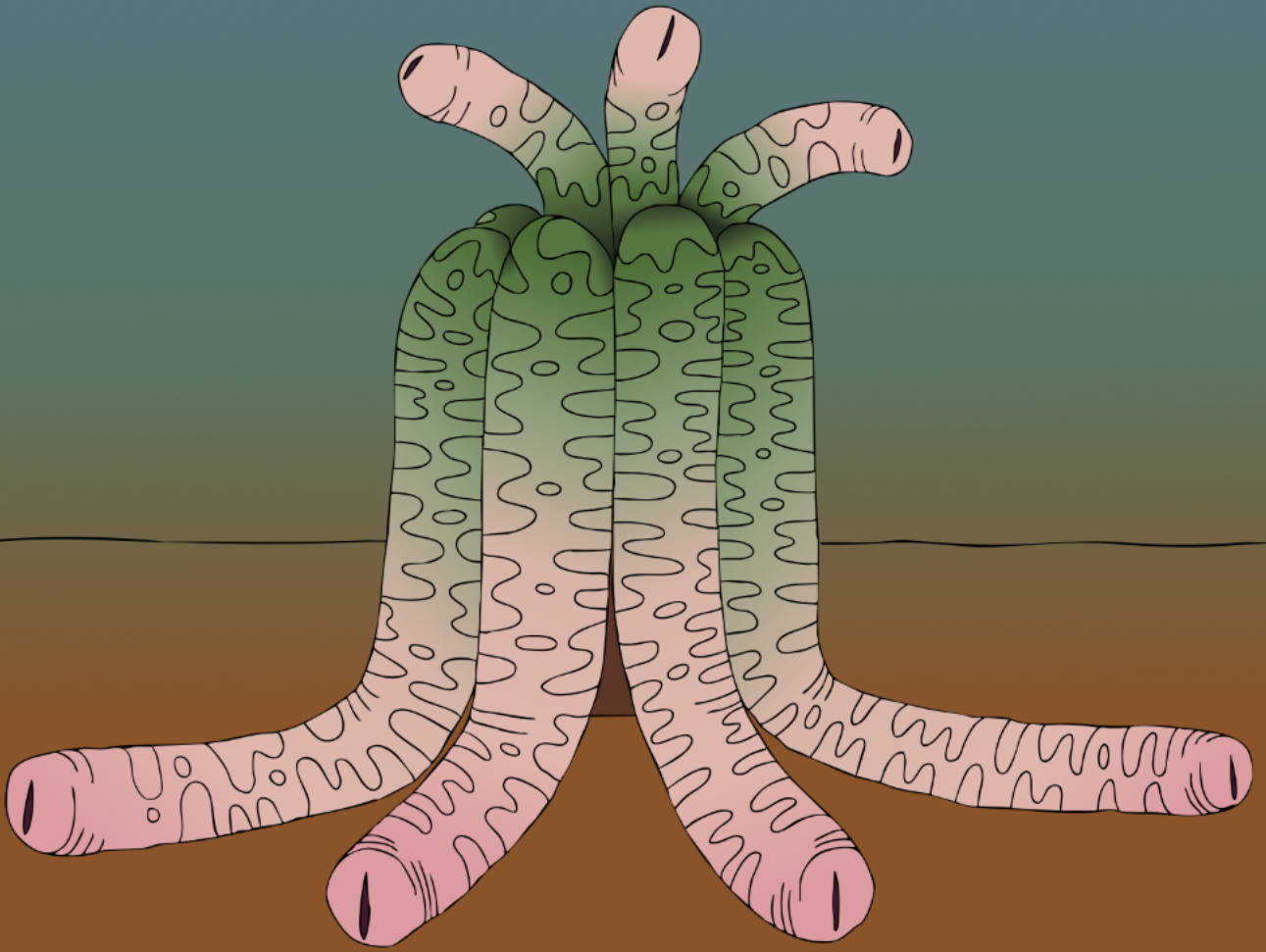


DEFYING THE UNEXPECTED

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DMD 168**

SUBVERTING THE CISGAZE BY ASHTON S. PHILLIPS



The article *Subverting the Cis-gaze* digs into the idea of the "cisgender gaze," which is shaped by societal expectations and power dynamics around gender. It ties this idea to experimental art involving mealworms that eat styrofoam. Like Laura Mulvey's "male gaze," the cisgender gaze judges and objectifies, especially when it comes to gender, looking for some so-called "authentic" truth. The article also talks about the "cis-human gaze," which is how humans tend to view nonhuman subjects in art. This gaze pushes for things to be clear and easy to understand, often ignoring creatures that don't fit neatly into human categories like ones in the middle of change or transformation.

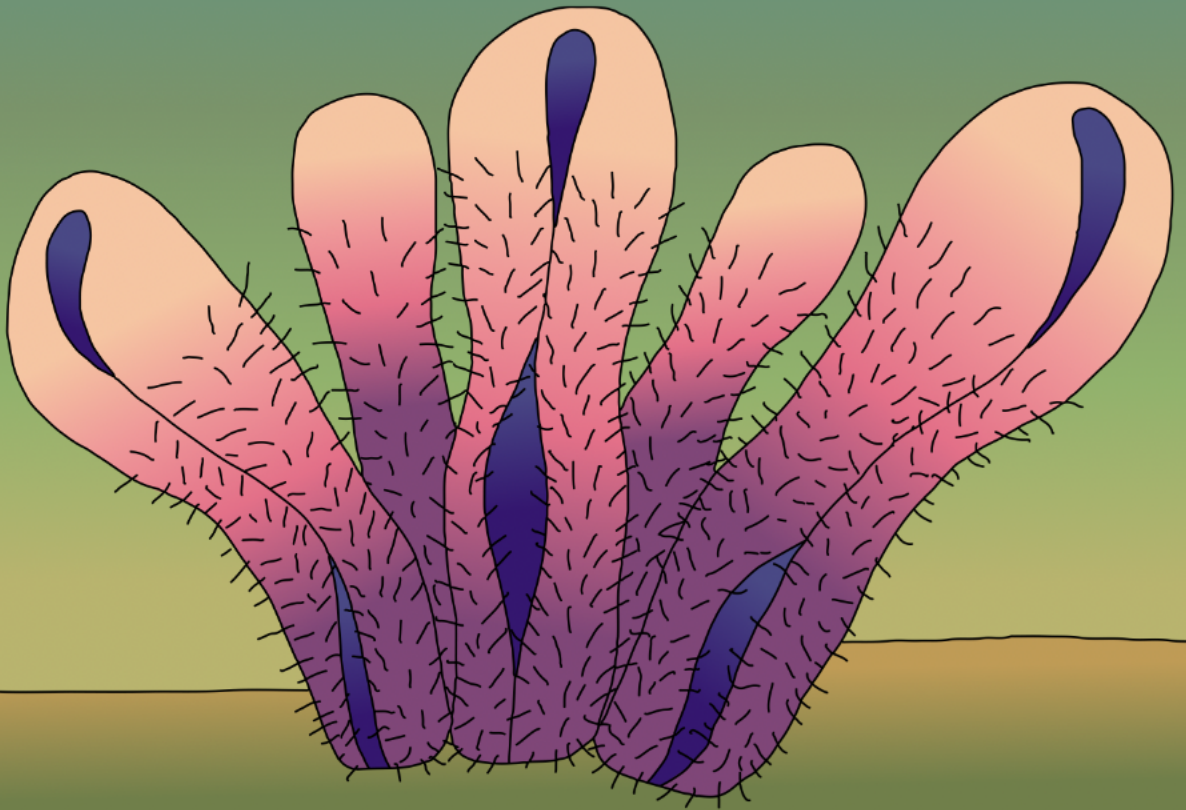
The author critiques both gazes, saying they limit how we understand things and miss out on deeper connections and meanings in art. Instead of sticking to these narrow perspectives, the article suggests that art has the power to challenge them, helping us find new ways to connect with other species. Art influenced by the cis-human gaze often focuses on whether something is "real" or "fake" instead of looking at its bigger meaning.

The installation, *Womb/Tomb/BooM*, is a response to these ideas. It uses dim lighting, sound, and veils to create a protective space for mealworms, shielding them from being overly examined. This setup respects both human and nonhuman participants, pushing back against the cis-human gaze and rethinking art as a space for all forms of life. The installation embraces mystery and transformation, inviting viewers into a world where styrofoam, synthetic fur, and larvae blur labels and identities, reflecting the uncertainty and change we all experience.

Womb/Tomb/BooM also breaks down the separation between “viewer” and “viewed.” With purple lighting, the sounds of metamorphosis, and live mealworms, it encourages people to experience the art in a more immersive way, using more than just their eyes. Visitors become part of a living, changing ecosystem, challenging the idea of “pure” identities and instead exploring the fluid, interconnected nature of life. The installation rejects rigid categories and celebrates the “messiness” and queer potential of constant change.

By showing how everything is connected in an evolving ecosystem, the installation asks us to rethink how we view nonhuman “others,” especially those tied to decay or contamination. In a world that often feels unfriendly to trans and queer identities, this piece creates a space for queer joy and discomfort, inviting people to embrace life’s fluidity no matter how weird it may seem.





This work feels powerful and inspiring because it challenges how we think about art, identity, and our connection to the world around us. Womb/Tomb/BooM blurs the lines between humans, animals, and the environment, making us question ideas of what's "pure" or "decaying." It encourages us to let go of perfection and embrace the messy, ever-changing nature of life. In a world where we're constantly pushed to fit into tidy boxes, this piece reminds us that art can spark new ways of thinking, healing, and connecting with others and with nature.

I chose to create three plant-inspired illustrations after reading this article because it made me think of the cycles of decay, transformation, and renewal that plants share with all life. Just like mealworms, plants grow, break down, and regenerate as part of dynamic ecosystems. The installation encourages us to rethink how we relate to nonhuman life, including plants not as resources or objects, but as active participants in our world. It helps us see the beauty in these cycles of change and connection.