

# Natural Perceptions

Interactive video art exploring the way we perceive nature through art and animation.

JOANNA SAMUEL

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## Natural Perceptions by Jo Samuel, 2016

*A collection of interactive pieces exploring the way we perceive nature through art and animation.*



Natural Perceptions is a pilot exhibition created by Jo Samuel, exploring interactivity and animation with the theme of discovering hidden nature. The exhibition ran from 1st July – 19<sup>th</sup> July 2016, at Gallery 7, Pie Factory Margate. Alongside four interactive animations, a fifth exhibit featured work by video editor Chris Cordwell.

The run saw over 200 visitors to the gallery, with comments being very positive about the exhibition.

‘To feel and produce complex movements and meanings in the situation of interactive art, we must forget the computer’s input / output modes that might have us mistakenly understand ourselves as information machines, simply viewing and triggering content’ (Stern, N. 2013 – 21) The aim of the exhibition was to encourage visitors to engage with the art, whilst the animations engaged with the visitors seamlessly. The animations were triggered by minimal movement from the visitors, so the experience was fluent. Motion sensors were hidden so they were not obvious to the visitor.

Katja Kwastek reflects that physical space is observed by many installation artists to be a fundamental component of the work. To make the installation as immersive as possible, artificial grass, pine cones, moss and twigs were added to the environment. Audio recorded in the new forest of bird song was played in the space to complete the woodland experience.

Both young and old interacted with the exhibits. The general feedback from the visitors was they liked that it was something different from the norm, and that they enjoyed interacting with the art.

The exhibition included five exhibits:

## The Oak Tree

'We are aware of only the empty space in the forest, which only yesterday was filled with trees.'  
Anna Freud.

This piece explores the community hidden within the tree.

A wireframe papier-mache sculpture, with three tablets embedded with different motion sensed animations.



The tablets used a motion sensor piece of software called Motion Zone Trigger which converted the camera of the tablet into a motion sensor. The motion sensor triggered an animation of a 3D character.

This piece was quite successful, the main difficulty being positioning the tablet in the tree so that the camera was able to easily detect movement whilst still being hidden.

The three animations included:

A squirrel which appears from below with an acorn, he then drops the acorn when he sees the visitor. He disappears to retrieve the nut before reappearing with it to look again at the visitor.

A sleeping owl, which awakes when triggered.

A group of sleeping baby birds in a nest which awake and want feeding when triggered.



## Animation 1: Hidden Squirrel



## Animation 2: Sleeping Owl



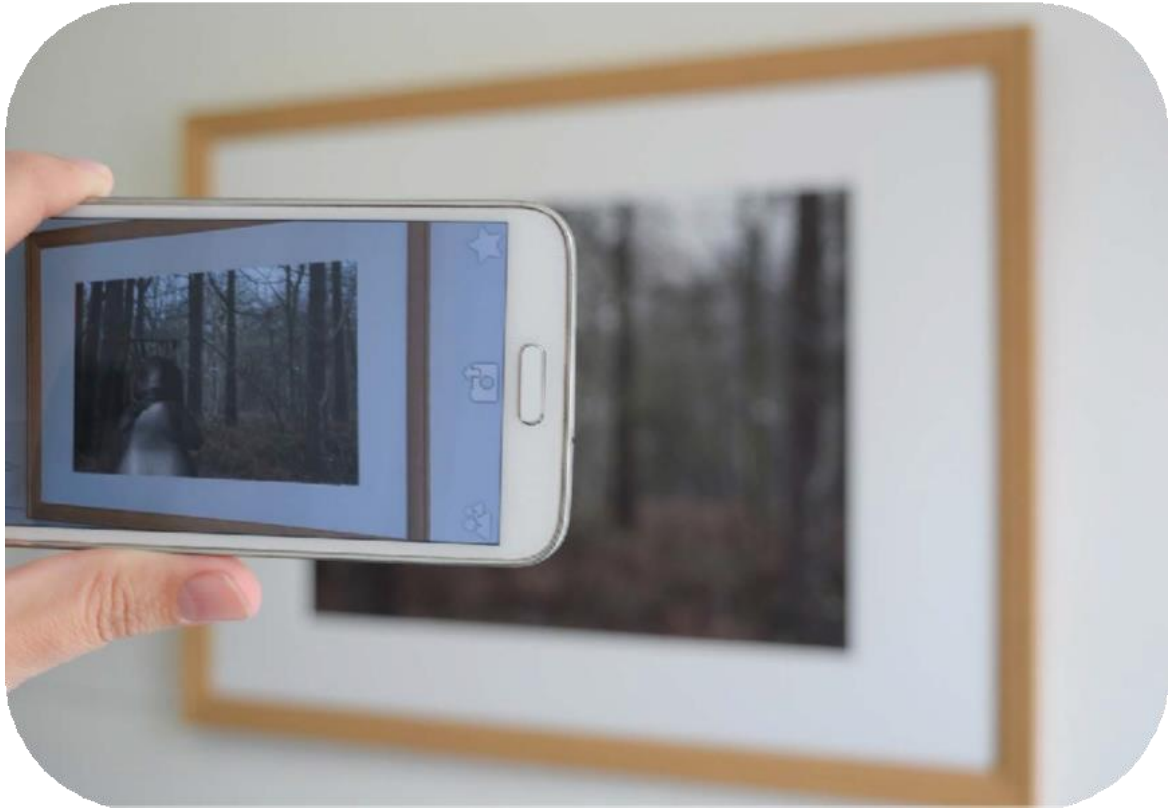


### Animation 3: Baby Birds



## Secret Forest

'Nature is often hidden, sometimes overcome, seldom extinguished.' Francis Bacon.



This piece is an example of augmented reality. An image with a hidden animation revealed if looked through an app on a mobile device called Aurasma.

Unfortunately, this initially did not work as well as hoped. The reflection on the glass of the frame prevented it from working, so the glass was taken out. Even then, it was still a little unpredictable, working some of the time and not others, dependant I think on the light in the gallery.

The image was also on the marketing postcards of the exhibition, and this worked very well. So, most visitors were able to see the animation even if they could not see it on the main print. Obviously this is not ideal, and further testing needs to take place in order for it to be consistently successful in a gallery setting. Those visitors who did see it in action did enjoy the experience.



## Westbrook Sunset

'If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it, for it is not to be reached by search or trail.' Heraclitus

A projection of a sunset at Westbrook Bay which is connected to a motion sensor, which when triggered, reveals an animation of an unexpected owl flying towards the camera.

This was particularly enjoyed by children. They enjoyed looking for the owl and then running away from it as it flew towards them.



## Hidden Forest

'Look deep into nature and then you will understand everything better.' Albert Einstein.



The most effective piece of the exhibition, both younger and older viewers enjoyed interacting with this. A projection of a bluebell wood, when movement is detected an animation is triggered, either of a squirrel or an owl moving through the woods. There are seven animations in total, and different movements trigger different animations.



## Stepping Off by Chris Cordwell

‘When you come to the light of all that you know and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things will happen. There will be something firm to stand on or you will be taught how to fly.’ Barbara Winters



A guest piece by Chris Cordwell, experimenting with Augmented Reality. A print on aluminium corresponds to a tablet positioned in front, which shows information about tide times, weather and seagulls. The user can then move on to a 3D space featuring a seagull, which can be moved around by the user. Finally, an art video of the sea, and gull can be seen. This was quite successful, although it needed explaining to most visitors.



## Observations

The main observation from the exhibition is that visitors are not used to interacting with exhibits. If visitors were not told that the exhibits were interactive, they would just walk around quickly and leave. Visitors which read the information cards by the exhibits were more successful in identifying what they had to do, but not all visitors wanted to do this.

The exhibition was especially popular with younger visitors. On the first day of the exhibition, a young couple with their two year old child came in, and he loved trying to wake up the owl in the tree. On another occasion, a ten year old boy spent a long time interacting with the Westbrook sunset owl. He got really excited every time the owl flew towards him. All the young people who came in have also enjoyed interacting with the hidden forest projection, trying to find the different squirrels running around the forest. The big oak tree is also a draw for young people. On a few occasions, children would see the tree and ask their parents if they could come in and have a look.

A number of people connected with a particular piece. One elderly lady said she liked the sunset at Westbrook bay because she liked walking along the coastline. Another middle aged couple loved the baby birds because they said it reminded them of a bird's nest that they had outside their kitchen window.

It was quite interesting to watch how people interacted with the pieces when they were told it was interactive. One elderly man ended up practically dancing whilst interacting with the Hidden Forest, whereas an elderly lady just waved her hand extremely close to the webcam. The majority of people did however do what was intended, which was to sit down on the bench opposite the projection and make subtle arm movements to trigger the animations.

The British Artist, Keith Tyson, The Turner Prize winner in 2002, suggests that the encounter with a work of contemporary art should not make the viewer ask 'what is it about, but how do I feel?' (De Oliveira, N. Oxley, N. Petry, M. 2003 – 28). I received a lot of comments that the installation was very relaxing, especially in regard to the Hidden Forest piece. The nature soundtrack adding to the experience the visitor felt. A few visitors also engaged well with the characters in the Oak Tree especially the birds in the nest, talking to them as if they were real.

Main comments:

It is good to see something different.

It was fun to interact with.

A few people said they would tell all their friends to come as they liked it so much.

It would be great in the Science Museum.

One person said it was better than what he had just seen round the corner. (He was referring to the Turner contemporary).

It is fabulous, and it is nice that it has a bit of humour.

I liked the colour change in the Hidden Forest.



## Questionnaires

This was a pilot exhibition as it is the first time that I have experimented with interactivity and animation in a gallery setting, so along with observing visitors interacting with the pieces, I was also interested in visitor's opinions, so a questionnaire was made available to be filled out. Forty visitors opted to fill them in.

Thank you for coming to the Natural Perceptions Exhibition.

This is the first time I have experimented with interactivity, and I would be very interested to find out what you think about the installations. Please could you take a minute to fill out the following questions:

Did you enjoy being able to interact with the installations?

How effective do you think the interactivity was for each piece? Please circle.

Hidden Secrets AR picture:            Very Effective / Quite effective / A little bit / Not at all

The Oak Tree:                            Very Effective / Quite effective / A little bit / Not at all

Westbrook Sunset Projection:        Very Effective / Quite effective / A little bit / Not at all

Stepping Off AR picture:            Very Effective / Quite effective / A little bit / Not at all

Hidden Forest Projection:            Very Effective / Quite effective / A little bit / Not at all

Which piece did you enjoy interacting with the most? .....

Please add any other comments you may have below.

Gender: Male / Female

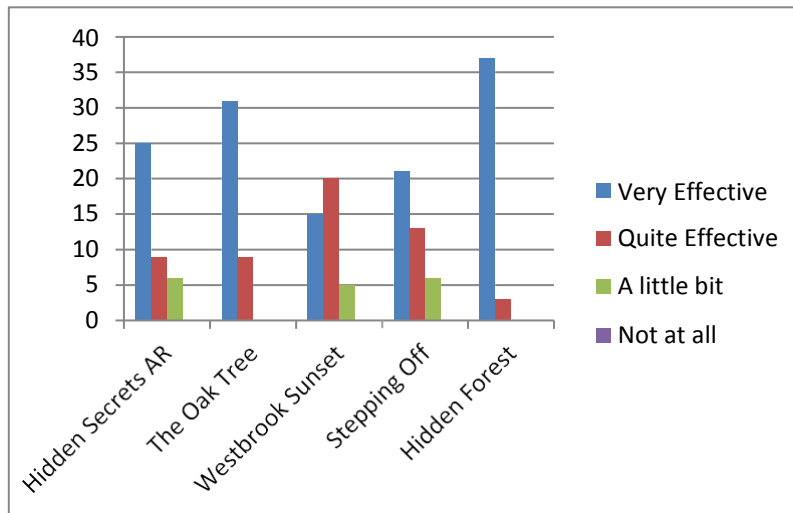
Age range: Under 20, 21 - 30, 31-40, 41-50, 51 - 60, 61 - 70, 71+

## Findings - Effectiveness

Everyone who filled out the questionnaire said that they enjoyed interacting with the installations.

	Very Effective	Quite Effective	A little bit	Not at all
Hidden Secrets AR	25	9	5	0
The Oak Tree	31	9	0	0
Westbrook Sunset	15	20	4	0
Stepping Off	21	13	4	0
Hidden Forest	37	3	0	0

In terms of effectiveness, it can be concluded that the Hidden Forest projection was deemed the most effective in terms of interactivity, 37 out of 40 responders saying they thought it was very effective. The Oak Tree came a close second, with 31 out of 40 respondents saying that they thought this piece was very effective.

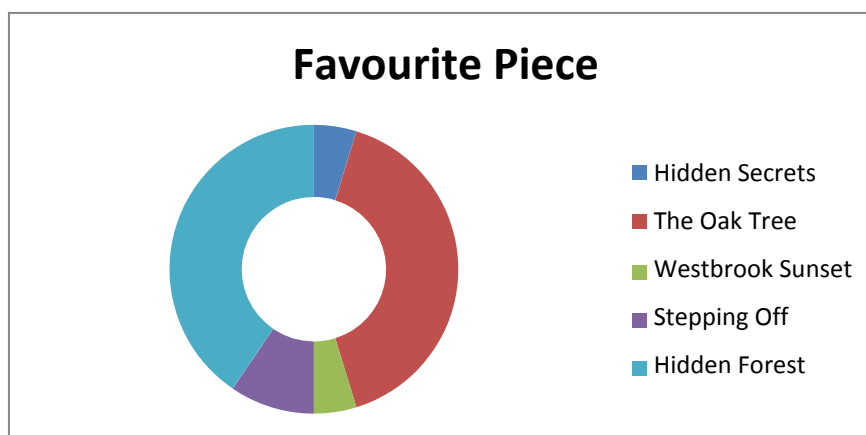


It is interesting that the Westbrook sunset was less successful. I think that the reasoning is that this particular piece only did one thing in comparison to the other pieces. The Hidden Forest having seven animation triggers, and the Oak Tree having three. The more the piece seemed to do, the more effective it seems to be.

### Findings – Favourite Piece

	Favourite Piece
Hidden Secrets	2
The Oak Tree	17
Westbrook Sunset	2
Stepping Off	4
Hidden Forest	17

The visitors were asked which piece they enjoyed interacting with the most. The favourite piece was shared by the Oak Tree and the Hidden Forest, with both having 17 responses in their favour. Both pieces required the visitor to explore them. The Oak Tree had variety in terms of characters to find. The close up Owl in the Oak Tree had many favourable comments, as did the birds in the nest, whereas, as previously mentioned, the interactivity of the Hidden Forest was the most effective.



### **Comments from the questionnaires include:**

Really interesting and enjoyable. Loved having some interaction.

Quite relaxing space – a reminder to enjoy our natural habitat.

Great show, Thanks.

More projections – particularly like the Hidden Forest that change based on the type of interaction, would be very interesting.

Overall very effective and lots of scope for development. The owl is very effective.

Very enjoyable.

Very interesting and thought provoking.

Interesting concept. Overall successfully implemented.

Enjoyed it very much.

Very inspiring show, lots of interaction. Great for kids and adults – Thoroughly recommend.

Another level of creativity and smart thinking.

Terrific Display.

The Oak Tree was a step back into childhood which I loved.

I liked the tactile nature of Stepping Off.

Simply loved it! It draws you in for more.

Interesting mix of nature and comical (to me) animations.

### **Constructive feedback includes:**

I loved it. I wonder if some of the interaction was lost on the sunset due to site location. (Referring to its placement in the middle of the gallery)

Perhaps make the information about each piece more visible – even interactive.

## Publicity

Postcards were made for the exhibition and distributed to the local visitor information centre, Turner Contemporary, other galleries and businesses in the area. They were also handed out to colleagues, friends and families to help spread the word about the exhibition. The postcard is a teaser trailer for the exhibition, as it is an example of augmented reality. Details are explained on the back of the postcard. Full size posters of the postcard were also displayed in prominent places.

**Gallery 7**  
Pie Factory Margate  
7 Broad Street,  
Margate, Kent.  
CT9 1EW  
**Open Daily**  
11am - 5pm



**Natural Perceptions**  
Interactive video installations by Jo Samuel  
plus a new art piece by Chris Cordwell

**2nd July - 19th July 2016**  
Private View: Friday 1st July, 6 - 8pm



**BRING THIS PAGE TO LIFE**  
WITH THE FREE AURASMA APP

The image on the front of this postcard is an example of augmented reality (AR).

If you would like to see the secret hidden within it, download the Free Aurasma App, available for IOS and Android devices.

Search for my **JoSamuel** channel, follow Natural Perceptions.

Point your device at the image and all will be revealed.



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The exhibition made it to the local Thanet Extra paper, taking up almost half a page.

line.co.uk To advertise: 01843 296969

# What's On

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**Jo Samuel - Natural Perceptions1**

## Artist gets animated about natural world

Local animator and video artist Jo Samuel is holding an interactive video and audio installation at Gallery 7, Pie Factory Margate, this summer.

Natural Perceptions explores the way that we perceive nature through art, animation and interactive sound.

The centrepiece features a tree sculpture, with hidden animated characters within to be explored.

The movement of visitors around the sculpture will control the environmental sound.

Similar themed screens of animated video art will complete the exhibition, alongside a guest piece by video editor Chris Cordwell.

This is Jo's third video installation in Margate's



**Jo Samuel - Natural Perceptions3**

artistic area. It follows on from her last exhibition, Natural Perspectives, displayed in the Old Town Gallery in 2005.

Since then she has been working as an animator at Pixel Circus and has recently become a full-time lecturer in digital media practice

at Canterbury Christ Church University.

For more information go online to [josamuel.com](http://josamuel.com) or the gallery website [piefactorymargate.co.uk](http://piefactorymargate.co.uk)

Natural Perceptions runs until July 19 in Broad Street, Margate.

The exhibition was publicised on my own website and the Pie Factory gallery website. Social media was used as a marketing tool. The exhibition had its own Facebook page which 69 people followed. Posts were added in the lead up and during the exhibition. The exhibition had a presence on twitter as #naturalperceptions. Tweets about the exhibition were retweeted 42 times, with an average retweet reaching a new audience of approximately two hundred people.



### **Public Awareness**

One of the main reasons for the exhibition was so that I could raise my profile within the digital art community. I think this has been quite successful. I have been asked to show at a gallery in Whitstable. I have met many local artists and gallery owners. I was also visited by Tim from Genetic Moo, an interactive digital arts company based in Margate. He enjoyed the exhibition and has emailed me to say it would be good to meet up for a chat some time, so there is a possibility of a collaboration in the future.

## Reflection

The exhibition was a great way to test out interactivity and animation. It has given me a great insight to the art world, given me reactions to my art, and given me ideas to develop in the future.

‘Experience is mediated through the body: the degree to which our sensory faculties are stimulated is linked to the impact the experience has on us’ (De Oliveira, N. Oxley, N. Petry, M. 2003 - 49) The aim of the installation was to create an immersive woodland environment for the visitor, which was created through digital visuals, physical objects and sound. A lot of people commented on the relaxing nature of the installation, so I think that the environment created for the installations worked well in complimenting the interactive animations and stimulating the sensory faculties of the visitor.

There are a few technical aspects I would develop if I were to show this exhibition again, but on the whole I think it was generally successful. People enjoyed interacting with the pieces, and to experiment with something different.

For my next work, I would like to add more meaning to the pieces. Raising awareness of different issues affecting the natural world will give the exhibition much more impact.

The Oak Tree and The Hidden Forest were the two most successful pieces of the exhibition. These will have a second showing at the Artist East Kent Open House in October. I have a few ideas to develop both pieces further following observations and feedback during the exhibition, so it will be interesting to see if the response to the pieces is different with the developments and in the new location.



## Bibliography

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