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I died I lived : shaping an ecological balance

Shelby Prindaville

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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I DIED I LIVED: SHAPING AN ECOLOGICAL BALANCE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by
Shelby Prindaville
B.A., University of Pennsylvania, 2008
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Abstract

I Died I Lived: Shaping an Ecological Balance is a body of work about our tenuous ecological situation and the power humanity has to preserve or destroy it. Through a broad range of two- and three-dimensional media, my installation transforms the gallery into an environment that demonstrates the enrichment nature delivers and the compensatory responsibility we have to conserve that experience.

Introduction

Charles C. Mann's article "State of the Species" details how *Homo sapiens* came out of an evolutionary bottleneck approximately 75,000 years ago with new cognitive abilities: innovation, language, and *art*. These new capabilities made humans one of the most successful species in the history of Earth. Unfortunately, the biological definition of success includes as its supposedly-inevitable end resource exhaustion followed by extinction (Mann 1). In order to avoid this fate, I believe that the very same abilities that brought humanity to this point need to be used to leash our expansion and protect our resources. I use all three of these distinctively human proficiencies – art, language, and innovation – in communicating this message while refraining from proselytizing (a very ineffective mode of communication that often achieves an opposite result). My artwork delves into this topic of ecological equilibrium by appealing to the viewer's own curiosity, emotional engagement, and sense of responsibility.

My work focuses on the beautiful fragility and resilience, as well as the capacity for destruction, of the natural world. I am interested in the human role in shaping an ecological balance and create images centered on erasure and revival. I am currently working on watercolor drawings and figurative and interactive sculptures that repurpose biological forms. These drawings and sculptures literally as well as symbolically accentuate delicacy and impermanence through their vulnerable mediums. The different surfaces of my drawings, ranging from corrugation to silk thread to an applied relief medium, conceptually allude to changing environmental stressors while visually functioning to make each drawing feel unique and object-like.



Figure 1: Shelby Prindaville, *Anolis carolinensis* (*Riley Redux – Cataract*), watercolor and pencil on corrugated paper, 2012.

My subjects in both two- and three-dimensional media are removed from strictly representational habitats and isolated in a space that references the discovery and artifactual documentation of taxonomic illustrations and specimens. Albrecht Durer's animal studies and John James Audubon's bird illustrations are fantastic examples from this tradition that influence my drawings.

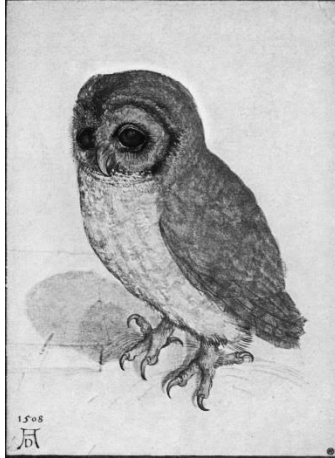


Figure 2: Albrecht Durer, *The Little Owl*, watercolor on paper, 1506.

My interest in this work stems from my own belief and value system; subtle religious and mythological symbolism are sometimes used to underscore that connection.

Species Selection

As I develop my artwork, I research local fauna and flora and relevant biology, botany, and horticulture, as well as ecological ethics. My subjects are always species that inhabit the locale in which I work, presently Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I want viewers to encounter regional resources that they have a clear, present stake in maintaining. “The Weirdest People in the World,” a recently published social sciences paper, explains that in the industrialized West, our cultural remove from nature has led to sociological analogies of the Western relationship to nature with that of malnourished children to physical growth (Watters 1).

...the “weird” Western mind is the most self-aggrandizing and egotistical on the planet: we are more likely to promote ourselves as individuals versus advancing as a group. WEIRD minds are also more analytic, possessing the tendency to telescope in on an object of interest rather than understanding that object in the context of what is around it. The WEIRD mind also appears to be unique in terms of how it comes to understand and interact with the natural world. Studies show that Western urban children grow up so closed off in man-made environments that their brains never form a deep or complex connection to the natural world. ...weird children develop their understanding of the natural world in a “culturally and experientially impoverished environment (1).”

Because my audience is more familiar with architecture than with the countryside, I use the mediated space of the gallery to safely introduce a handful of selected species to the viewer without overwhelming their underfed relationship with our biosphere.

Severely limiting the number of represented species prevents the viewer from suffering attention fatigue and works with instead of against the Western telescopic interest described in the WEIRD paper. Obsessive rendering of the same species over and over again also demonstrates through my own abnormal level of focus the worth even a common, discounted species holds. In Orson Scott Card’s science-fiction book *Xenocide*, there is a plotline regarding a planet whose highest caste is believed to hear God as manifest in their repetitive obsessive compulsions that supposedly honor Him: washing hands, tracing lines, and similarly useless and often physically uncomfortable tasks. It is later learned that these “Godspoken” are actually suffering from a disease and a cure is disseminated throughout the population. All the “Godspoken” abandon their rituals once cured but one: Han Qing-jao. She continues to complete her now-absent God’s tasks even more rigorously than when she was previously being compelled. The rest of society commends and honors her devotion (Card 1-608). The Sisyphean aspect to Han Qing-jao’s decision, the willpower demonstrated through her uncompelled rituals: there is a taste of this in my work.

The species I choose to depict are frequently overlooked in their natural habitats but provide greater than average rewards for time invested in close examination. Although other species are occasionally featured, the bulk of my current work concentrates on a variety of anole lizard species within the genus *Anolis* and on two different species of plants: *Mimosa pudica* and *Selaginella lepidophylla*. Anoles are the subjects of my figurative sculptures, while live *Mimosa pudica* and *Selaginella lepidophylla* star in my interactive sculptures and all three species are featured in my watercolor drawings.



Figure 3: Shelby Prindaville, *Anolis carolinensis* and *Selaginella lepidophylla* (Arousal), watercolor and pencil on paper, 2012.

***Anolis* Lizards in Drawings and Figurative Sculptures**

Anoles are common lizards colloquially called “American chameleons” that not only can change color but also possess the ability to sever and regenerate tail segments, are typically sexually dimorphous, and have dewlaps.



Figure 4: *Anolis carolinensis* (Lipstick), watercolor and pencil on corrugated paper, 2012.

These visually fascinating characteristics combined with their non-threatening size make anoles an ideal animal representative for my broader ecological interests as well as my artistic exploration into drawing methods, surfaces, unique forms, juxtapositions, and color relationships. The sculptures and drawings I create with the anoles use their innate character and abilities to explore a metaphysical space. The first drawing in the watercolor series puts anoles in place of rats in the rat king myth made famous in *The Nutcracker*; the use of anoles allows a way out of the diseased mass through voluntary autotomy and allegorically demonstrates that repairing environments requires sacrifice.

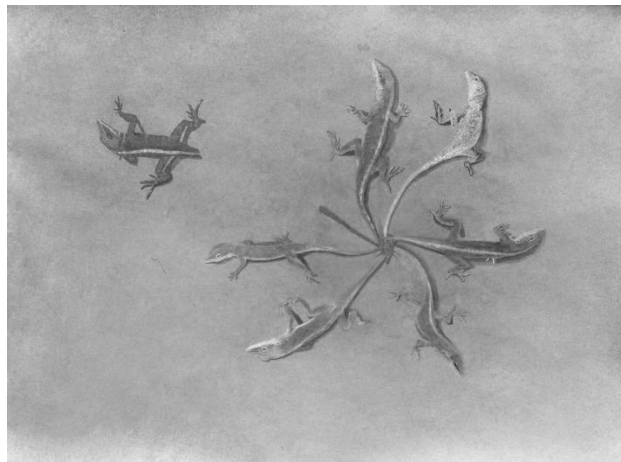


Figure 5: *Anolis* (Anole King), watercolor and pencil on paper, 2011.

Other drawings pull from subjects ranging from the Ouroboros to Terry Pratchett’s allegory of summer (Pratchett 428-433).



Figure 6: Shelby Prindaville, *Anolis (Summer)*, watercolor and pencil on paper, 2012.

Although viewers may not always recognize these connections, they heighten the works' emotional and conceptual power. Contemporary artist Walton Ford uses a similar structure for his large-scale animal watercolors; his works also have a great deal of research that rewards motivated viewers with fascinating histories while still serving as compositional and aesthetic guides for the more casual viewer (Ford 1).



Figure 7: Walton Ford, *Thanh Hoang*, watercolor, gouache, pencil and ink on paper, 1997.

The anoles in my figurative sculptures ambiguously rise from or disappear into the gallery walls as they crawl up and off wall boxes onto the walls themselves.



Figure 8: *Anolis (By Turns)*, 3P Quick Cure Clay and wooden box wall installation, 2013.

Because they are installed on the enclosing boundary of the space, their bi-stable positioning implies a true withdrawal or emergence into this mediated environment in a way that installation on a traditional floor pedestal could not achieve; the wall installation also adds a playful authenticity as anoles are arboreal and frequently use walls for sunning or hiding places.



Figure 9: Shelby Prindaville, *Anolis (Dive and Climb)*, 3P Quick Cure Clay wall installation, 2013.

Through careful lighting, the sculptures' beautiful and slightly ominous cast shadows underscore the future risk of impermanence through their nature, as cognitive scientist Roberto Casati puts it, of being “‘negative objects’ (absences with a shape)” (Casati 1).



Figure 10: Shelby Prindaville, *Anolis (Pirouette)*, 2013.

Mimosa pudica and *Selaginella lepidophylla* in Interactive Sculptures

Though most time-based and kinetic art focuses on new technology, my interactive sculptures use existing biology to interact with the viewer in a time-based kinetic exploration. *Mimosa pudica*, “the sensitive plant,” and *Selaginella lepidophylla*, “the resurrection fern,” both possess a rare plant behavior – they physically react in a humanly perceptible time frame to environmental changes. Their inclusion in my interactive sculptures gives viewers the chance to actively engage with these plants and actually witness the short- and long-term effects of their actions over the course of a gallery show. *Mimosa pudica*, when touched, misted, or heated, folds up its leaflets (or, when really irritated, lowers entire petioles) and only reopens after a period of isolation. During a show, the constant energy drain of a steady stream of viewers’ touches on a specimen can slowly kill it.



Figure 11: Shelby Prindaville, *Mimosa pudica* “Touch Me” pedestal detail, mixed media, 2011.

Selaginella lepidophylla is a form of epiphytic tumbleweed that enters a balled-up state of dormancy when removed from light and water but when reintroduced will unfurl and revive over the course of two hours. The *Selaginella lepidophylla* sculpture allows viewers to resurrect or mummify specimens, but resurrected plants must be watched - if they are left in stagnant water beyond the rehydrating phase, they will rot.

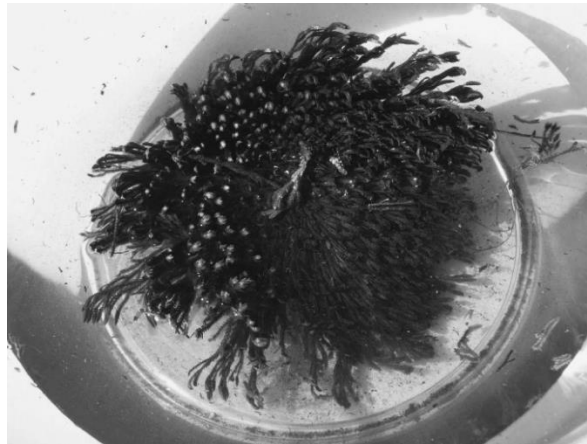


Figure 12: Shelby Prindaville, *Selaginella* pedestal detail, mixed media, 2012.

As a way to extend the enthusiasm viewers experience when all is going well with the plants (and as redemption when it doesn't), I also offer self-propagated *Mimosa pudica* and self-packaged *Selaginella lepidophylla*. By cross-pollinating my hand-raised plants and harvesting the seeds for these offered plant starts before placing parent plants in the interactive sculptures, I also fulfill my specimens' biological imperative to reproduce before their possible death during the exhibition. In considering the environmental ramifications of my artwork as well as the message, I enjoy studying the work of Jason deCaires Taylor; his underwater sculptures are not only about ecological topics but also serve as artificial reefs that actually improve the health of their sites (Taylor 1).



Figure 13: Jason deCaires Taylor, *Vicissitudes* detail, cement underwater sculpture, 2006.

In contrast to both deCaires Taylor's goal and my own, artists like Christo and Jeanne-Claude make ephemeral, beautiful land art that temporarily transforms the viewing of landscape... to its detriment. Christo's current project to install fabric above the Arkansas River in Colorado warranted a federal environmental impact study and is currently facing a federal lawsuit (Johnson 1).



Figure 14: Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Surrounded Islands*, pink polypropylene floating fabric installation, 1983.

The text on my interactive sculptures' pedestals began as fragments that were meant to incite curiosity and hinted at the types of interaction available. Viewers exceeded my expectations in that they were actually so curious that they found the limited text insufficient in satisfying their questions. In moving toward a more educational, museum-based concept (drawing from works like Marcel Broodthaers' *Musée de l'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*

in terms of imagery and an appropriation of institutional influence rather than institutional critique), I have laser-cut whole panels of text that cover the pedestals with an abundance of information (MoMA 1).



Figure 15: Shelby Prindaville, *Mimosa pudica* “Handle with Care” pedestal detail, mixed media, 2013.



Figure 16: Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée de l'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, mixed media installation, 1972.

New Art Media Development

My interest in the relationship between science and art extends to my collaboration with LSU Chemistry Professor and 3P CEO John A. Pojman.

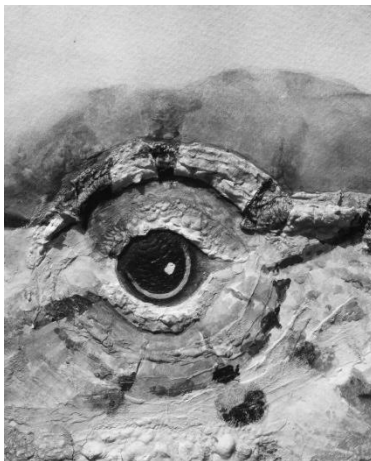


Figure 17: Shelby Prindaville, *Anolis sagrei (Eye)*, 3P art mediums, watercolor, and pencil on paper, 2012.

Our collaboration started through my beta-testing of several industrial polymer mediums he hoped to tailor to a more artistic use; as I became more familiar with the properties of these mediums, I realized that with some chemical alterations we could formulate a clay that would occupy a unique place in the sculptural medium market. Our subsequent development of a range of kiln-free polymer clays (3P QuickCure Clays) has cemented our partnership, and in addition has provided me with the perfect medium to make my structurally stable yet intricately detailed figurative sculptures.

I have been truly excited by the opportunity to contribute to both the artistic and scientific communities by creating new art media. This type of collaboration directly relates to my belief that humanity needs to use our unique capacity to innovate in order to forestall resource exhaustion. I don't believe the new art media we've created is capable of solving humanity's problems beyond that of wanting really versatile clay; however, innovation builds off of other innovation and can often lead to unforeseeable results. As Mann's "State of the Species" details,

The full question is: How can we provide [more resources] without wrecking the natural systems on which all depend? Scientists, activists, and politicians have proposed many solutions, each from a different ideological and moral perspective. Some argue that we must drastically throttle industrial civilization. (Stop energy-intensive, chemical-based farming today! Eliminate fossil fuels to halt climate change!) Others claim that only intense exploitation of scientific knowledge can save us. (Plant super-productive, genetically modified crops now! Switch to nuclear power to halt climate change!) No matter which course is chosen, though, it will require radical, large-scale transformations in the human enterprise—a daunting, hideously expensive task (Mann 1).

This type of radical, large-scale transformation requires small-scale roots; I am actively engaging in teaming up to change the status quo and in a surprisingly short amount of time I have been able to help introduce a new resource.

The Internet as a Resource

My desire to document viewer interactions and expand public access to my work has also led to my series of YouTube videos: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ShelbyPrindaville/videos>. These videos range in subject matter from “behind-the-scenes” inspiration for my work to filmed viewer interactions and responses to demonstration videos of the new art media I’ve helped develop. By embracing the internet’s power to disseminate material globally, I have managed to grow my community beyond what is available regionally and have already ended up influencing, for example, the zoological data collection of Harvard’s Losos Laboratories through both the demonstration of the uses of 3P Clay and images of my own figurative sculptures. Scientists at Losos Labs are now testing 3P Clay as a superior material for studying predation bites and other environmental marks on zoological models.

Conclusion

My artwork's focus is firmly rooted in both my professional and personal life. The passion that I have in preserving our biosphere and its flora and fauna has motivated me to try to use a wide variety of mediums and approaches in connecting with the public. I want viewers to interact with my work and for that interaction to demonstrate the joy of contemplative engagement with nature as well as provide a taste of the sorrow a disconnect with nature can bring.

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Vita

Shelby Prindaville was born and raised in Concordia, Kansas, a small town in rural North Central Kansas. She received her Bachelor of Arts in fine arts with a concentration in sculpture from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 2008. After working in maritime shipping and Indian Ocean piracy prevention for two years in New York City, New York, she moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to pursue her Master of Fine Arts in Louisiana State University's interdisciplinary Painting and Drawing Program. Shelby will graduate in May 2013.