



ILANA MANOLSON:

*The Air We Share*

PROJECT • SPACE



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Sarah Tanguy, Curator  
February 7 - March 29, 2026

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PROJECT SPACE

# Foreword

By Jack Rasmussen

C. Nicholas Keating and Carleen B. Keating Director  
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

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*The Air We Share* fits squarely within the mission of our Project Space. As we mark the twentieth anniversary of the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, it is worth pausing to recognize how essential this modest gallery has been to our identity. Since its beginnings, the Project Space has served as a laboratory—an arena for experimentation, for interdisciplinary conversation, and for the testing of new ideas. It has welcomed artists at pivotal moments in their practice and has invited audiences to witness work in formation, often before it appears anywhere else.

Since 2019, the Project Space has carried forward our core values: to encourage social dialogue, to elevate diverse voices, and to demonstrate that art is not separate from inquiry but central to it. We have long believed that art's most compelling force emerges when disciplines intersect and when conventional boundaries fall away.

Curator Sarah Tanguy's presentation of Ilana Manolson's *The Air We Share* embodies this ethos. Rooted in science, animated by painterly gesture, and grounded in close observation, the exhibition brings together the very elements the Project Space was designed to support. As Tanguy notes in her catalog essay, Manolson draws on decades of botanical study, environmental engagement, and artistic experimentation. Her works—paintings, prints, and installations—move fluidly between empirical knowledge and intuitive insight. They model a way of looking that holds scientific attention and imaginative openness in balance.

In this sense, *The Air We Share* activates the Project Space's purpose. It bridges art and research; personal experience and collective responsibility; the intimacy of quiet observation and the urgency of ecological awareness. It reminds us that interdisciplinary thinking is not simply an approach but a necessity, especially at a moment when our connection to the natural world demands renewed attention.



Ilana Manolson, *Burnweed* (detail), 2024. Acrylic on yupo, 39.25 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.

We are pleased to present this exhibition during such an important milestone in the museum's history. It honors an artist whose work deepens our understanding of the fragile systems that sustain us, and it reaffirms our commitment to experimentation, inquiry, and the shared work of discovery that has come to define the American University Museum for two decades.

# Ilana Manolson's Ecology of Connection

By Sarah Tanguy  
Curator

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***“...Day after day, I pilgrimage to this forgotten river’s edge. I sink low away from the horizon line. At this union of water and soil, I inspect the most humble, incidental happening, and back in the studio with a brush, a spatula and paint, I grab its essence. I work in a world of visions for which there are no words...In my paintings, we are part of an endless story of cycles—of seasons where in the comfort of repetition, there is always something new.”***

—Ilana Manolson



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When I first encountered the work of Canadian American artist and naturalist Ilana Manolson fifteen years ago, I felt a kindred spirit. At the time, I was curating the permanent collection for the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, a city that had recently endured a brutal siege. My theme was nature as healer. I immediately sensed struggle in her art as well as resilience and *joie de vivre*. What continues to attract me is its majestic presence and visceral immediacy. “Nature is my mentor,” she explains. Even her first name is apt: Ilana in Hebrew means “young tree.”

I’ve since learned that her practice springs from direct experience and botanical training, making the sensory power of her intimate depictions all the more authentic. You feel the mushy soil, smell the damp verdure, and trace her sweeping gestures.

In *The Air We Share*, Manolson asks us to reimagine our relationship to the humble weed and, by extension, the natural world, at a critical juncture of our planet’s survival. Her atmospheric paintings, prints, and installations invite careful study of their intricate detail and patterning. They celebrate beauty and wonder, while cultivating a deeper awareness and stewardship of the complex ecologies around us.

Opposite: Ilana Manolson, *Milkweed Teenybopper* (detail), 2024. Acrylic on yupo, 30 x 38 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Manolson's engagement with nature began in childhood. Her family first lived in the Canadian Rockies before moving to Montreal, where their house sat on a lake in a small community. "That's where the swampy, muddy, earthy part of my painting comes from," she explains. "The place became my playground, my comfort zone. That was where questions were asked and answered through observation." One formative influence was a local adult who created what he called the Nature Museum—just a shack he had built in the woods filled with books. Children could share whatever they had found foraging—a nest, a plant—and learn about it. This early experience continues to define Manolson's artistic practice.

Now living in Concord, Massachusetts, on the bank of the Assabet River, she has, in her own words, "moved into one of my paintings." Following Thoreau's footsteps, she takes daily walks and kayaks the Assabet, Concord and Sudbury Rivers, the same ones that Thoreau canoed, and brings collected specimens to the studio for study. But where Thoreau wrote, she paints: "I check the ground for what's growing, then the birds and the ducks." Nature, she learned, always has something new to teach. She understands that whatever comes from the land has its own story, "You have to keep an ear and an eye out so that you can hear what's being said by the earth."

Manolson grew up when it was assumed being an artist meant you would starve. Her father insisted art was not a good career choice. So, she studied botany—bogs in particular—and became a naturalist with Parks Canada. The park served as a bison reserve, and part of her job involved studying 12-inch-square soil plots to assess overgrazing. She also led tours, urging people to look closely and engage with nature. To better connect with audiences, she began making life-size puppets and banners in her office, turning her talks into performances. After taking a short course at the Rhode Island School of Design, she realized art was her calling. She enrolled full-time and studied printmaking and painting, bringing her scientific training into the studio.

"When I really think about it, my work isn't that different now," she reflects; "One of the things I learned at the park was to look closely at the minutiae to see something much larger, to see the whole." This methodology—an intimate study of small systems to understand larger ecological relationships—remains central as she blends scientific precision with painterly passion.



The exhibition's concept arose from Manolson's thinking about weeds as a marginalized community—a politically charged position that challenges anthropocentric hierarchies of value. Take dandelions, one of her favorite subjects. "Everybody's always pulling them out," she notes. Though considered a weed, the dandelion has a taproot that irrigates the soil, making it easier for other plants to grow and creating nitrogen, an essential nutrient for human life. Like other plants, dandelions absorb carbon dioxide through photosynthesis and produce oxygen. They also provide edible roots and leaves that serve as digestive remedies when taken as tea. Every aspect of this plant gives. "So," Ilana asks, "why do we define dandelions as weeds when we're so reliant on them? Truthfully, the dandelion became a weed when we decided to prioritize lawns."

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This is more than botanical democracy—it's an argument about what merits our notice, care, and protection in an era in which species are dying out. In championing marginalized plants, Manolson reveals our relationship with them is symbiotic, not adversarial.

"[My work] always has something germinating and something dying, because...those are part of the whole cycle," she explains. She captures both growth and decay with the fluidity of her medium, reflecting the seasonal transience and mystical stillness at the heart of natural cycles. In the show, three paintings of milkweed caught at different phases highlight the plant's remarkable features. *Milkweed Teenybopper* depicts first sprouts as little green balls. *Arena* shows the next phase, where milkweed forms a pod, dispersing seeds by wind. Finally, *Successor I* addresses dispersal, movement, and decomposition. Milkweed protects itself with naturally produced latex, poisonous to most insects. The monarch butterfly, however, has figured out how to cut leaves so latex falls to the bottom while butterflies dine on top.





Ilana Manolson, *Successor I*, 2015. Acrylic on yupo, 30.375 x 23.3 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson (in collaboration with nature), *A Reliquary of Seeds and Wishes*, 2025. Dandelions, glass, size variable. Courtesy of the artist.

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Beyond these paintings, Manolson introduces milkweed and dandelion specimens in an arrangement she titles *A Reliquary of Seeds and Wishes*. “I’m inspired by these plants. I hope to capture their different phases and changes.” The specimens also help audiences understand the role of collecting in her practice—a daily ritual that validates plant stories. Writing many exhibition labels in the first person further allows visitors to think of plants not as other, but as living partners in a shared community.

These themes of interdependence and exchange permeate the show and are fundamental to *Exhale-Inhale*, where Manolson visualizes root structures, above-ground plants, and air as interconnected networks, reminiscent of neural or capillary systems. “That’s why I chose red,” she explains, “to make the connection between plants and humans, to highlight the similarity between how we get nourished and how plants get nourished.” This idea extends to *Nature as Mentor*, a collaborative installation with biologist Janine Benyus, co-founder of Biomimicry—the practice of learning from nature to solve complex engineering problems more efficiently, including the hook and loop structure of burrs that inspired Velcro’s creation. *Nature as Mentor* interprets four natural systems and their biomimicry relationships: milkweed, mangrove and mycelium systems, and gravel-bed rivers.



Ilana Manolson, *Nature as Mentor* (detail), 2024. Acrylic on duralar, 40 x 132 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Manolson’s multi-stage process stems from observation and experimentation, with her touch always present. When she is fascinated by a plant, she records it for accuracy, creating hundreds of sketches she neither sells nor displays: “I consider them my gift to myself because they’re my time with a plant.” After understanding its structure, she creates artwork—a looser interpretation, adding the essence of what’s not seen. Akin to Zen painting, she gains freedom through sudden insight to improvise, striking a balance between careful inspection and intuitive expression. These poetic distillations emerge as clouds of evocative hues or “auras” radiating outward from plant forms, which she renders with lush brushstrokes, while her shift from representation to abstraction generates metaphors for change.

Her paintings are ongoing explorations to convey paint’s flow. Yupo and Duralar, her main substrates, are both synthetic materials—Duralar is polyester, Yupo is polypropylene. Both can be translucent or opaque and interact with paint differently. Using synthetic materials instead of traditional canvas creates luminous, membrane-like surfaces that echo the permeable boundaries between organisms. Light itself becomes an active force, serving as a source of surface tension and hidden depth. It’s also a catalyst. By using different light sources simultaneously, Manolson connects her inner world with collective experience. Earlier in her career, she painted in situ with a specific light source. As she’s aged, her perception has expanded, and her

treatment of light has changed. “I’m not trying to catch the light still,” she explains. “I’m trying to catch it moving, in flux. I’m trying to catch that energy, that movement, that transformation.”

Manolson paints flat on a table. Drips occur when she intentionally pulls the work up and places it back down. Sometimes the drips only reach part-way because she adjusts the work to her liking. “You must be in the moment,” she says. In *Luminary*, she swept a large brush loaded with yellow acrylic across the top, letting color rush down, and balanced the composition with a passage of white space. Viewers feel the weight of gravity watching milkweed and bracken rise from muddy clusters. In other works, nature’s forces seem suspended, lifting plants into floating arrangements, or in action, urging flora downstream. This variance creates the pleasurable sensation of moving through different densities at shifting speeds.

By contrast, Manolson’s monoprints on mulberry, shown here for the first time, are all recent works. Created with stencils, chine collé, and a press, they employ non-toxic, soy-based, water-soluble inks, often with acrylic on top: “I think of my printmaking as a call and response, similar to how I paint—the medium works with me because I’m always responding, putting things down in relation to each other.” The stencils, which Manolson makes from her drawing journals, become recognizable characters and lend another layer as they merge with translucent washes. In *Exhale-Inhale*, for example, the entire root structure is evoked by an expressive stencil. This recurrent formal device mirrors the intertwining of natural systems and her message of connectivity.

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Ilana Manolson, *Luminary*, 2018. Acrylic on yupo, 48 x 74 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Exhale-Inhale* (detail), 2025. Print on mulberry, 21 x 38.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Manolson's work arises from a rich confluence of Western and Eastern traditions while forging something distinctly contemporary. Her practice is grounded in nineteenth-century Romanticism, where landscape reflected emotional and mystical concepts. Living in Concord, she's also inherited American Transcendentalism's intimate reverence of nature. And her blend of representation and abstraction—capturing landscape's essence in a mark—recalls the New York School's gestural abstraction, particularly Joan Mitchell's explosive panoramas and Helen Frankenthaler's stain paintings. But Manolson's seemingly spontaneous marks are informed by botanical training and empirical observation. Starting with rich base colors, she builds her paintings up by applying translucent layers and then, selectively scratching and sanding to create dimensional experiences of luminosity, line, and texture.

There's also something Eastern in Manolson's approach to composition and space: "White space in Chinese painting is considered both empty and full; in Western culture, however, we often designate white space as negative. I never have. I've always thought of it as a space...left for us to inhabit and fill in with our imagination." Similarly, in much of her work, objects near and far coexist in complex evocations of dynamic flux. Perspective veers from extreme close-up to distant view, while landscape elements coalesce in rhythmic pulse. These cyclical and spatial fluctuations resonate with the yin-yang harmony of Taoist philosophy and the contemplative traditions of East Asian ink painting. It's like taking a breath—pause, exhale, pause, and inhale. Pauses are essential to the whole cycle. When we pause, we get another chance to reexamine and rediscover. For Manolson, discovery is never-ending.

What sets Manolson apart is her ecological intentionality. She belongs to a generation responding to the Anthropocene—the geological epoch defined by human impact on Earth's systems. Instead of nineteenth-century's sublime wilderness, Manolson focuses on marginalized plants—"weeds"—in degraded landscapes, embracing the "impure" nature of our contemporary world. Her work acknowledges that even in natural systems coming apart, there is great beauty—not as escapism, but as radical witnessing. This elegiac quality, with its undertones of loss, urgency, and resilience, positions her within the contemporary ecological art movement alongside artists who engage directly with natural processes and environmental advocacy.

Ultimately, the exhibition invites us to pause, look closely at minutiae, and recognize ourselves within a vast living web. The air we share, Manolson reminds us, is not merely around us but flows through us, linking every breath to the green world that sustains us all.



*This essay is adapted from a conversation between the artist and curator Sarah Tanguy on October 24, 2025.*







Ilana Manolson, *Arena*, 2024. Acrylic on yupo, 30 x 38 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Braken*, 2024. Acrylic on yupo, 30 x 38 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Burnweed*, 2024. Acrylic on yupo, 39.25 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Dandelion Two-Step*, 2025. Acrylic on yupo, 25.25 x 30 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Luminary*, 2018. Acrylic on yupo, 48 x 74 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Ilana Manolson, *Matters Breath*, 2017. Acrylic on yupo, 37 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Milkweed Teenybopper*, 2024. Acrylic on yupo, 30 x 38 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Successor I*, 2015. Acrylic on yupo, 30.375 x 23.3 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Successor II*, 2015. Acrylic on yupo, 23 x 33 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Vernal Pond*, 2015. Acrylic on yupo, 28.75 x 24.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *After Image*, 2025. Acrylic on yupo, 56 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Exhale-Inhale*, 2025. Print on mulberry, 21 x 38.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.







Ilana Manolson, *Lotus*, 2025. Acrylic on yupo, 57 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.  
Opposite: Ilana Manolson, *From the Darkness, Light*, 2025. Acrylic on yupo, 47 x 33 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Strife*, 2025. Acrylic on yupo, 50 x 33 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Dandi*, 2025. Print on mulberry, 38.5 x 21 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Green Immigrant*, 2025. Print on mulberry, 38.5 x 21 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU*, 2025. Print on mulberry, 38.5 x 21 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Joe-Pye Weed*, 2025. Print on mulberry, 38.5 x 21 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Wild Ginger Blaze*, 2025. Print on mulberry, 38.5 x 21 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson, *Nature as Mentor*, 2024. Acrylic on duralar, 40 x 132 in. Text by Janine Benyus. Courtesy of the artist.



Ilana Manolson (in collaboration with nature), *A Reliquary of Seeds and Wishes*, 2025. Dandelions, glass, size variable. Courtesy of the artist.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

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*The Air We Share* celebrates, interrogates, and elevates plants that exist at the margins of our lives. My paintings are works of close looking, examining the most minute to understand the monumental. Swaths of paint flow over landscapes, and intricate strokes detail leaf capillaries. The plants in these painting are surrounded by bright bursts of color and form. These “energetic fields” are often felt rather than seen. In visualizing them, my work honors the attributes and contributions of each species. Each piece is informed by my training as a botanist, finding the beauty and function among the overlooked. *The Air We Share* seeks the wisdom plants offer, their intrinsic role in human lives and humans’ intrinsic role within the broader ecosystem.

So often humans place arbitrary constructs and constraints onto plants, elevating some for their beauty (think roses or alpine flowers) and others for their utility (think corn or wheat). Yet so many plants are relegated to weeds. Weeds creep into our lives and choke out the “preferred” plants. They compete for water, sun and nutrients with these plants and often win the competition. Weeds offer essential services to their ecosystems, thriving in marginal soil, providing irrigation, natural pesticide, and medicine.

This show captures the spirit of those categorized as weeds. There is quiet subversion to this. Foregrounding weeds in a museum setting challenges the hierarchies embedded in both landscape and art history. It is to insist that life persists and often thrives in places we overlook. As Michael Pollan points out, weeds are a human construct, they are “any plant in the wrong place.” My paintings pursue the beauty and mystery in all plants, finding that weeds speak to the heart with as much splendor as any other.



Ilana Manolson's studio.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

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**ILANA MANOLSON** is a painter, printmaker and naturalist. Her work has been exhibited at Jason McCoy Gallery (NY), Cadogan Contemporary (London), and numerous galleries in Boston, Toronto, and San Francisco as well as at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Brattleboro Museum, De Cordova Museum, Fuller Museum, Boston Public Library, and Ballin Castle Museum among others. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), the Berkeley Art Museum (BAMPFA), RISD

Museum, Danforth Museum, DeCordova Museum, Boston Public Library, and Ballin Castle Museum.

Manolson is a two-time winner of the Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship for Painting (2008–11 and 2018–21). Her residencies include the Banff Centre for the Arts residency where she was a Leighton Fellow, the Mass MOCA residency, the Ballinglen Arts Foundation residency, Yaddo Artist Colony, and Banff School of Fine Arts. She received a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design.

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## ABOUT THE CURATOR

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The daughter of a US diplomat, **SARAH TANGUY** is an independent curator and arts writer based in Washington, DC. A strong believer in hands-on collaboration and the power of art to catalyze our lived experience, she explores the intersection of art, culture, and science in her practice, including such topics as physics, earth sciences, food, tools, and books. Among her recent projects are a biannual exhibition program at The American Center for Physics (1997–2020); *Traces*, Kreeger



Museum (2020); *Reveal: The Art of Reimagining Scientific Discovery*, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, (2021); *Past & Present*, Oxon Hill Manor (2021-2023); *SUSTAIN* (2022) and *SWIMMING* (2024) with artist Monica Johan Bose; *Mother Earth*, Meridian International Center (2024); *When Many Become One*; The Kennedy Center; and *Nonsense and Hopeful Songs / My Inner Fight to Be Heard, Recent Art by CL Lunn*, Lost Origins Gallery (2025).

Tanguy studied at the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, Fleming College, Florence, Italy, and Bard College, before earning a BA in Fine Arts from Georgetown University, Washington, DC, and a MA in Art History from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. After interning at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Tanguy worked at the National Gallery, the International Exhibitions Foundation, The Tremaine Collection, the International Sculpture Center, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, The Hechinger Collection, and the Office of Art in Embassies, US Department of State, where she curated temporary exhibitions and permanent collections for US diplomatic facilities overseas. She currently serves on the Board of the Frauke and Willem de Looper Foundation. A frequent lecturer and juror, Tanguy has contributed to numerous catalogs, *Sculpture* and *Metalsmith* art journals, among other publications.



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Cover: Ilana Manolson, *Green Immigrant* (detail), 2025. Print on mulberry, 38.5 x 21 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



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AU Museum **Project Space**, launched in 2019, supports interdisciplinary, inquiry-driven projects developed with artists, scholars, and community partners. Connecting art with subjects such as history, science, and lived experience, it presents focused explorations of timely topics that invite new ways of thinking and understanding.

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