

For Immediate Release

## REFRAMING THE ENTITIES KNOWN AS MICROBE AND HUMAN

### ***Sine qua non***

In our society, bacteria usually get really bad press. Indeed, when we hear about them, most of us think about sickness, filth, and disinfectant; if we're lucky, a foodie may mention yogurt, sauerkraut or probiotics. But are we missing the bigger picture?

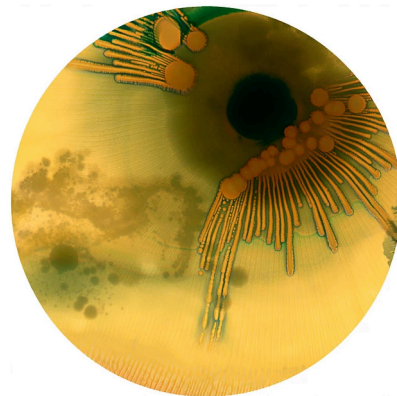
As a species, Humans tends to see themselves as an autonomous entity; this conception implies, among other things, that human beings are entirely contained in their individual "skin bags", isolated not only from each other, but also from non-human entities. However, we are deeply embedded in the world from which we emerged; and so are all living things on this planet. Animals, plants, bacteria, archaea, fungi, viruses: we have co-evolved as a closed system, and we all depend on each other for survival. This trans-species synergy is at the heart of Earth's history, and bacteria, as the most abundant and diversified form of life on our planet, play a key role in almost everything, from soil fertility, to weather patterns, to pathogens control, and even to bridging the gap between life and non-life.

To approach those microorganisms from a fresh angle, and, hopefully, initiate a positive reframing of the entities known as *microbe* and *Human*, the artworks presented in this exhibition all are inter-species collaborative endeavours. Created by a human photographer and bacterial painters, each image is grown in a Petri dish by bringing photographic film in contact with microscopic life rather than light: this unique process allows microorganisms to "paint" their reality through their own actions, unveiling unexpected universes nested within our own.

Because nothing exists in a void...especially not us.

### ***MicroScapes***

The *MicroScapes* series was, for me, the discovery of the microbial world that surrounds us. It was also with this series that I first developed the process that allows bacteria to use the pigments present in a photographic film to create an image of themselves, by themselves.

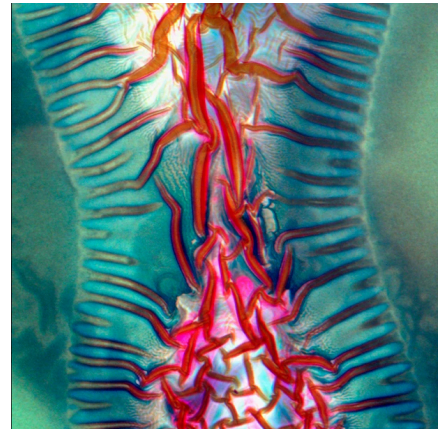


The resulting artworks bring forth a reality that only exists at the outermost limit of our senses... Indeed, microorganisms, by their invisible and yet ubiquitous presence, deeply shape our macroscopic reality.

### ***HumanScapes***

The *HumanScapes* series started my foray into the human microbiota; it is with this series that I realized that my research was not about the microbes themselves, but about our relationship with them. Indeed, since bacteria are everywhere, then, we must have some on us too. And even in us. Are we simply hosts? A nice ecosystem? What is our relationship with them and what does it mean for us?

To explore these questions, I joined forces with microorganisms from our body's microbiota: as I let them "imprint" themselves on film, I aimed to achieve a less anthropocentric perspective of our own self; one where we are at once an entity, an ecosystem, and a cog in the machine. One where we are so deeply, so intrinsically entangled in this network that it ultimately challenges what it means to be *human*.



### ***Terraformations***

Bacteria and other microorganisms also are the cornerstone of agriculture, and thus, by extension, had a tremendous impact on civilization. Indeed, not only have they formed mutually beneficial associations with plants and their seeds, allowing them to survive in inhospitable environments, but they also transform dead/inert materials and gases into a fertile, living soil: a single gram of healthy agricultural soil usually contains more than 10,000 species of microbes, most of them playing a key role in our food supply. Neither friend nor foe (although they can seem like a little bit of both at times to us), bacteria are an essential part of life as we know it.

However, as a human being, I find that my perspective is limited because I myself am part of the network... and so I wonder. How many of these synergies remain to be mapped?

As a metaphor of these unseen (and sadly, often overlooked) synergies of our world, *Terraformations* thus proposes an uncharted sky with peculiar planets: here, each planet's image is created by either soil or skin microorganisms; some images are even still alive.

*Sine Qua Non* by Günes-Hélène Isitan will be exhibited at Visual Voice Gallery from September 25 to October 21, 2019. For more information, see [www.visualvoicegallery.com](http://www.visualvoicegallery.com)

## **Artist Statement**

In a hybrid approach, at the crossroads of art, philosophy and microbiology, my practice invites a significant rethinking of what it means to be human. Through visual works and living installations that go beyond anthropocentrism, I challenge the cultural barriers we have erected in the continuum of life by revealing the interdependent relationships and co-becoming fates that not only engender our world, but also our very existence.

In my studio-laboratory, I explore the remarkable implications of the symbiotic relationship between humans and microorganisms. In the "DIY" spirit, I hijack the know-how of microbiology and molecular biology to explore the realities of a multi-species humanity; a humanity that, by renouncing its claim of exceptionalism, reveals itself in continuity with its environment.

## **About Günes-Hélène Isitan**

*Günes-Hélène Isitan is a Canadian artist-researcher in biomedica arts. She studied photography and intermedia at Concordia University, and holds a graduate diploma in Actual Artistic Practices and a micro-diploma in Microbiology from Sherbrooke University. A grant recipient of the CALQ, the CAC and the CAM, she presents her works in numerous individual and group exhibitions, both in Canada and abroad, and participates in several conferences and artist residencies in the biomedica field. She is considered to be one of the first Canadian artists to take an interest in the human's microbiota, to grasp the formidable implications of these discoveries from a philosophical point of view and to reveal their creative potential.*