This 2022 M.F.A. thesis exhibition is the culmination of two years of intensive work by M.F.A. candidates in the Division of Art and features works in a wide-ranging variety of styles and mediums.
Prior to colonialism, practices existed among indigenous cultures that aligned with the natural world. A respect was taught for natural resources and how to utilize them without doing the harm we so readily do now. Indigenous sciences which reinforce this connection across all ways of living are being revived through familial teaching, scholarly research, and a new generation of scientists and creators.

Mylan Nguyen is one such creator. Her multidisciplinary work in ceramics, illustration, printmaking, and installation explores themes of magic, healing, and interconnectedness. Incorporating traditional art practices with materials from the natural world, her work references indigenous mythology and alchemy to better understand her ancestral history and belief systems.

Standing amongst the works of Mylan Nguyen, one cannot help to sense her connection to the natural world. Moths, birds, hedgehogs, and a myriad of hybrid creatures inhabit drawings and paintings. They seek out from sculptural installations, overtake large areas of paper, and come to life through clay. These cute and playful characters, which take center stage in her work, are magical beings whose identity is closely linked to the Mexican folklore of Nahualismo, the belief that individuals can shape-shift into other creatures.

Mylan’s knowledge of Nahualismo began as a child through stories told by her maternal grandmother and aunts. Described often as evil mischievous bruja (witches), the shape-shifting Nahuales are also known as wise healers and protectors. Inspired by the writings of Carlos Castaneda and other Nahuales researchers, Mylan challenges the colonialist narrative that Nahuales are mischief makers.

Though sometimes they reveal mischievous grins, Mylan Nguyen’s creatures do not instill fear. Instead they evoke a sense of magic and wonder, transporting the viewer to a space that encourages connection with these beings. They occupy the space as healers and spirit guides. Many of them exist outside the binary, their identities shifting, refusing to be one thing or another. This is both a reference to Nahuales folklore and Mylan’s multicultural heritage.

Along with paintings and sculptures of the Nahual like creatures, Mylan incorporates healing plants, candles, and jars filled with herbs in her current body of work. Aligning with her interest in the practice of curanderismo, her work is part art installation and part botanica. There are zines containing information on the healing properties of plants, ritual practices for spiritual and emotional healing, and ceramic animal forms that hold symbolic meaning.

Weaving indigenous folk tales and practices into her work, Mylan Nguyen is exploring her “mixed” identity and reclaiming her ancestral wisdom. The shape shifting creatures in her work and the duality of utilitarian sculptures mimic her own experience of being from two cultures, Mexican and Vietnamese. Her use of naturally derived pigments and plant materials reinforces the connections of this work to curanderismo. Her work, arranged as a botanica, is an effective vessel for sharing folk healing practices and making them accessible to the wider community.

Iris Bechtol, MFA
Cultural Programs Coordinator,
Oak Cliff Cultural Center Gallery
Top:
*bat song*, 2022
Ceramic (stoneware)
4” l x 3.5” w x 1” h

Middle:
*bud boi star*, 2022
Ceramic (stoneware)
6” l x 5” w x 1/8” h

Bottom:
*little fangs nabual*, 2021
Ceramic (terracotta)
5.5” l x 4.5” w x 5.5” h
1. Nataliel nocturna, 2021
Ceramic (stoneware)
8.5" l x 6" w x 10.5" h

2. Salamander, 2022
Ceramic (stoneware)
6" l x 5.5" w x 2" h

3. Make food, 2021
Ceramic (terracotta)
9" l x 9" w x 3.5" h

4. Moth dance, 2021
Ceramic (stoneware)
13" l x 10.5" w x 3/8" h

5. Pigeon small pot, 2021
Creak fired glazed clay
5" l x 6" w x 4.5" h

6. Arma, 2022
Ceramic (terracotta)
11.5" l x 13" w x 10.5" h
Reaching Nshul Bowl, 2021
Glaze on Ceramic
12” h x 12” w