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**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Welcome to the *Free Range* podcast. I'm your host, Mike Livermore. Today's episode is sponsored by the Program on Law, Communities, and the Environment at the University of Virginia School of Law.

With me today is Jenny Kendler, an artist and activist whose work focuses on climate change and biodiversity loss. She is the artist-in-residence with the Natural Resources Defense Council and her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at museums, biennials, public spaces and natural areas.

Hi, Jenny. Thanks so much for joining me today.

**JENNY KENDLER:** Hi, Mike. It's a pleasure to be with you.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** So I thought we might begin by discussing some of your works over the past few years. There's just so much really rich and fascinating art that you've created. And of course, a podcast is a bit of a tricky medium for art. But we'll include links in the description so that listeners can get a visual sense as well.

Maybe one that we could just get started with is *Amber Archive*, which is something that, a work that is ongoing and I guess still available to be seen. Maybe you could just describe for us a little bit of what we're seeing here and we could go from there.

**JENNY KENDLER:** Sure. So the *Amber Archive* is, as you say, it's an ongoing series of works that are being created. And essentially, I arrived at the idea by thinking about how, unfortunately as we all know, that so many species are currently under threat because of all sorts of human activities. So whether this be anthropogenically driven climate change, habitat loss, oil and gas expansion. And there's these numbers that say that we might be on track to lose 50% of species on the planet by 2100.

And so in this sort of worst case scenario, which hopefully we will avert, but in this worst case scenario, you could imagine some kind of far future where we might be interested in undoing the harm that we've done. And there actually exists in the scientific community quite a number of efforts to preserve the DNA of these threatened species, whether they be crustaceans, corals, birds, vegetal plants.

But they preserve the DNA. And it's this very high tech sort of initiative, where genetic samples are kept at deep freeze temperatures, which is very energy intensive. And of course, it's also sensitive to any kind of disruption in the power grid.

So I wanted to imagine a sort of ancient and more analog way that we have to preserve DNA, and which, this is embedded in the popular imagination, this idea that we can use tree resin or essentially amber or, in this case, proto amber to preserve genetic specimens. And so I essentially made, like I say, proto amber, or pre amber, or what is in the process of becoming amber thousands of years from now, in my home studio and embedded inside of it fragments of biological material that were all ethically obtained, some with of the help of biologists, from a variety of threatened species.

So it's scale wing, leaf, seed, bone from countless different creatures, with the idea that this both provides some sort of potentially viable archive of genetic material for some far future in which it was both feasible and ethical to bring back these creatures. Because we could actually have a whole conversation on why I don't think that what people call de-extinction is an ethical move at this moment. But it also creates this beautiful, haunting visual experience of what it is that we stand to lose in the midst of the sixth extinction.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah, it really is. As you said, it is very haunting. And it's such an interesting relationship to time that the piece kind of draws out in the viewer. So it's an archive of a moment in time, like now, and species that-- what it, of course, calls to mind is this future perspective of looking back at now, where now is deep time, now is deep history, that perspective, and to say-- I mean, there's just so much going on, and kind of saying, look, we will regret this. We're making decisions now that from that future perspective, we will say, we will regret, we will think that there was a terrible loss. And this is maybe even a loss that we might seek to undo.

But of course, as you note with respect to de-extinction, there's always something irretrievable in that loss. And of course, it also puts us in mind of fossils. And you mentioned the popular culture, kind of *Jurassic Park* idea. But of course, we have fossils. We have lots of remains of other versions of the planet that have existed prior to us.

And so all of that, as you say, does that seem to be in mind when you conceived of the piece and then you kind of executed it from there?

**JENNY  
KENDLER:** Yeah. I mean, I appreciate that you bring up deep time. That's actually something that often is a feature of my work. So I'm really interested in proposing work that might be very explicitly contemporary, in that it relates to the political moment, as we are in now, with some sense of urgency, but oftentimes is also considering the much grander sweep of time and wanting us to remember that, in terms of geologic time, this moment that we live in is actually quite brief.

So I have work that thinks about ancient history, that proposes something far into the future. And as you mentioned, what I hope that it does in the mind of the viewer is help us to imagine how we might feel looking back on this moment when we still have time to make some changes.

And also, you mentioned *Jurassic Park*, which some people do bring up with this project. I have to tell you that actually that was not, in fact, my inspiration for the piece. I honestly don't even that I've seen the movie, despite being, I guess, a kid of that generation. But certainly what I was looking at was all of this great variety of scientific research that has gone on around amber and these sort of extraordinary finds, such as when someone in fairly recent history has found a dinosaur feather embedded in amber or other types of species that provide this record of deep time in a much more high resolution, in all senses, than you can get from the traditional fossil record.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, no, it's funny, the *Jurassic Park* thing is just, some of these cultural touchstones, they can become overwhelming in their influence.

The pieces are all so beautiful. They're aesthetically pleasing. They're these different kinds of plant and animal material encapsulated in this kind of beautiful amber colored-- I mean, I guess it's amber, or proto amber. And when you were working on this project and kind of executing it, what's the balance, I guess, in your mind, or what are you thinking about at the level of making the piece in terms of the aesthetics and what it's ultimately going to look like? Because obviously, it's very, very conceptual as well. And how do you balance that kind of the aesthetic demands and the process of creation with the conceptual element that you're trying to get across?

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah, that's a great question. And certainly, for me, other artists approach this in different ways. But for me, I like to say that art does not need to be ugly in order to look intelligent or intellectually engaged or to show that it has a conceptual point of view. It is actually, in my practice, extremely important to engage with aesthetics, both because that is where a lot of the pleasure of the making comes from for myself, and I have a deep and engaged history with aesthetics and with art history that I want to be in dialogue with.

But I also think that it's a gateway for people. And so because my work oftentimes has all of these layers in it, I'm maybe referencing specific scientific white papers, I might be thinking about art history or theory, but I also am really interested in having a wide open gateway for anyone to feel like they have a point of entry. And I oftentimes think that aesthetics can be that gateway.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah, it's really interesting. So just maybe to move on to another piece that I found super fascinating, also appears to be ongoing as well, is the *Underground Library*. So again, maybe you could just explain a little bit about what's going on with that project.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah. So the *Underground Library* came out of a collection of books that I made over the course of about a year, which the idea is to create essentially a library composed primarily of discards and unread books that encompasses the history of nonfiction works on climate change. So this is everything from Bill McKibbin's earliest book, Donella Meadows' *Limits to Growth* in the '70s and early '80s, goes through the '90s, where we see the books all having the words global warming and conflating it with the threat of nuclear winter or the hole in the ozone. And we sort of see a history of how the movement around climate changes up until the contemporary moment. I have books in there everywhere from the Sunrise Movement to Naomi Klein's recent books.

And so what I was really interested in doing is both giving a historical survey of where we've looked for information on climate and also thinking about how all of these authors who are sort of pouring their life's work into this, whether they be cultural theorists, writers, scientists, activists--

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** There's even some lawyers. I saw there's the climate change law book is amongst the books that you collected.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Absolutely. There's very technical manuals on specific areas of law or of global politics. But mostly what I was interested in saying about this is that many of these books quite literally went unread. So not only do we say as a society we didn't heed the message but that actually many of these books were discarded from libraries with their old school library cards unstamped.

And so my interest here is twofold, which is that I'm sort of thinking about how do I both mark and honor this unread history, maybe memorialize these books, where the books have already themselves kind of become graves for these unread words, and also try to think about proposing some remediation, essentially, in this case.

And so the work is called *Underground Library*, and I'll get back to why in a minute. But in order to create the works, what I do essentially is burn the books. And that's what you're seeing in these images is these beautiful, delicately charred black books, where, in some cases, you can still read the ink on the page in this contrast between a shinier and less shiny area, which I think is really lovely.

But this is not a traditional form of burning. I'm doing what's called biochar, which is a process that's used in agriculture or in other fields to take, essentially, a material that has carbon in it and through the process of pyrolysis, which is a low or no oxygen form of burning, actually turn that into this extremely stable form of carbon, which can then be sequestered in the Earth, e.g. taken out of the carbon cycle.

So what I'm doing with these books is because they themselves are made out, of course, trees, which we know, if a tree biodegrades in the forest, does it make an impact on climate change? Yeah, in fact, it does. So even though these are natural parts of the carbon cycle and would have been there despite any human interference, any time that biological material degrades and releases carbon into the atmosphere, that actually could in theory be increasing the overburden of greenhouse gases. However, you can take that material out of the carbon cycle by doing something called sequestration.

And so in this case, that's what I'm doing with these books is at the conclusion of each exhibition-- and they've been exhibited a number of times at different museums or venues-- we find a spot where they then become buried at the end of the exhibition. And that's sort of the arc of the project. So it's not just the books being displayed. It's not just the list of the titles, which I think oftentimes are evocative. But it's this act of burying them. And then again, with this deep time perspective, many thousands of years, that carbon will still have been removed from the carbon cycle.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah. It's such a hopeful project. It's a sad project. I mean, the idea of a book sitting in the library for who knows how long without a single person checking it out. As someone who's written a couple of books, that's just the saddest thing that I can imagine. And especially, of course, in the context that you're describing of folks, these are very important messages, very important scientific or political messages about climate change and what we can do about it.

And so there is something very sad about the state of these books. And as you said, just kind of graveyards of ideas sitting in the library. But then again, something hopeful of resuscitating them, getting the ideas out into public circulation, at least in their higher points, the titles and the main ideas, and then, yeah, this idea of, in a sense, heating the message out of these books, if only in a small way. I guess, any individual act is going to be small in the context of climate change, with this idea that there will be a long-term positive benefit.

**JENNY  
KENDLER:** Yeah. And I think there's also something in here that there's a sense of humor about the idea of inverting a book burning, which I'd love to say is an idea from the far past. But as you can see, we continue to have books banned in the United States. And I'm not sure at the moment those are books around climate, but certainly there was a very vigorous climate denial movement that, although mostly discredited at this point, still exists. And so the idea of taking and recasting the idea of what a book burning might mean as something to actually honor, memorialize, and shine light on these words.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Right. Yeah, no, I mean, and absolutely correct, the resonance with today's current debates over banning books and the like. And climate discourse is absolutely part of that. There are places politically in the States where it isn't OK to talk about climate change. It's not a path to getting your voice heard and where state officials are asked not to talk about climate change or climate science gets censored out of official reports.

So absolutely that's not far removed from the contemporary environment. And again, as you noted, the books are really arresting looking. There's something kind of beautiful about them. They're very destroyed. But they're also, there's something about the physicality of it, the color, the deep kind of black charcoal color that they have that is quite arresting.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah, they're destroyed but they're also preserved.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Right. Yeah. So another piece, I don't know if you consider it a series or related pieces, that have gotten an enormous amount of attention are the *Birds Watching* and *Bewilder*, both of which involve these kind of natural images that are integrated into different environments. So maybe you could just describe those a little bit and then, yeah, we could talk about those as well.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Sure. Yeah. So the *Bewilder* project uses butterfly and moth eyespots, which are not their eyes but are decorative camouflage marks that the moths or butterflies use to evade predators, so to appear more threatening or to engage in this form of camouflage that is referred to as deimatic camouflage, which essentially means a startle camouflage. The idea being that you could have a very cryptic-looking butterfly that has grays and browns on the outside up against a tree and then where a bird to approach "too closely," they might flash their wings open and startle the predator with these eyespots that make them look much larger, fiercer, or a different species than they actually are.

So I started to think-- and this piece was created a number of years ago-- but I started to think about this idea of how we humans might use deimatic camouflage. And what happens in this piece is wherever it's installed is there's this patterned wallpaper that becomes this kind of [INAUDIBLE], this overwhelming pattern of eyespot upon eyespot upon eyespot in every different color and is really both overwhelming but does become this repetitive field.

And then the visitors to the museum or other venue are asked to pose for a portrait in front of that, where they're both covering their body with a cloth, cloth with the same print, and also are invited to use temporary tattoos on their faces to actually apply these eyespots to themselves. And what I discovered at the time was that this disrupts facial recognition technology.

So I was very inspired by activists who have published guides that would tell you what types of makeup you could put on to disrupt facial recognition technology were you in a crowd situation and were worried about being tracked by government surveillance. And I wanted to think about how we as human beings might be able to benefit from some sort of anonymity or camouflage online. And so it was an invitation for people to essentially take selfies or portraits of themselves and then be able to post them anonymously by using this biomimicry or strategy from the natural world.

Then *Birds Watching* also uses eyes, but in this case, the literal eyes of birds. It's a 40-foot sculpture that exists in two, and soon to be three, versions that depicts 100 eyes of birds that are all threatened or endangered by climate change. They're cutouts that sort of seem to float in this flock, almost. And they're printed on a highly reflective material that's used for road signs so that when they are hit by light, especially in these beautiful low light conditions, they appear to glow back at you.

This was partly inspired by my coming across birds in a night spotting situation. If you're a passionate bird watcher, like I am, if you want to go and look at night, you hold a hold a light up next to your eyes. And then if you're lucky enough to see a bird, the light bounces off their retinas and you get sort of transfixed by this look of another.

And so I want to emphasize that this piece is not called Bird Watching. It's not about us looking at them, though. It's called *Birds Watching*, as in birds watching us, and really is about the gaze being returned back upon us and the different ways that we might choose to encounter what that gaze means when we know that our species is responsible for potentially pushing these other species off the planet.

**MIKE** How were the birds selected that you chose for that particular piece?

**LIVERMORE:**

**JENNY** Yeah, so in each case, they're chosen in a different way. In the first one, which was created for the Storm King Art Center in 2018, which is a really fabulous sculpture park north of New York City in the Hudson Valley, that was using Audubon's really remarkable report on climate threatened and endangered birds. And so in that case, it's all North American species.

**KENDLER:**

The second version was created for the Eden Project in Cornwall in the UK. And so then I worked with their ornithologist to revise and update the list with birds from the UK and the EU. And this third version, I'm actually in process of working on right now-- in fact, was working on a little bit this morning-- is for the Hayward gallery in London, where it will be installed essentially over the Waterloo Bridge and hopefully visible to millions of people, which is astonishing to think about.

And that, I was working with the Zoological Society of London, which is really a fabulous international conservation-based not-for-profit that's one of the world's oldest, if not the world's oldest, research zoo. And they do very important conservation work. So they help to quite literally keep birds back from the brink of extinction. And so we focused on a number of the species there that some of them are extinct in the wild and their populations exist only in captivity. And so we wanted to really highlight the amazing conservation work that the zoo is doing.

**MIKE** Yeah, it's really powerful. And yeah, this idea that the kind of eyes are looking back at you, and yeah, that these are species that are seriously affected by human activities.

**LIVERMORE:**

And so when you were conceiving or even when you look at the piece now, I mean obviously, people are going to have different reactions. But I could certainly imagine a kind of accusatorial gaze coming back from this suite of eyes that are kind of disembodied and staring back at you from the landscape. Was that part of the idea is to kind of shock people into a sense of responsibility? Or what was your thinking vis-a-vis that reaction that I would imagine is at least somewhat common?

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah. Well, Mike, in this particular case-- well, I'm always happy to write about my work and to share the way that I feel the work might be interpreted. But in this particular case, I think I'm going to lean back on that old artist's adage, which is that it's really up for the viewer's interpretation.

Certainly, one might encounter the sense of feeling accused by these birds. But it's really my goal to allow the nature of that gaze to be expansive and shifting so that we might go through imagining this sort of accusatory stare or a gaze of castigation. But at the same time, we might be able to imagine one of communion or camaraderie or even love, so that that connection doesn't have to be simplistic. Because actually, when we're in true relationality with other beings, the nature of that relationship can be quite complex. And I think that, at least for myself, I feel a number of different emotions at the same time.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah. No, that's really interesting. And that's the beauty of art is that there's many, many interpretations. And that's the goal in some sense.

I mean, you could even say forgiveness. There's lots of different ways that you could look at something like that. Yeah.

Just to take back for a second with *Bewilder*, the relationship of seeing and being seen is just really interesting there. On the one hand, as you mentioned, with *Bewilder* and the project with the eyespots, that, in some sense, is about not being seen. It's about camouflage. It's about hiding from a kind of technological gaze. At least that's part of the story that you were telling.

And then in the other project, *Birds Watching*, it's almost, you could imagine someone feeling seen by the landscape in a way that they're not accustomed to, to say, wow, I feel visible before all these eyes. I'm kind of de-camouflaged in a way that's potentially kind of disruptive in a positive way, could lead to new ways of thinking of myself.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah, that's a good point. I think in both of these cases, what I'm interested in is sort of troubling this more generic or more assumed type of the gaze. As we discuss in the history and theory of art, it formally and through the sort of Academy in Western Art, the idea was of the, in this case, generally wealthy, white, educated male viewer gazing upon and sort of essentially consuming the subject of the painting. And Manet famously reverses this with his painting *Olympia*, where the subject in that case then sort of gazes back out at the viewer and confronts them.

And certainly in my work, what I'm interested in is really creating some complexity around that relation. Because the real thesis of all of my work is to try to disrupt the idea of human exceptionalism. And so that sort of primary mode of art viewing, the idea of a single educated white male viewer consuming the artwork is at the heart of what I think is problematic in the way that art itself can prop up human exceptionalism. And so proposing that there are these many different modalities that we might be gazed upon by other different types of beings and that the gaze might be reciprocal, that we might feel small within this web of relationships, I actually think that that's tremendously important. And that sort of feeling of being set back into the landscape really can help to undo this terrible poison of human exceptionalism.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah. It's really, really interesting.

So another piece that's, I think, maybe slightly differently themed, but particularly interesting for folks in my part of the world. I'm obviously, I'm talking from the University of Virginia, which is in Charlottesville. You spent part of your youth not that far away from here, in Richmond, Virginia. And the piece that I was just thinking about right now is *Studies for Bioremediation*, which is a theory of series of photo collages. And there's a relationship to Richmond there. So maybe just could explain a little bit about what's going on with those pieces.

**JENNY  
KENDLER:**

Yeah. Well, firstly, I'm really happy to be talking with a fellow Virginian. The beauty and character of that state is certainly lodged deep within my psyche. And I sometimes feel a little out of place here in the Midwest, where it is flat as a pancake, thanks to all of those tens of thousands of years of being scrubbed by glaciers. So I miss my forested hills for sure.

So that piece you're talking about, the *Studies for Bioremediation*, and then it's a parenthetical that says kudzu, which, of course, is a plant that we classically associate with the South, despite it being what's termed a "invasive species" from Asia.

So that work talks about the idea of monuments, which I think we now have seen in every form of media, thankfully, being discussed, the problematic nature of the way that we construct monuments in general, and then specifically the monuments that represented Southern Confederate generals that tended to be actually put up many years after the Civil War and were in fact about reinforcing Jim Crow ideals and actually directly oppressing Black folks.

So in my hometown, Richmond, Virginia, I remember being a small child and going downtown to Monument Avenue and trying to understand why these statues of the people that I had thankfully learned enough about in Social Studies to realize were maybe not on the right side of history, we'll say, why were they memorialized in our city streets? And I remember also the struggle around getting Arthur Ashe's statue put up on Monument Boulevard.

So as this conversation started to be raised in the public dialogue about what should be done with these memorials, there was this question that kept being raised about how do we discredit these people as heroes, how do we stop the trauma of people of color having to constantly encounter these as icons that we're lifting up in our public spaces, but also at the same time, how do we not forget that this history happened. And as a Jew, I maybe have a particular way of looking at this. We think about Elie Wiesel and Never Forget and how important it is to actually keep history alive in each generation so that we can't just obliterate or erase the atrocities of the past. But at the same time, we don't want to be retraumatizing people.

And so I had this idea of taking kudzu, which is this quick growing plant that when inappropriately released in our beautiful Southern forests can cover trees quite quickly in this blanket of thick leaves. I thought, well, why don't we plant kudzu at the base of these statues and just let nature do the work? And I loved this metaphor of bioremediation, meaning how plants, in particular-- phytoremediation would be in that case-- but plants or living creatures of any kind can kind of help to remove toxicity from a site, and was using that as a metaphor but also this literal, again, camouflage to try to say, well, we what's under there but we've made it green and verdant and beautiful instead.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah. No, it's really, I mean, it's such a arresting series of images and fascinating, fascinating idea. And the relationship, yeah, with history and forgetting and nature seems, I mean, this just seems a lot going on there, right.

Because when I think of-- one of the things that this called to mind, I'll just say, as a viewer, was other contexts where nature has kind of quote, unquote taken over or you have a civilization-- I mean, this happens all over the Americas, where civilizations are either, through internal processes or in the course of colonization, suffered horrendous losses in their monuments, which were very different. Well, it's a different kind of context, we're talking about monuments, but there was monumental architecture, in any case, that was overtaken by the natural landscape.

So that there would have been a huge temple, important area, and now it's kind of covered in vines and kind of slowly being reincorporated into the natural landscape. And so I think what struck me, in any case, is this relationship between nature and the power of nature and forgetting, just this idea that over time the landscape removes any trace, in some sense, of human civilization and even injustices or great things that we create that at the end of the day, nature kind of has its way and there's not much of a trace left.

And I'm curious if that was also on your mind. You mentioned this tension that the monuments would be there but they'd be covered in camouflage. But eventually, when nature has its way in the end, there won't be anything left at all.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah. Many years ago, I read that book, *The World Without Us*, and certainly, even prior to that, I am not a misanthrope, despite the problems that I see with contemporary human society, namely because of these cultural modalities of human exceptionalism and white supremacy and late stage capitalism that we're currently engaging in. But I don't actually want to see humanity disappear.

But sometimes I have to tell you that in dark moments, I would have this fantasy of essentially what it looks like if we all were gone. And that idea that the buildings would crumble and be overgrown with vines, that there is this, to me, some hopefulness in that, that there is this ability to heal on a long enough time scale. And for me, the question is really, how can we in the contemporary moment be most responsible towards that deep future?

I think about this idea of seed saving, but in a cultural sense, like cultural seed saving or on this larger sense of biodiversity, how can we be sure that this diversity, of whatever type, right, human languages maybe, human cultures, all the different species, the different habitats, how can we ensure that enough of that makes it into the future that it'll have a chance when we actually, I hope, can reach a place of essentially remediating the harm that we've done.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah. It's an interesting tension that's exists in the environmental movement and conservation and even in our environmental law is, do we think of nature-- and this has been a theme that's been visited on earlier episodes of the podcast. Emma Marris recently, an environmental writer, we talked a little bit about this, is can we envision a place for humans in the world?

There seems to be a binary of either, kind of a human dominated world where it's all about people and what we do and resources that we extract, or the alternative of misanthropy and kind of picturing a world without people as a kind of idealized state of nature. And can we come up with a vision where we play a different role but we're still around, is the question.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Yeah. No, I think that that's a great frame for discussion. Because I mean, I certainly think that the idealized view of perfect, harmonious nature is in some ways just as erroneous a view as it is to think about nature as resources to be extracted. I think that, again, that there's some complexity in between, that is the space that we need to inhabit. And I really think that we, of course, we can do much better as human beings in terms of trying to understand what our place may be.

People spend a lot of time talking about how special we are in the animal kingdom, if they remember at all that we are animals, which, of course, we are, and how language or tool making or art sets us apart from the rest of the natural world. I think all of these can be debunked in certain ways, if you look at our fellow creatures.

But at the same time, there is something that's particularly wonderful about a self-conscious species that can respond to its environment and make something new. So I think maybe that's part of where, again, like this conversation around a vision and the gaze and observation can come in, that there's something special about the fact that we can look at the natural world and respond.

But I think that it's dangerous when we think of this as something that elevates us above the rest of the natural world, which is why I remind people that when we look at nature, nature looks back, that we are not set apart but, of course, are deeply interdependent on this natural world. No matter what sort of technology we have, we're nowhere close to being able to survive independently of our biodiverse planet. And if Elon Musk wants to perpetuate a fantasy that he's going to go live on Mars, like, by all means, buddy, get in that spaceship.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Well, it's funny--

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Mars is going to try to kill you. That's what I'm saying.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** I mean, that's the thing. Occasionally, I'll have friends or folks will kind of mention, they'll bemoan the state of the environment, which is bad, we're doing bad things to the environment, and they'll say, well, should we be thinking about colonizing other planets? And I say, look, there is nothing that we could do to this planet that would make it as inhospitable to life as Mars, right. So whatever you're picturing, we're going to be here. It's going to be better here. And so we just want to make it as-- there is not-- the alternative is just a fantasy.

And yeah. It's almost a dangerous idea because I think people can get this-- because it makes people less risk averse with what should really be accepted as where we're going to be indefinitely.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** Correct. And this actually wraps back to that footnote I made about de-extinction, which is that, yes, of course, humans invent incredible technologies and it would be so foolish of me to say that could we never colonize Mars. Of course, we can. Of course, there will be, assuming that we don't set ourselves back 10,000 years by destroying our planet so fully that civilization collapses, there will come a time when we could successfully colonize another planet.

But exactly what you're saying is, I think that it's, right now it's too soon and that it becomes a very dangerous idea. It props up this idea that our technology will save us, which is the same thing with this idea of de-extinction, that we could bring the mammoths back or bring back the passenger pigeons. Where are we going to put them? We need to start at a deeper level before we can make these kind of surface remediations.

And I think that the idea that our technology is going to save us allows people to act in really reckless ways. What's going to save us is changing our culture from the roots up.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Yeah. And just to kind of take us back to another piece for a second, just speaking of extinction, the work I'm thinking of is *Music for Elephants*. And it also, this piece in particular involves sound, which is an important element in several of your works.

And so maybe you could just explain a little bit of what this piece is and your interest in sound as a kind of artistic media and as an artist, how you think of the relationship between visual and audio ways of doing art.

**JENNY  
KENDLER:** Yeah. I think that I'm interested in sound probably for some of the similar reasons that I'm interested in these other kind of sideways approaches to visuality, which is that I really want people to have a novel encounter and to be able to be rooted in their body in a sense based way when they are encountering these works of art. And I think that in an especially visually oversaturated environment, sound can be quite effective in doing that.

In the case of this project, *Music for Elephants*, if you're just looking at it, what you see is a 1921 vintage player piano that's been meticulously restored. And if you're hearing it, what you hear is this kind of haunting and lilting score of out of key notes that plays. In this case, the score is on a die cut perforated player piano roll that's played through the pneumatic machinery of this, what I like to think of as the world's first mp3 player.

And the music that you're hearing, if you want to call it music, is based on data that I got from scientists that work on elephant poaching. And it essentially is based on an algorithm that predicts what might happen in any future month were poaching of African elephants, *Loxodonta africana*, to increase by only 1.5% annually.

And the, I guess I'll just say, horrifying thing that I discovered is that if that happens, then elephants are extinct within 25 years. And so, again, this music that's played on the keyboard plays a note for each month based on the amount of elephants that might die into this future, 25 years from now, when then at the end of the score, elephants are extinct and the piano falls silent. And of course, then you, as the viewer, can't help but notice that these sort of ghostly notes played on this player piano are played, of course, all on an ivory keyboard, ivory being what is driving the poaching crisis in Africa.

**MIKE  
LIVERMORE:** Wow. So maybe we'll just listen to a few seconds of that clip right now.

[PIANO MUSIC]

One of the really interesting elements to the audio component of this piece is that it unfolds in time the same way that extinction unfolds in time, whereas with a visual, especially a static visual medium, obviously you can have video too, but if you're doing something that is still, that's a snapshot, right, it's a moment in time, even if it can be evocative of other times, for example, with *Amber Archive*. But with sound, the piece has a temporal existence. Is that part of what attracts you to sound, to integrating sound into works?

**JENNY KENDLER:** Yeah. I think certainly that idea of the way that it can help you enter into a meditative state, certainly, as an artist, especially one who works oftentimes in public settings, I'm very aware of all of the other information that's out there that's competing for people's attention. But I myself find that the most potent art experiences happen when I'm able to kind of slow down and enter into, in some senses, an alternate way of experiencing. And so I do think that there's something that can happen with sound work that really can help us take a beat and think about things in a new way.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** So just maybe stepping back and thinking about your work broadly, one question just maybe to start us off with this is, when you approach a project like *Music for Elephants* or *Birds Watching* or any of the other works that we've been talking about, do you come to those problems with a message to communicate? Is there a formal problem that you're interested in addressing? Do you come thinking about materials first and working with the material and then you're drawn into an idea? Is there a particular way that your process unfolds? And I guess I'm kind of getting at this interaction of the conceptual element, which is always very clearly present, and then the physical manifestation that, as an artist, you bring to life.

**JENNY KENDLER:** Yeah, that's a great question. I think that for me, there is not like a rubric by which I make my work. So it's not like I always start with one thing and progress through a series of steps to another. I would say more that it's sort of organically arising out of a very deeply researched driven process, which the engine of that is my unending curiosity for this fascinating biological world that we live on.

But you do I think make a really good point, which is that there is always this synchronization between the concept and the material that is very important to me and certainly is not something that, this does not arise by accident, that is all very, very carefully put together, piece by piece, and I like to think of it almost as braiding strands together. So I want the materiality of the work to have a natural relationship with the concept, that there's a sort of material poetry that's going on.

And oftentimes, there is some sort of alchemy or transformation that's happening. And I like to think about this idea, when I was talking about wanting to make work that was accessible to anyone, but oftentimes I'm doing that through processes that have never been done before so that there's this kind of-- there's a research based process not only in the concept but in the materiality itself. And a lot of that is what makes it fun for me.

I sometimes feel like I know that a project is right or it's the one that I'm going to work on when I feel a little, what's the, like a free [INAUDIBLE] about I can I actually accomplish this or not. This is like, it's not something that I am sure can be made. And so even with the player piano piece, that was nine months of working that out. With the *Amber*, it was a couple years, honestly, of collecting specimens and trying different methods.

I'm engaged in a project right now where I'm growing sculptures inside of pearl bearing oysters. It was something I thought about for years and then it took me 18 months to even figure out, was this really possible. So this process where I'm coming up with the idea for the piece and then figuring out if it can actually be accomplished is oftentimes many years long.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. No, it's really, it's fascinating. The pearl piece sounds really cool too. So I look forward to seeing that.

Even more broadly, I mean, obviously you think a lot about the relationship of art to the broader world and how your art relates to these questions of environmentalism and climate change and biodiversity loss. And I would just be curious about your thoughts on a couple of elements of that interaction.

So one is the relationship that you have to the broader art world and maybe uppercase Art and World in that sentence. So this is the world of museums and galleries and auctions and the stuff that's covered in the newspapers. And it's a world that's really, really, really consumerist in its orientation. There's a lot of display of wealth. There's a lot of inequality. And there's a peculiarity, I think, that, again, I'd just be curious to hear your thoughts on, on the relationship with politics to that uppercase Art World, where, in a way, it can almost become part of the currency of exchange.

It just becomes, it joins as one other element of the coin of the realm, so to speak. Warhol talked about business art, or you have this kind of-- there's lots of ways that artists interact with that commercial culture. And I'm curious, how do you see your work or your existence as an artist vis-a-vis that world? Do you try to ignore it or escape it or critique it? Or how do you see yourself in relationship to that world?

**JENNY KENDLER:** Great question. I think, I mean I try not to ignore anything in the world. So I'm certainly very aware of this aspect of the art world, the sort of, oh, are you bored with collecting Louis Vuitton bags, try contemporary art. The art world is a really big place, thankfully. It's certainly not where I see my work having a place or relevance.

Just like pretty much every other aspect of human culture, capitalism got its fangs into the art world. And it's easy enough to trace the history of how that happened. At this moment, at certain levels, certain types of art and certain types of artists are traded like commodities. They have great return values in the secondary market. But that's a really different way of working than what I'm interested in.

And I think it would be a shame if people were to give up on the idea of art simply because part of it has been turned into a tool for capitalism. And they're actually pretty discrete parts of the art world, in that oftentimes they don't overlap at all. So what I'm really interested in is culture change. And so for me, I want to be able to try to use the other parts of the art world, where art becomes a tool for communication with people. And that's what's infinitely more interesting to me.

**MIKE LIVERMORE:** Yeah. And so of course, that takes us to another interesting area here, which is the relationship of art and activism and communication and the ability of art to change people's minds and to bring new ideas and so on. And I'm curious about your thoughts about this. I'm kind of a personally of two minds, where I've always, as just a viewer, I've found to have lots of positive experiences encountering art and leaving, be changed afterwards, and having different perspectives.

But I've always been a little skeptical of the relationship of art to politics, in part because there could be bad politics in art too, right. Propaganda has been used to forward really horrendous ideas, including-- well, it depends on how you would define art, I guess, but stuff that looks a lot like art. And so yeah, so I'm curious about how you see the role of art and politics or the role of art in communication and whether you think there's anything inherently truth tracking in art, that the experience of interacting with art inherently leads you to a better or a more clearer version of the world. Or is it just a matter of disrupting old thoughts and then it's up to the viewer, in some sense, to do with that what they will.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** So I'm definitely a believer in this idea that people say everything is inherently political or that the personal is political. As someone who identifies as a queer Jew, I think it would be foolish of me to ignore the necessity for us to all be participants in a political realm in whatever ways we can. But I also think that, you're right, that there's not or there shouldn't be such a simple relationship between art and politics.

Occasionally, there are like intentionally deliberately explicitly political parts of my work. There's been projects where there was an element of it where we were asking people to sign a petition around a particular piece of legislation. So this is oftentimes when I've worked in concert with the Natural Resources Defense Council, where I'm artist-in-residence.

And sometimes there are specific pieces of legislation that I'm interested in changing. There are wildlife trade laws that are very relevant to whether or not elephants will be extinct in X number of decades. I don't, however, think, though, that art should become like a literalized tool of politics. I think that, you hinted towards this, is that art anymore, that it probably becomes propaganda.

But there's a sort of continuum that I see in my own work. And I don't feel limited to have to occupy only a single part of that continuum. So I make everything from detailed and diminutive works that really are most appropriately experienced in an art museum or a gallery, but I also paint 30-foot banners and help to organize blockades in downtown Chicago with Extinction Rebellion in the past.

So I think that for me, I don't feel the need to choose one part of the spectrum. As a person who also identifies as an artist, I think I can be explicitly political and have an activist practice and also just, you feel out what's right for the work. Sometimes the work really has a direct political engagement and sometimes it doesn't. But at least for me, it is always about culture change.

And I do think that that's the role of art and artists is to think about how, when we have a contemporary moment that requires all of us to rise in whatever ways that we can, that's the role of art is to think about how we actually begin to change these base engines of culture, which we do in all different forms, right. You're a writer. You have a podcast. We have poets and philosophers and people making big Hollywood movies, and also artists, that that's our role is to help people write what the next chapter in human culture will be and to suggest that things might be able to be otherwise.

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** Yeah. Well, that's really fantastic set of thoughts. And this has been a super interesting conversation. I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with me and, of course, all of the wonderful work that you do that I encourage our listeners to experience in person whenever they have an opportunity and to check out in the links that we'll put in the description.

So thanks so much for joining me for this conversation today, Jenny.

**JENNY**  
**KENDLER:** That was really my pleasure. Thank you for the fun conversation

**MIKE**  
**LIVERMORE:** And listeners, if you enjoyed this episode, let us know. You can give us a like, a rating, subscribe to the podcast, and follow us on social media. It'd be great to hear from you.

Till next time.

[MUSIC PLAYING]