

# Urbanature

**New Perspectives on the Natural**

**By Constance Mallinson**

**By the year 2050 over 70 percent of the world population will be urban based. Already in the United States more than 75 percent of the population is urban dwelling. Our contact with the nonhuman “natural” world is increasingly from the vantage point of our cities, whether through mediated representations, community parks and gardens, even abandoned lots.**

Traditionally, an authentic experience of nature was sought outside of city life and meant journeying into the countryside or pursuing Alpine peaks and exotic waterfalls. As critic Lucy Lippard has commented, “The idea that ‘nature is a place we are not’ has ruled for centuries...[H]umans are the center, surrounded by everything else, reflecting the way Western culture has been built in opposition to nature.”<sup>(1)</sup> These attitudes were largely shaped by artists and photographers who gravitated to and thrived in urban centers, supplying the masses with tantalizing images of wildness. From nineteenth-century Romanticism well into the twentieth century, painters and artist photographers often used the landscape and nature imagery to explore experimental visual languages. Through the artistic discoveries evidenced in Turner’s cataclysmic storms, Monet’s shimmering *Waterlilies*, Cezanne’s near-geometric *Mt. St. Victoires*, civilization was seen to advance and progress while the fundamental view of nature as “out there” and separate from civilization remained unchanged. Although the Modernist epoch was more interested in the nature of art than in nature itself, popular “art” photographers like Ansel Adams and scores of Sierra Club proponents gave us sublime vistas of national parks and alluring coffee table books of inaccessible and uninhabited areas. Most recently, acclaimed artists such April Gornik and Alexis Rockman have maintained the nature/culture divide with their epic Romantic-throwback painted scenery.

Despite a burgeoning and activist environmental movement that has emphasized stewardship and conservation, especially of wild areas, environmentalist William Cronon describes this position as an over-reliance on the idea of wilderness, which instead may “teach us to be dismissive of or even contemptuous of humble places and experiences.”<sup>(2)</sup> Cronon reminds us that the wonder of a natural experience is not limited to far-flung corners of the planet: the tree by the city sidewalk and the cells of our own bodies are no less important than the towering tree in the faraway forest and are a reminder of our responsibility and obligation to the earth. Quoting poet Gary Snyder who said, “A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth,”<sup>(3)</sup> Cronon calls for an abandonment of dualisms and the tradition of seeing nature as pristine and remote. A deep reflection on and respect for our use of nature as well as the redefinition of what is “natural” necessarily begins with our homes, where we make our livings, and which we try to manage and sustain for the future. Writing in his *Landscape* magazine as early as the 1950s, the cultural critic J.B. Jackson urged us to begin valuing the nature in our midst: “We are all victims, whether we know it or not, of a way of thinking that sets the city apart from any other kind of environment. At the root of this confusion is one single error: the error which proclaims that nature is something outside of us, something green which we can perhaps enjoy as a spectacle or examine for future exploitation, but which is only distantly related to us. Nature thus defined belongs in the country and is all but totally excluded from the city; hence the oft repeated outcry that urban man is alienated from it – nature is actually omnipresent in the city: in the city’s climate, topography and vegetation we are in fact surrounded by an impalpable or invisible landscape of spaces and color and light and sound and movement and temperature, in the city no less than the country.” Whether intimately revealing nature in the city, challenging ideologies of space and natural representation, or focusing on the interconnections between

human activities and other species, more integrated, multidimensional, progressive perceptions of nature such as those proposed by Cronon and Jackson are being encountered in exhibitions like *Urbanature*.

Many of our entrenched beliefs and conceptions concerning our relationship with nature were formed during the nineteenth century, when popular landscape painting synthesized centuries of nature representation. According to Malcolm Andrews, landscape painting and photography have always been “the barometer of anxieties over the balance of power between nature and culture.”<sup>(4)</sup> A landscape is a mediated view of nature, one that has been aesthetically processed, a product of human control over wildness and natural chaos. This pictorial approach always maintains an uneven proportion of humans to non-humans so that the fantasy of an undefiled, natural playground or respite, and unbounded resources, remains intact. As W.J.T. Mitchell explains in *Landscape and Power*, that mode of representation dominates and is “now part of a repertory of kitsch, endlessly reproduced in amateur painting, postcards, packaged tours, and prefabricated emotions.”<sup>(5)</sup> Lusciously painted picturesque scenery, glossy Sierra Club calendars, and seductive travel and advertising media featuring unspoiled “natural” environments continue to be the apotheosis of expressing our relationship to the land.

The framed landscape instills the viewer with a sense of mastery and control, from the rational and ordered structuring of space in the high Renaissance to the Romantic obsession with nature as a path to spiritual and moral improvement. Representations of nature were analogous to advances in knowledge and perception while simultaneously promoting an estrangement from nature itself, a negation that has contributed to centuries-long land and ecosystem destruction. Much of the landscape imagery we value has its roots in Rousseau, Hobbes, and Thoreau with their notions that humans live more ethically and purely amidst nature, while Kantian theories of the sublime propelled the Romantics to find emotional solace, spiritual and moral uplift, and a renewal of their rational powers upon gazing at awe-inspiring scenery. Less fixed in our psyches is the idea that such gorgeous landscape painting and photography were tethered to progressive narratives that fueled imperialistic motivations, from the colonial era through Manifest Destiny’s North American expansion to the present. Icons of abundance, nineteenth-century photographers’ images of the American West made Easterners comfortable with the conquest and subsequent commercial development of the American frontier. Their legacy is today’s oil, nuclear, and chemical company advertisements depicting “reclamation” or respectful “coexistence” with the natural environment. Automotive corporations often promote SUVs in ads displaying the big polluters serenely situated among redwood forests or bathing in mountain streams. Assuming a false harmony with the natural, these kinds of familiar representations actually facilitate deforestation, development, and mineral extraction by reinforcing historical perceptions and optimistic narratives of progress, subliminally calming our fears of harm. Moreover, such idealized fictions succeed as they always have in offering a view of nature we want to believe will always exist – a symbolic liberation and escape from the overpopulation, waste, mutilation, deterioration, and obliteration being perpetrated globally. They offered scenic respites from cities that were perceived as having no natural resources of their own. Currently, landscape representation has become one of the battlegrounds on which the continuing decline of the environment is being fought, and the beautiful, pristine landscape image that has concealed its involvement in the process is being questioned and reappraised by many contemporary artists.

Though we seem hardwired to the visual pleasures of natural beauty (everyone has somewhere in their possession landscape scenery to revel in like pornography), environmental scientists, writers, and activists like Aldo Leopold, Paul Shepherd, Carolyn Merchant, Paul Taylor, and Rebecca Solnit have alerted us to the imperilment of the natural world, thus making the conventions and stereotypes of such scenery harder to maintain as “real” or “natural.” Solnit has equated landscape scenery with women’s bodies as a “pleasure ground acted upon” and has advocated for a nature-based art that recognizes “landscape not as scenery but as spaces and systems we inhabit, systems our lives depend upon...the circumference of possibility, the conditions of survival...one whose focus is on relationships.”<sup>(6)</sup>

Unlike photographer Ansel Adams, the enduring icon of landscape art who lived and worked for long stretches in the Sierras, the most relevant contemporary nature art is disassociated from the Romantic paradigm or the Edenic sense of an open and free relationship to space where humans are separate from but spiritually and materially nourished by their contact with eternal natural abundance. Like the painted female nude, the traditional framed landscape, with its scopic control, upholds the possessive gaze onto the other, emphasizing a dualistic worldview that enforces our alienation from anything natural. By purging landscape of narrative, allegory, and myth in the way nature imagists Adams and Eliot Porter had accomplished in their photographs, even a “modern” landscape – much in the manner of Greenberg’s flat painting – could be characterized as progressing more towards “pure” nature. Paradoxically, the unattachment to recognizable myth or narrative has enabled nostalgic fantasies and a certain dishonesty about the human impact on and involvement with nature to flourish. More recently, however, postmodern landscape theory has determined “pure nature” representation as a cultural production and exposed its many hidden and illusionary ideologies.

With the knowledge that nature can no longer be neutral territory and that its conventions serve so many commercial interests, artists have begun to explore through photography, sculpture, and painting, the reassessment and redefinition of the natural in the early twenty-first century, asking what we require of art in an age of environmental crisis and helping to reframe and expand our experiences of nature emotionally and philosophically. Because older models are implicated in and aligned with the dualisms that promote nature commodification and consumption, these newer representations eschew picturesque romantic pastoralism or Arcadian retreat, deriving their images of the natural from a close involvement with their urban environments. Unlike artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, who work with nature primarily in rural settings, the *Urbanature* artists realize nature cannot be viewed in isolation or retreat from human wants, needs, activities, and technologies, insisting on the fact that humans, even in sprawling cities like Los Angeles, are connected to and included in a vast ecosystem. They observe it within, not from afar, to advance a newer paradigm of humans as part of a natural world that resides everywhere. The urban is no longer the antithesis of the natural. Although none see themselves as overt environmental activists, these artists embody a feminist “personal is political” ethic, transposing politics from public power arenas to the area of transformative aesthetic experience, promoting prolonged, deep meditations on a human/nature interface.

The essentialism implied by using the word nature as sufficient in describing the infinite variety and quality of organic life is unavoidable; the word itself reinforces hierarchies and totalizing narratives that these artists are critiquing and debating. It is offset by the diversity of approaches and their engagement of fresh, inventive visual strategies. No discourse, ideology, or imagery dominates, but all embrace and evidence the importance of shaping our relationship to nature locally in order to promote stewardship and lead to larger environmental questions: the influence of Los Angeles – one of the most dynamic and diverse metropolises in the world today – is ubiquitous. Here the car offers the individual a mutating montage of scenery and sensory experience that is constantly and instantly shifting seamlessly from the constructed, social, and cultural to the natural, often suggesting an integration. As Los Angeles and other cities become more serious in confronting pollution (for which L.A. is infamous), climate change, natural “ghettos,” quality of life, loss of habitat with development, and environmental justice, the *Urbanature* artists are interpreting and depicting the interconnections between nature and civilization in ways that are redirected from the exotic – including zoos, natural history museums, and aquariums – to everyday lived perception. By first seeing nature as valuable and accessible in our immediate environs, larger environmental questions assume greater importance.

Reconciling the contradictions between natural idealism and the technological progressivism that cities embody remains challenging. One of the roles of the *Urbanature* artists in transforming our current perceptions of nature, however, is in making the conflicting assumptions, anxieties, and tensions over

the intersections of urbanity and nature visible. They are attuned to what Robert Gottlieb describes as, “How nature reestablishes itself in the city can be influenced...in how we talk about, imagine, conceptualize, and represent it. Nature might be described as a threat, felt as a loss, or seen as a life-giving and healing force and each approach can influence certain kinds of outcomes.”<sup>(7)</sup> These differing perspectives abound in the exhibition, but an interrogation of the formative historical tropes embedded in art forms that have constructed and “culturized” ideas of the natural and progress is present in all their work, often in the form of quotation or appropriation. A sense of loss over an idealized past is understood and palpable, but coexists with a crucial insight into history and its relationship to twenty-first-century environmental conditions.

While the *Urbanature* artists are helping to reframe critical debates and assumptions in order to shape progressive concepts of nature within the context of contemporary urban life, several artists in previous decades must be acknowledged for their groundbreaking projects in heightening awareness of the interconnectedness of the human and natural environments and making the experience of nature in our immediate surroundings relevant. In an era when the advancement of Western art seemed tied to ideas of economic progress and predicated on heroic (usually male) gestures and new contexts, their artworks embraced transforming and revealing aspects of their immediate environments in contradistinction to “earth” artists like Michael Heizer. His *Double Negative* involved massive engineering in remote and fragile desert locations in an attempt to attract viewers from around the world. Conversely, Alan Sonfist’s “living sculpture,” *Time Landscape* (1965 to the present) – a large tract of land in the heart of New York’s Manhattan planted with native plants and soil – examined the relationship of human and natural history in the actual urban environment. In Los Angeles Lauren Bon’s *Cornfield* project from 2005, a thirty-two-acre field of corn or “living landscape” created on an undeveloped plot of land near the city’s downtown, coalesced artists, poets, and activists around renewing the Los Angeles River, now underway. Robert Gottlieb describes Bon’s projects as “building on the legacy of radical art while contributing to the quest to reinvent nature and community...a landscape of improvisation [that envisioned] a type of reconstructed nature in the city...imbued with possibility.”<sup>(8)</sup> In emphasizing community and environmental sensitivity, Sonfist and Bon undermined the imperatives that the frontiers of art required expanding art’s boundaries at any cost and demonstrated that while the scope and nature of an artwork can still be enlarged upon, it need not be at the expense of the environment. The stereotypes and obsolete notions of the *avant garde* are being replaced with inquiry and a responsiveness to place and the conditions of contemporary existence. This, of course, is to be distinguished from official public arts projects that are allied with corporate and official “big city” interests.

There are presently innovative artists all over the globe using diverse strategies within art contexts to create large- and small-scale projects that integrate art, ecology, aesthetics, and economics. Many have illuminated climate change, patterns of consumption, the importance of ecosystems, agricultural, artistic, and industrial practices, with some emphasizing political action. By operating within the realm of artmaking, they are free from scientific strictures to experiment and cross into multiple disciplines. Because of the complexity and quantity of artmaking involving these subjects, it is not within the scope of this exhibition to present a comprehensive look at all their activities. However, all might agree that in their positions as artists they are not seeking solutions or viable alternatives to these problems but are regarding art as one link in a chain of thinking and one means to trace and define our experiences of nature. By disrupting conventional habits of seeing, making visible what we don’t often choose to see, posing unexpected questions, and offering counter-narratives to existing ideas about the places and roles of nature and humans, they open discourses, broaden our vision and consciousness and, importantly, provide windows to self-inquiry. For as the eminent twentieth-century economist and thinker E.F. Schumacher believed, the proper work for us in curing the problems of industrialism and late capitalism is to simply work on ourselves.

Working within traditional media of sculpture, painting, mixed media, and photography (as opposed to research projects or monumental on-site installations), the *Urbanature* artists can be seen as using the unique properties of these media to promote self-reflection and constructive thought on a range of nature-related concerns. As such, the expectations for these media are simultaneously enlisted and often diverted from their assigned roles. This is particularly true for the painting in this exhibition. In concentrating solely on its formal issues, painting in the Modernist era was perceived as having abandoned social and political narratives to instead adopt an autonomous “Art for Art’s Sake” attitude that subverted existing values mainly via novel or disturbing aesthetics. Co-opted by a dominant consumer society that embraced the novel and shocking, painting then became the ultimate bourgeois commodity relegated to high-end living room decoration and corporate boardrooms. For painters like **Merion Estes**, the influence of feminism in the late 1960s and early ’70s allowed for a radical reappraisal and restoration of painting’s power to transform consciousness through the embrace of ideas and content beyond questions of pure form without abandoning formal experimentation. Similarly, her recent paintings galvanize environmental issues such as nuclear meltdowns and the collapse of ocean ecosystems. Lured by dazzling color, expressive paint handling, boldly decorative but highly symbolic collage elements, viewers linger to grapple with challenging content about natural disasters. Thick with references to global art forms of Eastern and African cultures and beyond, *Local Color* depicts on one side of the painting a flock of dispersing crows that Estes often observes from the window of her Mt. Washington home and mystical glowing orbs on the adjacent half. Elongated drips of paint rain down over the melancholy grey clouds behind the circling birds; colorful stylized floral prints float throughout. The experience of nature is tinged with spirit: the “bright lights” suggest a vision of higher consciousness or heavenly space. Estes’ window view evokes a kind of urban Walden on par with Thoreau’s sentiments that close contact with nature provides an antidote to civilization’s ills; contemplation of the self and natural wonders leads to epiphanies. Estes’ painting urges us to carve out spaces for such meditations in our lives, leading us to thoughts like when a bird flaps its wings in Los Angeles, the effect is felt throughout the cosmos.

**Linda Stark’s** *Amber Rotation* series employs a laborious painting method of dripping and building up translucent layers of paint over a lengthy period much like natural geologic processes. Embedding tiny flora and fauna collected from her immediate vicinity in colorful resinous varnishes recalls the creation of amber from ancient fossilized tree sap, perfectly preserving specimens within. A sense of both the micro- and macrocosmic prevails, with references to radiating light rays and celestial formations as well as spider webs designed to capture prey. Nature as substance is fully present so that rather than mere images of nature, subject and object are mutually constitutive, undermining entrenched nature/culture dualities. Recalling John Fowles’ statement that “Art and nature are siblings,” hers is a celebration and alignment of the very human act of making objects – that which comprises a civilization – with the smallest life in our midst, from spider to bees to nectar-producing flowers. Stark eschews the sort of labeling, naming, and scientific classification that has always determined the use potential of every aspect of the natural environment and discarded that deemed worthless to the human scheme. In sensitizing us to the array of life outside our doors, perhaps balanced on a tiny web or hidden in the folds of a leaf, she implies that our city enfolds the natural beautifully within itself, if we stop to notice.

Although **Don Suggs’** photo/painting hybrids represent a small part of an extremely diverse studio practice, his subjects have most often entailed the landscape – not *plein air* impressions, but art as a translation or mediation of the experience of being out in nature. His investigations into the genre have included luscious painterly reinterpretations of historical landscape icons to a series of hyperrealist picturesque landscapes overlaid with crisp, minimalistic geometric configurations, the coloration of which is derived from the painted landscape. Another recent series consisting of bright concentric-ringed abstract interpretations of western landscapes he had visited and notated, were created using an elaborate painting “machine” with mathematical precision. Here the *Paradise Prints* synthesize the pure abstractions and scenic photography,

as he applies his colorful painted “radial compositions” atop photographs of various Los Angeles landscapes synonymous with California paradise. He has referred to the long history and appeal of concentric-circular compositions in painting as stated in object relations theory. In the context of assessing our experience of the natural in Los Angeles, however, we might meditate, for example, on Suggs’ image of a cell phone tower “palm tree” next to a church roof and several dead tree trunks superimposed with a hovering mandala-like black and white “translation” of the scene. He poses a dilemma in the irony-laden *Paradise* series: as the connections between civilization/technology and its crucial natural components are increasingly obscured and acculturated, human survival becomes less and less secure, the paradise we so fervently seek, permanently out of reach.

Like many of the artists in the exhibition, painter **Constance Mallinson** situates us between the wonders available to contemporary lifestyles via consumer culture and the by-products of that quest. Intricately rendered scenes and figures reminiscent of fabulists like the Renaissance’s Archimboldo, and of Old Masters Dutch still life are created from the natural and mass-made detritus she collects on her daily walks through the urban and suburban environs of Los Angeles. Desiccated plant materials, decapitated tree limbs, bird’s nests, even dead animals, intermingled with fragments of colorful plastic, fast-food packaging, toys, balloons, small auto parts, etc. are re-contextualized to present near post-apocalyptic visions of debris fields on land or ocean. Fomenting a kind of malaise, the brightly colored accumulations of forms seduce while simultaneously repelling us with the reality of our wasteful consumption. Mallinson provokes a range of questions surrounding the mutual constructions and interdependencies of humans and nature, especially in overpopulated urban areas where the frictions, tensions, and loss of connection between the human and non-human can be most acutely felt and observed. Rooted deeply in art history but also in current mass culture, the paintings are allegories for the fragility, crisis, and destruction of life forms in a hypertrophied consumer world, and yet while imagining possible collapse, they also paradoxically elicit belief in human ingenuity, design, and re-emergence.

**James Griffith’s** paintings of indigenous fauna are created from tar retrieved from Los Angeles’ La Brea Tar Pits, where the fossilized and preserved remains of extinct species have been extracted, studied, and exhibited. This “primordial goo” – the source of petroleum products and a reminder of our global dependence on oil – is next diluted with thinners and oils, then often mixed with other substances like human ashes, sand, and pollen to create subtle colors and symbolisms. Expressively manipulated and transformed into imagery with exquisite rendering, the subtle sepia tones and rich burnt umbers suggest vintage photographs as well as contemporary aerial photos of oil spills. Directly engaging – or collaborating with – the natural materials of his environment rather than simply recording his observations, the paintings dissolve distinctions between nature and culture and make connections. The detailed images of wildlife ranging from birds, deer, mountain lions, and bears to tiny reptiles are juxtaposed or overlaid with grid motifs suggesting street maps or modern architecture or set within scenic backdrops. The inferences of Griffith’s work are many, but among them are confronting cycles of natural growth and decay, and the forces of evolution and cataclysm while implicating urbanization and its relationship with fossil fuels. Further, when pausing to consider the recent attention given to the electronically tagged mountain lion for whom a freeway underpass was constructed, we begin to perceive the necessary interplay of history, influences, survival requirements, and systems linking life in vast urban areas.

Historically, the development of Los Angeles is one of uncontrolled urban sprawl with little respect for destroying or integrating native habitats. Aerial photographs indicate that encroachment from the edge of the Pacific to the heart of its magnificent mountains. **Fran Siegel’s** multidisciplinary studio practice has combined such photographs with abstract and figurative drawing, maps, mixed-media sculptures, cyanotypes, and text, often coalescing into large-scale installations. *Overland 19* began with a tracing on architectural vellum of a large photograph she took from a plane ride over the vicinity of ArtCenter

College of Design, the site of the *Urbanature* exhibition. Incisions and slashes are made into the surface and multiple abstract, organic-like shapes derived from shadow patterns in the traced photograph are cut, painted, then applied to other areas of the piece, creating a sense of dislocation or translocation of the areas depicted in the original image. Fragments of the former space even extend beyond the edges of the piece. The space in the photograph is barely recognizable, as a flurry of abstract ink marks in tandem with the quirky collaged shapes has transformed it to an evocative abstract artwork. Perhaps foremost is the intimation that the systematic, linear logic of gridded streets, representing the human need to control, develop, zone off, and rationalize wildness and chaos in order to erect cities, is subverted in favor of space as essentially unfixed, permeable, receptive to change, fluid. By interrogating the established logic behind urban development and encouraging the organic to spontaneously emerge, overlap, shift, and coexist throughout urban spaces, Siegel imagines a future landscape vastly different from the present – one that can be expansive and inclusive simultaneously. Dishabituating ourselves from conventional demarcations and delineations will be part of the transformation.

The blending or balancing of culture and nature, or what Bruno Latour calls “hybrids of nature and culture [that] are mobilized and assembled into networks that weave the natural and social worlds – humans and non-humans – into a seamless fabric”<sup>(9)</sup> characterizes most of the art seen in *Urbanature*. That hybridity describes the sculptures of **Coleen Sterritt**, who intertwines natural materials, such as pine cones, bamboo, tree roots, limbs, and stumps from her studio’s immediate surroundings near the foothills, with locally found recycled household objects and commercial castoffs. Her early sculptures combined natural and industrial materials and involved what she describes as “an investigation into the uneasy balance between nature and the constructed environment.” Particular to all of her work is a synthesis between the rugged and sleek, the raw and fabricated, provoking a tension between the organic and inorganic that is both formal and symbolic. So, for example, when a sea green skein of semi-transparent green plastic is entangled with sea sponges, tape and various found objects, its beauty is haunted with thoughts of ocean gyres and streaming waterways clogged with human and natural castoffs. Sterritt always leaves us in the question. Similarly, a trimmed agave stump sprouting hair of gossamer fishing line and bamboo body parts is absurdly balanced on diminutive found legs to become a clownish, anthropomorphic act. In jest is truth, however, and we sense the necessary interdependence of the human and natural world and rejuvenation – to the extent of becoming “as one” – yet are always aware of its possible collapse.

A pronounced anthropomorphism also characterizes **Nancy Evans’** fantastical bronze and resin figures cast from assemblages of found natural materials such as leaves, twigs, ripe seed heads, dried flowers, and branches she collects in the environs of her Venice home. Evans alludes to the enmeshment of the human with the non-human, but her art envisions reassessing and transforming our relationship to nature by recalling the spiritual and cultural connections to nature of the pre-modern, pre-patriarchal, non-Western and folk arts. The intimate scale and finely executed details of the plant materials she molds are fully evident: “soft” shapes fold, flop, curve, and change shape as they would naturally. Totemic and doll-like, they are often based on iconic god/goddess or mythological archetypes and are as reminiscent of fertility figures and ancient ritualistic pieces as they are of more modern Surrealism and organic abstraction. Evans is convinced we are in what she describes as “a disintegrating culture where the specificity of the sign is manipulated and obscured,” resulting in her desire to “find the archaic and to explore the kind of residual psychic content of preverbal experiences paralleling Freud’s theorizing the religious or spiritual feeling of merging or oneness with the universe.” Tapping into our human past when handmade objects were used purposefully, the sculptures equally apprehend our contemporary need to engage with nature and become reenchanting in ways our mass commodity-driven culture dismisses. Resolutely untechnological, anti-utopian and imaginative, Evans’ sculptures are metaphorical of a time when human-made objects expressed a synergy with the natural world, enacting a relationship with it that united and gave meaning to communal life. Revisiting our collective memory, as eco-feminist Carolyn Merchant reminds us, is critical in beginning to solve intractable environmental problems.



Once a year at the summer solstice, **Ross Rudel** runs naked through the city's Griffith Park late at night. Feeling the warm air, the brush of shrubbery almost erotically touching the skin, reverting to animal instincts as he uses all his senses to safely move through the darkened, potentially dangerous space, he affirms our essential and primal bond with the earth – all sensations awakened by Rudel's sculpture. He works in his artifact-laden studio next to the L.A. River, with which he has developed a profound relationship: the ebbing and flowing, the detritus and pollution, the wildlife such as hawks and ducks that inhabit the region have provided him with imagery and inspiration. His sculptures feel more like empathetic collaborations with nearby nature rather than detached impressions. A chunk of tree trunk requisitioned from the river bank becomes a mysterious tunnel-like female orifice, while the eight-foot-tall *Poop Column* resembling a massive accretion of bird guano (Rudel raises pigeons next to his studio) could be its phallic companion. These *lingum* and *yoni* reconnect us to ancient universal procreative and generative life forces all around us. Rudel also creates works based on dreams, like Australian aborigines or Native Americans whose dreams were sacred magical incursions from the human world into the spirit and nature realms. *Emissary*, a facsimile of the artist's own head molded from strips of dripping green algae harvested from the river, sits atop a thick layer of shiny resin. Appearing as a human/plant hybrid with semi-transparent, terrifying eyes emerging from a glassy pool of water, it alludes to the myth of the Green Man within whom lurks a slimy, sublime wildness opposed to our intellect-dominated bodies. In such works, we importantly rediscover and acknowledge our latent wildness and the biological interconnectivity to all life in our urban ecosystem and the planet at large, crucial to improving a declining environment.

While many contemporary photographers like Edward Byrtnytsky and Robert Adams have approached photography journalistically to document land development and degrading commercial intrusions into the natural world, **Elizabeth Bryant** eschews straightforward depiction and is instead drawn to examining the conventions and tropes found in historical still-life painting, landscape and wildlife representations, and *trompe l'oeil* spatial effects to describe contemporary experiences of nature. Using her overgrown plant-filled Eagle Rock backyard or settings such as the Huntington Gardens as backdrops, she creates small-scale, rather elaborate tableaus only for the purposes of photographing. A diverse range of objects, from goofy discarded student ceramics, printed calendar-style wildlife portraits and landscapes, to groups of colorful common and exotic fruits and vegetables, is deftly incorporated and collaged. Actual vegetation infringes the borders of the photo prints, making it difficult to discern between the real and the photographed; the flat, more refined photo images appear as fabricated as the low-tech assemblages of artifacts and handcrafted vessels. Subtly humorous and playful, Bryant casts doubt on the veracity and objectivity of the photograph. Further, she questions and problematizes our sense of what currently exists and what is memorialized when it is endangered or after it has disappeared. Like its art historical still-life antecedents, everything in these abundant, teeming little scenes is overripe with the conflicts and synergies that abound between the natural and the human. Decay lurks and a tense uncertainty hovers. Negotiating and processing this complicated space reveals a central metaphor in all Bryant's art: the fate of the earth's human inhabitants or its civilization, is inextricably intertwined with that of all other species.

Like Elizabeth Bryant's exploration of the conventions of photography and the borders between the natural and the artificial, photographer **Brian Forrest** works exclusively at the perimeters of the city, photographing the dense vegetation of official park areas. In contrast to his previous near-monochromatic black landscapes, color has infiltrated the current series involving similar locations. Resembling early stereoscopic cards, the joined images appear as copies of the same scene. Dark, hairy root balls, unruly tangled branches and vines, fallen tree trunks, and clouded skies create a melancholic Romantic gloom or what he terms "a quiet uneasiness." Forrest acknowledges these pictures recall eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of the sublime, but the "doubling" effect subverts and dissolves the singular spectator's gaze – the "I and it" put forth in Burke and Kant – and then multiplies it. Their traditional model of the sublime held that the individual, facing the threat of annihilation upon exposure to terrifying natural

phenomena, would pull back from the brink, “saving” himself by the uniquely human powers of rationality and reinforcing our separation and control over nature. In these photographs, however, the wild and chaotic “other” is suggested by an equal viewpoint and presence, evoking an “eco-sublime” that does not require mastery but represents partnership and inclusivity. At odds with more voyeuristic, materialistic scientific methods of observation, Forrest promotes what Jeremy Rifkin described as “an embodied experience...[or] the understanding reality comes not from detachment and exercise of power but from participation and empathic communion”<sup>(10)</sup>...an “experience near”<sup>(11)</sup> rather than neutral approach that potentially changes the relationship between urban and natural to one of proximity and balance.

On her lunch break sitting under a tree at a city university campus, **China Adams** found herself watching the squirrels at play running up and down the trunks and branches and dashing about in the green turf. This species is so adaptive and pervasive, few stop to consider their movements and antics in human habitats. With wry humor and keen observation Adams began to map and record their steps and activities, as one would an elaborate choreography, later creating delicate, pristine drawings based on her field studies. Accompanying each drawing is a meticulously hand-lettered graphite “playbill” of texts combining description, poetic musings, and notes on the squirrels’ “performances.” Though seemingly ridiculous initially, what emerges is a critical meditation on landscape art through the ages and its need to project control over wild and chaotic nature through representational strategies like fixed-point perspective and cartography, even extending to Disney’s anthropomorphized and thoroughly civilized critters. At the heart of Adams’ piece, however, is a desire to patiently let the inner structures and workings of nature reveal themselves without interference, discovering commonalities between various animal movements and our own, and acknowledging the beauty, awe, pleasure, and purpose in both. The historical approach to landscape that served to assert domination is replaced with a “biosphere consciousness” in which all species share space in mutual interdependence. Artistic acts such as hers bring the two worlds together in a dynamic relationship to impart a richer, deeper sense of the places we dwell.

The garden as both symbolic of Eden and site of most urban encounters with the non-human takes on special significance in the collaborative installations of **Laura Cooper** and **Nick Taggart**. *Glassell Atlas* is a large mixed-media work depicting an area of northeast Los Angeles where their house and garden are located. Though noisy freeways, busy streets, and train tracks are all nearby, their bountiful garden teems with insects, birds, a diversity of exotic and native plant life, and wild animals. Drawings and photographs of the view from the house and studio are printed on cotton, then integrated into an intricately sewn map-like tapestry of the meandering arteries surrounding the plot. They then incorporate and suspend loose colored threads, plant materials collected on site, objects unearthed from the garden, and fragments of asphalt from their neighborhood streets. The resulting highly textured artwork is equal parts 2D abstraction, photograph, drawing, homespun craft, and 3D assemblage, a lively interpretation of the bio-complexity of their corner of the city. It reflects ideas of ecologically restored Eden, an earthly paradise, or even a small home place on the larger planet that maintains “natural and cultural diversity in all its forms.”<sup>(12)</sup> Such pocket Edens demonstrate that all these life forms can co-exist, suggesting a new narrative of Recovery from the Fall from the Garden that responds to the ecological conditions and urgencies of the urban environment. Perhaps less predicated on ideas of balance, it proposes “discordant harmonies” which “are part of a set of new narratives with non-linear plots and a new human relationship to nature....[W]hat is called for is a new ethic that arises out of both the needs of nature and the needs of humanity. Both must be considered active agents.”<sup>(13)</sup> Cooper and Taggart envision such a situation.

**Notes:**

1. Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local* (New York: The New Press 1997) p. 12
2. William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), p. 16
3. *Ibid*, p. 19
4. Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 223
5. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 20
6. Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 47
7. Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City* (Cambridge: MIT Press), p. 49
8. *Ibid*, pp. 19–20
9. *Ibid*, p. 55
10. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), p. 154
11. *Ibid*, p. 609
12. Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 203
13. *Ibid*, p. 217