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ESTHER E. RANDALL

NATURE'S HUMANS, THE NATIONAL JURIED ART EXHIBITION

Each year, the Giles Gallery at Eastern Kentucky University, in conjunction with the Chautauqua Lecture Series, mounts a juried art exhibition organized around that year's theme. Ann Tower of Ann Tower Gallery served as juror for the 2010-2011 show (January 24 through February 18, 2011), *Chautauqua National Juried Exhibition: Nature's Humans*. Both the selection of the artwork and the awarding of prizes were done through a blind process, meaning that the juror had no information about the individual artists or their background.



Figure 1. Isaac Powell. *Aboveboard*. Acrylic, oil, and graphite on paper. Two Dimensional Award.

Art exhibitions organized around a theme present special problems for artists. Their restrictive nature excludes many artists whose work does not fit comfortably within the context of the subject. Contemporary artists' penchant for self-expression is more than a myth: the discovery and development of subject is the *raison d'être* for most artists. Another issue is that a theme suited for lectures is not necessarily one that works well for the visual arts. The Chautauqua exhibition on *Space, Place and Life* (January 23 through February 29, 2008) provided subjects with which artists could readily connect, and was our largest show. On the other hand, the exhibition on *Compassion* (January 25 through February 21, 2007) did not elicit the same strong and wide response. In our ironic, postmodern age, such a topic could be read as sentimental, and that is anathema to many of today's artists. The *Chautauqua National Juried Exhibition: Nature's Humans* was notable for the artists who responded. Although we had entries from all around the nation, the award winners came from either Kentucky or the surrounding states, suggesting that perhaps the subject strongly resonated with artists within our region. The artworks exhibited were as varied as the topics of this year's lectures. The accepted pieces ranged from academic drawings of pregnant women to live silkworms housed in a silk and wire cages. Amazingly, as the show began to come together, currents and motifs began to emerge. Chief among them were metaphorically biomorphic forms, such as nature/human hybrids, humans in nature, and nature in humans.

Significant examples of the first category were the works of Cynthia Cusick (Irvine, KY) and Lori Phillips (Richmond, KY), who used an amalgam of plant and animal forms as a vehicle to examine relationships. Both artists used clay to construct fantastic shapes acting as metaphors for the connection between human experiences and the natural world. Lori Phillips's piece, *You're a Fool* (Figure 2), presented two polychromatic stoneware forms that at once looked like bizarre gourds, and yet were also reminiscent of bird shapes. The first projected a threatening presence with its erect posture, arching neck, and swelling "chest." It had menacing spikes clustered together at the point where one would look for a heart in a bird. The second form took on an almost cringing, supplicant pose. In its side was a nasty looking gash. Although the players in this little drama were surreal, their interaction—of aggression and passivity—was all too familiar.



Figure 2. Lori Phillips. *You're A Fool*. Stoneware.

Cynthia Cusick's (Irvine, KY) work projected a gentler mood. Her piece, *The Co-dependent Seeker* (Figure 3), featured a dark amber stoneware "pod" covered in fat, curling tendrils. This larger form cradled a smaller one, a glistening white "seed" of glazed porcelain. In her statement, Cusick wrote that she employed these contrasting shapes "to trigger introspection, and focus on maturation, sexuality, and intimacy by using seed-like forms and references. They contain relationships and contrasts, either within the piece or in relation to other pieces. These elements help identify change, often unrecognizable when it is happening. The process is often painful and a source of suffering, but then within that recognition of pain is the awareness that growth is taking place. Within that awareness, one can grasp a deeper sense of self." In the work of these artists (Cusick and Phillips), the human condition is addressed with distinctly non-human "actors" whose forms took on aspects of the natural world.



Figure 3. Cynthia Cusick. *The Co-dependent Seeker*. Stoneware, glazed porcelain.

Another artist who used other beings as stand-ins for humanity was Jennifer Reis (Morehead, KY). Her mixed media piece, *The Last (Church) Supper* (Figure 4), was a richly ornamented textile assemblage, constructed by using hand quilting and appliqué. She embellished the surface with acrylic painting on shrink plastic laminates, found objects, beads, and embroidery. The background was a deep forest green cloth studded with sparkling beadwork and adorned with gold and white flowers around its edge. The central figure was a chicken with a deer head crowned by an elaborate gold halo. Fluttering around him were four cherubs carrying garlands of flowers. Twelve haloed chickens flanked either side of the holy deer/chicken. In her statement, Reis explained that this work was “part of a series of works on the concept of an Appalachian ‘pastoral’—combining images of Eastern Kentucky rural life within a religious context. Chickens are surrogates for humans, and the deer is the Christ figure. This piece refers to

the religious and animalistic content and imagery as metaphor as well as commentary on Appalachian life.” Professor Reis received a Merit Award.



Figure 4. Jennifer Reis. *The Last Church Supper*. Embellished textile assemblage. Merit Award.

Other artists in this exhibit explored the relationship between nature and humanity by merging human forms with plant or animal parts in order to make autobiographical statements, to muse on human nature, or to explore man’s relationship with nature. Merit Award recipient Alison Pack (Radford, VA) merged animal parts with human anatomy. In her exquisitely crafted piece, *Lady Bugs* (Figure 5), Pack made a witty observation that the artificial shape Victorian fashion imposed on women was analogous to insect anatomy. Using copper, silver, and acrylic paint, she constructed three small girdle forms with wasp waists, voluminous breastplates, extravagant collars (projecting from the rib area), and painted stripes circling the hips. The first ladybug had eight legs sprouting from around her waist and ending in hooks where the “girdle” ends. The second would have been more conservatively attired if it were not for the spikes or stingers protruding from her breasts in place of nipples. The third, and sweetest of the ladies, had six legs—reminiscent of a large bow—adorning her waist. A lovely little rose was pinned to the top of her left breastplate. This charming little trio projected a mood of good-humored

danger. In her statement, Pack drolly observed “these are beautiful creatures, the black widow, bee and butterfly, that would be potentially dangerous to mate with.”



Figure 5. Alison Pack. *Lady Bugs*. Copper, sterling and fine silver, acrylic. Merit Award.

Taking an autobiographical approach in his woodcut, *Catch of the Day*, John W. Hilton (Kingsport, TN) combined the face of a man with the body of a fish. In *Ship of Fools* he reprised the fish body with man face motif, but transformed it into a boat. Its passengers were a rooster and pig with wings. Hilton explained in his statement, “I have always been fascinated with human/animal hybrids. It stems from my overactive, child-like imagination. Growing up, I would spend hours combining the characteristics of my favorite animals with myself and others, always searching to find something better and more unique. These images continue this journey. They represent narrative self-portraits in combination with fish, pigs, and roosters. Each animal references a specific point in the narrative without giving away too much detail. The animal, in this case a fish, is the vessel that carries, literally and metaphorically, the heart of the underlying message, which is personal triumph and tragedy, represented by the winged pig and rooster. It is the use of the human/animal hybrid that relates to this year’s theme of Nature’s Humans.”

Travis Graves (Elizabethtown, TN) employed hybrids of human and natural forms to comment on the relationship of man to nature. Both of his pieces, *Action & Consequence* and *Sprout*, combined human hands with tree forms. The Three Dimensional Award winning piece, *Sprout* (Figure 6), was composed of a bronze hand whose fingers melded into twigs from a tree. In *Action & Consequence* (Figure 7), a single hand grasped a real juniper tree held upside down. Beneath its tip, a pair of hands, made from cast paper, were cupped together as dead needles sifted between them and formed a pile on the gallery floor. In his statement, Graves wrote, “The direction of my artwork is rooted in addressing notions of expectation and cultural attitudes as they define our relationship between nature/culture and society’s dependence on nature. Often our attitudes and practices set us off balance with nature as we continue to indifferently stumble along with little regard for the resulting manipulation of natural materials as a metaphor for society’s dependence on nature, and ultimately its influence over it. My choice of familiar materials and subjects, such as trees, plants and the landscape, clearly references the natural world while simultaneously invoking their cultural identity. In doing so, I look to point out the obvious, yet often ignored connections that exist between the natural world and the cultural attitudes and practices we project on it.”



Figures 6 and 7. Travis Graves. *Sprout* (Three Dimensional Award), and *Action & Consequence*, detail. Bronze; Cast paper, juniper, needles.

The relationship between humanity and nature was also the subject for the work of Sheryl McRoberts (Plymouth, MN) and Darryl Halbrooks (Richmond, KY). Each of these artists' works was notable for the lack of humans in their respective pieces; rather, the impact of the man's actions upon Nature was explored.

Sheryl McRoberts' pen and ink drawing, *Abitibi on Rainy River IV* (Figure 8) establishes a still, meditative mood. It is an unusual work for today as the artist drew it as she sat on the banks of Rainy River, rather than working from photographs. As such, it projects an aura of quiet authenticity and authority. The drawing is a record of the interaction of a human with her environment in a specific place and point in time. As McRoberts stated, "This work is from a series of drawings begun as landscape studies. Pure landscape, however, rarely exists. My focus soon shifted to human artifact nested in the natural world. The most recent drawings deal with man's use of nature for survival or economic development. The focus is a paper mill in Northern Minnesota, built on Rainy River by Boise Cascade (American side) and Abitibi (Canadian Side). The more I drew the mill, the more the natural characteristics came in the cascade of buildings and the way the pipes and shafts unified the elements of the structures. Although there is no human presence in the work, I see the final function of this drawing as a portrait of humanity expressed in a time and place."

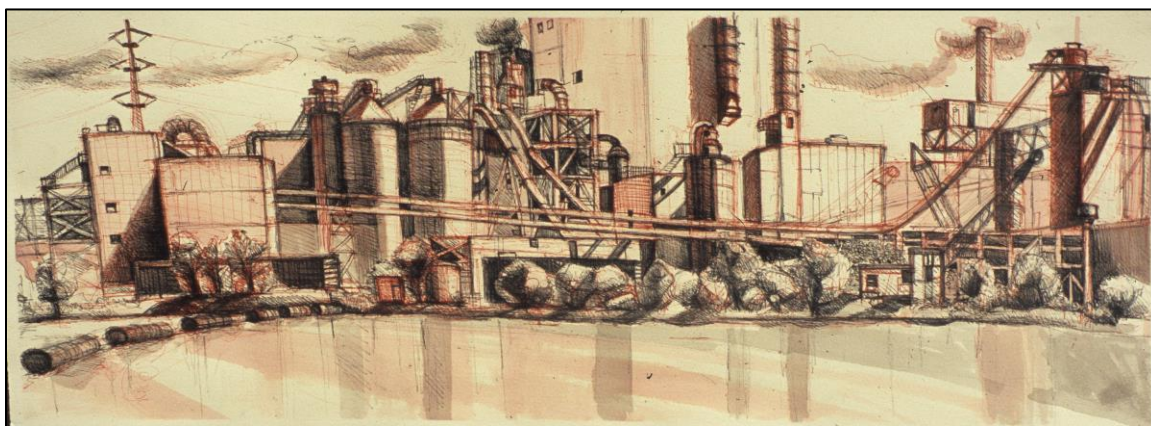


Figure 8. Sheryl McRoberts. *Abitibi on Rainy River IV*. Pen and ink drawing.

The benign image of humans as another of Nature's creatures that construct things, like bird nests or termite mounds, is sharply and wittily refuted by Darryl Halbrooks's mixed media piece, *Oil Spill 2* (Figure 9). With grim humor, Halbrooks

indicts humanity's reckless disregard for our environment, specifically the man-made disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The scene is shown from a bird's view point, as an empty, small yellow boat is adrift in a sea of dark tarry sludge. A stream of sparkling green water bisects the viscous black expanse. The heartbreak of the scene is undercut by the playful use of media. Halbrooks, a Professor Emeritus in the ECU Department of Art and Design, is well known for his proclivity to experiment with materials. In an email to the author, he described his process: "The piece is a wooden panel, covered with painted polyurethane. Polyurethane is carved in the river area. Paper is inlaid in the carved area and covered with Plexiglas. The entire surface is inundated with a flood of polyester resin. What I like about the process is that I don't know exactly what I'm going to get, due to the natural flow and set-up properties of the resin. In certain areas it heats up more rapidly than in others, causing interesting color changes. Finally, the little boat is ceramic."



Figure 9. Darryl Halbrooks. *Oil Spill 2*. Plexiglas, fiberglass, ceramic, and paper on wood panel.

Another piece examining the impact humans have on nature was the sculpture, *Niche*, by Elizabeth Jinko Chong (Upatoi, GA). In this work, Chong constructed three structures of descending sizes of wire and silk organza. These became ‘cocoon’ for colonies of live silk worms. Over the duration of the show the caterpillars spun cocoons, and eventually emerged as moths. In her extensive statement, Chong explained that because humans have bred these insects for their own use, silkworms have evolved into beings that cannot survive without humans. The emerging moths are flightless, and the caterpillars have no immune systems. Therefore, although the Giles Gallery director and attendants consider themselves to have impeccable hygiene, special care had to be employed when feeding the caterpillars their daily meal of pureed mulberry leaves. It was a complex piece that elicited complex emotions. It was fun to watch the silkworms spin their cocoons and exciting to see beautiful white moths emerge. At the same time, one could not but feel guilty that their essence had been so thoroughly co-opted by humans. Yet silk is a wonderful material result.



Figure 10. Megan Coyle. *In The Woods*. Paper fragment collage.

The art in the *Nature's Humans Exhibition* reflected the conflicted and contradictory feelings humans have about nature. We love and hold nature in reverence, yet we use and abuse it continually for our own purposes. Nature serves as a vehicle for metaphors for our life and essential character, and so becomes a source of inspiration. Yet one thing we humans rarely acknowledge is that we are a part of nature ...it is within us as beings. Two artists, Grace Benedict (Lafayette, IN) and Mel Keiser (Edinboro, PA), reminded us that our very biology roots us in nature. In her two elegantly beautiful drawings, *Break Open in Time* and *Lily* (executed in colored pencil and ink wash), Benedict depicted two women at different stages of pregnancy, as a means to make the indisputable connection between humans and other living things. In her statement, she wrote, "As humans, we are tied to nature—we are nature, and in this case, biologically with the advancing birth of a child. With incorporated and integrated studies of plant forms, the drawings express different stages of growth from the pod that springs the seeds which are planted, to the fullness of an open flower: symbolically, the actions of humans, as well as the fulfillment and continuation of life through birth." Keiser made a similar argument that biology reflects the nature within humans in her small oil paintings, *The Superstitions of the Tribe* and *Blue Lips, Blue Veins*. She explained, "These pieces deal with the human figure. They focus on skin, anatomy, and the elegance of human form. In each of these pieces, this attention to the construction of the human body attempts to depict something sacred and absolute; the natural design inherent in the human body. Thus, these works fall under the theme of the show, *Nature's Humans*."

The numerous and diverse attitudes expressed in the Nature's Humans Exhibition concerning the human relationship to Nature could be found bundled together in the painting, *Woman Traveling with a Bird* (Figure 11), by Brandon Smith (Richmond, KY), who was awarded the Purchase Prize. A large painting, it is filled with puzzles and contradictions. A woman is shown floating down a river. Her body is merely suggested beneath the water; only her head is above the surface. From her mouth extends a stick or a line up to a stationary black bird at rest on the top. The surrounding landscape is dark and indistinct; yet, it is yet richly beautiful in the deep colors used. The water of the river is a shimmering aqua. The painterly style used allows for no sharp edges or distinct forms, but shapes coalesce from the myriad of brushstrokes. The woman is in nature yet

her face is apart from it. Her relationship with the bird is ambiguous: is she being directed by the bird, or is she pulling it along? Nothing is absolute and nothing is certain.



Figure 11. Brandon Smith. *Woman Traveling With Bird*. Oil on canvas. Purchase Prize.

This painting provides a powerful metaphor for the human relationship with nature: one that is contradictory and mysterious. Humans are a part of nature, but also stand outside of it. The relationship is variable and constantly shifting. Humans love Nature's other creatures enough to make a heroic effort to save a beached whale, yet they go home to eat poultry bred and raised in the most unnatural and inhumane conditions. Humans spill oil on Nature's oceans and she slaps back with a Tsunami. Nature awes humans with her beauty and majesty, and then Humans bulldoze her into submission to create a shopping mall. Humans love, honor, and abuse Nature: but she has the last word.