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K Allado-McDowell: *The Known Lost*  
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## An Artist Honors Extinct Plants and Animals at New York's Swiss Institute

In an East Village gallery, K Allado-McDowell has created an audiovisual tribute to species we have lost as a rehearsal for a proposed physical monument.



K Allado-McDowell used A.I. to generate seven images of a hypothetical memorial to extinct species. They will be printed on fabric and hung as backdrops in a new exhibition. K Allado-McDowell

When K Allado-McDowell imagines you immersing yourself in “The Known Lost” exhibition, the vision unfolds something like this: It’s a hot, hectic day in New York City, and you slip into the serene gallery hosting the show.

You see another visitor, standing at a podium with a microphone, surrounded by backdrops depicting stone memorials. The visitor sings scientific names of species over a musical score infused with sounds of flowing water and crackling ice. As you listen, the Latin words wash over you like meditative mantras: *Zuberia zuberi*, *Tasmaniosaurus triassicus*, *Vegaranina precocia*.

The visitor steps aside. You approach the podium yourself and notice it’s stacked with six books printed with species’ names. As you sing and say the names, you’re struck by the sheer magnitude of life. It would take days to honor all these bygone relatives: trilobites, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, tree-size mosses, our Jurassic mammal ancestors and numerous other long-lost life-forms.

“The strategy here is to start thinking with deep time — trying to expand our sense of ancestry but also our sense of futurity,” Allado-McDowell said in a video interview from California, referring to Earth’s 4.5-billion-year history.



One of the A.I.-generated images of the imagined memorial to bygone species depicted a towering wall carved with their names. K Allado-McDowell

“The Known Lost,” showing at Swiss Institute from May 7 to Sept. 7, is the first solo exhibition from Allado-McDowell, 47, an artist, writer and musician who uses they/them pronouns. It serves as a space for visitors to, as the artist puts it, “rehearse” Act 1 of a continuously developing opera, which Allado-McDowell hopes will be performed at a proposed monument. The idea is for both the opera and monument to pay homage to the species that have gone extinct.

The idea evolved from Allado-McDowell’s previous innovative, nature-themed works. At the height of the pandemic, Allado-McDowell wrote “Pharmako-AI,” the first book co-authored with the artificial intelligence program GPT-3 — a text-generating A.I. program developed by OpenAI, the company that launched ChatGPT.

Through written exchanges, Allado-McDowell and GPT-3 mused on species loss, plant intelligence and other topics. In 2022 at the Lincoln Center, Allado-McDowell previewed [“Song of the Ambassadors,”](#) a work-in-progress opera they are co-writing with GPT-3 in which singers represent the sun, space and life.

For the opera, “the concept we started with was sound healing in a collective environment,” Allado-McDowell said. In “The Known Lost,” the sound healing

element is more participatory, and the aim is to collectively heal our relationship with extinction.

A self-described nature lover, Allado-McDowell regularly visits the Amazon rainforest and lives in the mountains of Southern California, near an area decimated by the recent wildfires. They said that, amid grave threats to these and other regions, they “have found it very hard to think about anything besides biodiversity loss and extinction.”

They continued, “so I thought I would take that head on, rather than trying to find some way to avoid thinking about it.”

For the past few years, Alison Coplan, chief curator at Swiss Institute, has been thinking about ways to fulfill the organization’s mission of addressing climate change through art. Intrigued by Allado-McDowell’s opera and book, she reached out to them about presenting an experimental show that would generate reflection and dialogue about environmental issues.

In a video interview from New York, Coplan said, “when faced with the reality of our world today, in terms of climate change, you can very easily become overwhelmed and feel kind of paralyzed.”

“K made this exhibition to reckon with a way we can start to focus our energy and move forward,” she added.

Allado-McDowell started the process feeling dissociated from extinction, they said. So they searched paleobiology databases for all the animals, plants, fungi and other beings that have died out since life began on Earth [roughly 4 billion years ago](#). They came up with a list of 180,285 identified species. This is only a fraction of the true, unknown number. Scientists estimate that some [99 percent](#) of the roughly 5 to 50 billion species that ever existed are extinct.

Allado-McDowell said that, personally, the humbling realization that we know so little was “extremely liberating.” They added, “Touching what we don’t know opens up a possible way of relating to the world that allows us not to be the center of the universe.”

Allado-McDowell created A.I.-generated images of stone memorials engraved with this list of species that will hang like theater curtains around the exhibition space. The list also forms the libretto of the opera that visitors will sing or read from the six

books near the podium, representing what many believe to be Earth's six mass extinctions.

Initially, Allado-McDowell said that they felt “vague dread” and “intense emotions” about these devastating die-offs. The first five mass extinctions were triggered by cataclysms such as super volcano eruptions and the impact of a massive asteroid. Today, humans are driving around [1 million plant and animal species to extinction](#), according to a United Nations report. Many scientists are calling it the [sixth mass extinction](#).

But as the artist engaged in deep-time thinking, they realized that extinction was not always sad. In the past, it has been a natural process that [set the stage for dynamic outbursts of evolution](#). The fact that life has repeatedly bounced back from the brink of obliteration — such as the Permian extinction that wiped out some 90 percent of the planet's species — is awe-inspiring. And the absence of T. rex certainly makes the modern world a more pleasant place. As a result, Allado-McDowell said, “I've taken great pains to make this work not something that feels really mournful.”

The A.I.-generated backdrops, rendered in uplifting colors like sky blue and yellow ochre, portray a contemplative memorial complex tucked into towering mountains by a placid lake. In the images, the monuments engraved with species' names rise like canyon walls above tiny, almost insignificant humans.

Allado-McDowell said that the scenes were inspired by abandoned Italian marble quarries, where, for centuries, slabs of white stone have been sliced out of mountainsides. The artist imagined carving a memorial directly into one of these sites of extraction, poetically illustrating renewal after human-driven destruction.

The artist hopes to construct a real stone monument to extinction, though the location and details have not yet been determined. However, Coplan said, “The idea of the rehearsal is that we're all beginning to perform this text, and by doing so, we're starting to make the monument, because now it's in all of our minds.”

Also in development is Act 2 of “The Known Lost,” in which species will be added to the memorial as they vanish from Earth, after the exhibition at Swiss Institute ends. Allado-McDowell said these additions could be performed ceremonially and broadcast to raise awareness “while also being a deeply felt, meaningful ritual.”

For Allado-McDowell, creating this exhibition has been “a process of healing” that took them from dissociation and dread to a state of informed humility. They realized that contemplating humans’ role in a deep-time narrative gives us a choice.

“You could look at it in a way that is passive or nihilistic, that it doesn’t matter what I do because time is so long,” they said. “Or you could see that you’re part of a cumulative process, and everything you do really matters.”