

Sounding Our Utopia: An Interview With Mileece

Maile Colbert

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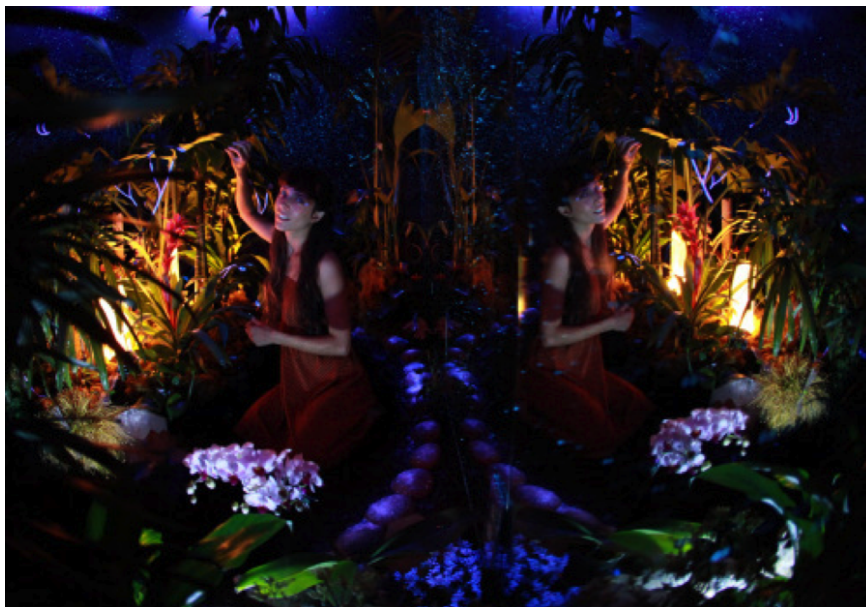
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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustic Ecology, Aesthetics, Digital Media, Environmental Issues, Field Recording



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There is no utopia without nature. Life is already a utopia—Mileece

When I heard sound artist and environmental researcher Mileece refer to utopia as she presented on her bio-sound work [this past year for MOMA's PSA1 series](#) "Speculations: The Future Is ____" I was startled and intrigued. When I asked Mileece to delve further into her conception, Mileece explained how when faced with an environment lacking flora—such as on a recent trip to India where she spent a lot of time in a cityscape heavy with apartment blocks—she noticed that finally coming upon a garden outside a temple or other lush area felt like utopia. "I'm referring to an ecological utopian society, not a fictional one." Mileece told me, "But either way, what we imagine as a perfect society always comes with fruit. Nature makes man right in the head. Without it, things get really rough. With it too of course, but you can see what happens to people deprived of green." Her participatory art installations explore and communicate her sense of the lushness and sensory surprises of the natural world.

Mileece is a internationally acclaimed, multi- disciplinary sonic artist and renewable energy ambassador. Her work "promoting ecology through technology and the arts" has brought her international critical acclaim as a composer and installation artist. [Formations](#), her debut album, inspired by cycles and formations in nature ("beautiful, real, musical science," BBC), was the result of her initial works in computer generated compositions, using Super Collider, an object-oriented programming language.—[Decibel festival](#) bio

<https://vimeo.com/20902352>

Mileece and I recently continued our conversation via Skype—she in the city of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan performing camera and sound work on mouthharps, and me in my studio in Lisbon, Portugal—what follows is a transcript of our talk. Mileece had just finished showing in Bhutan, where she created an installation in a dome at their first international festival.

Maile Colbert: Was the installation [in Bhutan] related to the work you did recently in MOMA [at POPRALLY in February 2013]?

Mileece: similar in being an installation with interactive plants and sensors.

<https://vimeo.com/73486004>

MC: And when you are home and in the studio, what does your day look and sound like?

M: That depends on much. The last project I did before leaving for Bhutan was a dome at a school, which had me with a shovel in garden clothes up early onsite, then home late, so I wasn't in the studio at all. Then I worked on the plant interface for Bhutan and generally to get a public interface finished—hardware and software as pre-made wireless 'off the shelf' devices and learning

kits that I can distribute to people and artists and do more complex projects with. So at random hours, when my colleague who is helping me with the engineering aspects had a moment, we would sit and quickly go over the builds. I did recently decide I want to do a less intensely computer based project, so completely rearranged my studio, borrowed a loop station, bought a gold guitar and started to 'jam'. It's something I've never done before. I've had days where it's fourteen hours working constantly in the studio, tweaking buttons and writing code. But it all depends...

<https://vimeo.com/104809435>

MC: So, does each project tend to take you into something new...new tools, new methodology...or do you think you work like that because that's how you like it, to be an exploration as well as a process?

M: I'm always refining, but the software I wrote is 10 years old now and I've been working on the plant project for about 15 years. "Soniferous Eden" is an installation series where interior spaces are transformed into star-studded micro-ecologies, where lush groves of plants generate rich and dynamic soundscapes in response to the touch and presence of the participants, who can saunter barefoot in moist soil amongst them. I'm always working on it, whether the code, concept, or its elements.

<https://vimeo.com/20900941>

M (cont. . .): Every time I do an installation it's site specific, so never the same, and generally it's evolved into a variety of different types with focus on various objectives. For example, the dome at the school is a bio-library and sound sanctuary, where I created a pond, dry creek, planted area, and interactive sitting 'pods' inside a dome so kids can read and be in a seemingly natural environment, sitting on the ground in a way that is ergonomic and triggers soundscapes when they are still. There is an array of benefits to being around plants and within a 'high fidelity' acoustic environment, as [R. Murray Schafer](#) would call it (from whose works some of the concepts were modeled)...from helping the parts of the brain dealing with abstract thinking, to developing memory and social skills. It's argued that attention deficit disorder is a behavioral issue that can be traced to the decrease in natural habitat available to children.

On other projects, such as for Bhutan, more emphasis was on the interactivity with the plants themselves, so I worked on the code of the plant synths, written in [SuperCollider](#), an object-oriented programming language.

I'm not really reinventing at this point, just tweaking and improving. Although, having said that, for these next projects there are significant advancements in the works...it's like invention. Sometimes I make new sensors and design new sounds, but since my work has spanned quite a variety of stuff from renewables to software to gardens, each one evolves slowly.



<https://youtu.be/dFYgue5VfGk>

MC: Can you tell us a bit about your background and where you are from? And what from this do you think led you to “Tree We’vr”, and working with biofeedback data of plants?

M: I’m from England and grew up in multiple cities (London, New York, Los Angeles) and the countryside equally, so I was exposed to rural and urban environments. I saw *The Secret Life of Plants* when I was around nineteen, and a couple of years before that [Mobius 8](#) had shown me his work with MIDI and sensors.

<https://youtu.be/d7l61oSYlq8>

M (cont. . .): I had imagined holographic plants (my mum did holography in the 80’s)...which then seemed completely uninteresting since plants THEMSELVES could iterate music.

MC: Have you always had an interest in micro-worlds? What about worlds barely perceptible to us interests you?

M: Yes, micro-worlds...love that. In Suffolk, where I grew up for some time, we had this greenhouse and I remember making this tiny micro-garden in it. I LOVED it and was just mortified when my father told me it needed to be torn down for being unsafe, which he did by getting riotously pissed with his best friend and driving the Range Rover through it.

I have great respect and love for the world and living things. I truly ache for the well being of plants and animals and most people so overall I am dedicated to helping support a healthy ecology, in the holistic sense of the word. And sometimes these ‘hidden things’ are what makes the link to show up the ‘livingness’ and connection we are lacking...the ‘magic’ we need to see and touch to remember that we are a spinning spool of intangible energy organized and perpetuated only by our own existence.

MC: Do you feel your sonification with plants as an instrument, or translation? Can you describe the connection you have with a plant when working with it...is it emotional, scientific, intellectual curiosity...a mix? Is it a dialogue?

M: Nail on the head. My work as an artist is to find the balance between the two. I call it aesthetic sonification, as what you are looking to do is relay data in a way that people understand it, which isn't necessarily how it iterates, as there are psychoacoustics and other human factors as to how we interpret sound that need to be considered when you are translating information into the sonic realm. So you find a way to relay the information, then make it beautiful for both the human and the plant to be able to enjoy, which is key to art being successful. It's a balance, and that is my job. That is where I see the necessity for artistry and mastery, and where I try to get it right. The rest is understanding the technicalities.

<https://soundcloud.com/mileece/mileece-plusic>

M (cont. . .): An instrument holds potential as a set of elements and offers a composer/musician that spectrum of potential to weave from. The limitations are the possible manifestations of that potential as choreographed by the degree of expertise of the musician/composer. Sonification doesn't care about weaving potentials, it wants to be direct as possible. The degree of articulation of the information is a strictly technical matter. So I am somewhere in there, where the sonification is the limitation of the instrument, and the instrument is the plant and interface.

MC: Do you find people understand your work? How much of understanding what you do is important for you to have from your audience?

M: b A whole spectrum of folk come and make use of the installations. Though perhaps not many thoroughly understand my work, most understand the consequence. When I explain what I'm doing I don't usually get vacant stares, most people follow. I don't really have an audience, I have participants, so people do a thing, and a thing happens...then they wonder how, and they can find out. Their curiosity leads them on that journey of discovery, and it doesn't really matter, the issue is plants are alive more than we thought. So long as someone walks away with that, that's right and good. And if the music and ambience moves them, that's best.

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<https://vimeo.com/20902953>

MC: You mentioned once plants "lacking representation"...I find this intriguing, can you tell us more about this concept?

M: There really isn't one part of our economy that doesn't rely on the exploitation of plants, either themselves or their habitat. We have rights for animals, rights for people, and we know we abuse

them often, as there are representatives who tell us so. But we don't often think about the plants, and the plants are also living. They support life, all life almost, so we have to start thinking about that. They are now using 'excess' plant energy to power devices. I find this idea of 'excess' interesting, like over 90% of our DNA is junk, and 94% of the Universe is 'dark'. I wouldn't like to be so assertive.

MC: What tends to happen with the sound from the plants when they are touched? Does it depend on the kind of touch? Does it depend on the kind of plant, or where it is touched? Do plants scream? Or is this anthropomorphizing?

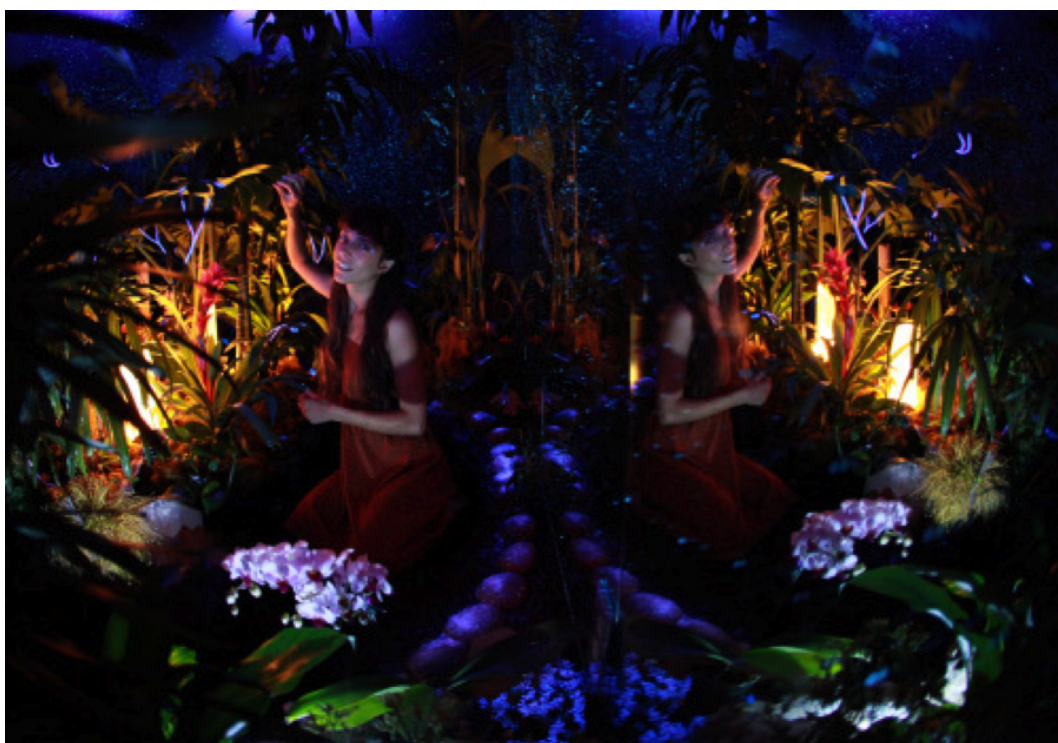
M: Plants emit indicators, best known to be chemical, when they experience threats or distress. The smell of freshly cut grass for example, this is a chemical emitted by the plants to express distress. So 'screaming' is an anthropomorphic viewpoint on that possibly unemotional 'response,' which is what plant biologists would commonly call it. This is because we don't understand plant biology well. They have systems to take in and calculate information, make decisions, and produce self-regulated results, but we have a hard time figuring that out since it isn't in the form of what we say is required of sentient beings... a nervous system and a brain. But no, it doesn't matter where you touch a plant, that doesn't make different sounds, at least that I can tell. I don't have scientific instruments, I have arty ones, so they aren't accurate enough to make precise measurements or declarations. I'm in the experience, not research department. The synths I've written are modulated by the current from the plant, so the sound changes in direct function of the modulation of the current, which changes with touch or presence and general livingness.

<https://vimeo.com/20735275>

[...]

MC: You go way beyond trend or gimmick, you have been doing this a while. Where do you think your work is going? Do you have more in this vein to explore...is it leading somewhere you can share with us?

M: I'm currently working with Eden Labs and some other partners at UCSD on a project engaging custom made technology to hybridize with living systems, forging lucid and direct connections between the inner city and wild ecologies in real time.



More on Mileece and her work here: <http://www.mileece.is/>

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All images courtesy of the artist

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Maile Colbert is a multi-media artist with a concentration on sound and video who relocated from Los Angeles, US to Lisbon, Portugal. She is a regular writer for Sounding Out!

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