

CARE Writing Prize:

Stewardship and the Prophetic Voice of the Artist

In the Doug Adams Gallery we encounter the collective prophetic voice of the artists, who like the prophets of several traditions, let us know that our generation stands at a crossroads. The art is not a silent witness to environmental degradation, but gives voice to those silent witnesses to waste, over-consumption, destruction, and nature in peril. Both the prophets and these artists tell the listener about the way it once was, how things are now, and then inform as to what the future might be, depending on the choices made by us and our descendents. But the artists do not preach or exhort. Their pieces inform by witnessing, by example, and through representation. It is for us to draw our own conclusions, thus enabling us to call up within ourselves our own prophetic voice as we resonate with the voice of the art. They not only impel us to act and to make those better choices as stewards, but potentially engage us through a transcendent connection that is at the root of religious experience.

The first composition one might see upon entering the gallery is Mariangeles Soto-Diaz's "Consumption #001." While art can serve to elevate the soul, here the art itself through abstraction and representation inverts that process and tells us of a consumerism which can separate the individual from nature, and potentially distance the person from her or his spiritual moorings. Thomas Starr King recognized, in his 1863 sermon "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada" not only the connection between spirit and nature, but how our own preoccupations with the material serve to remove us from that relationship:

The great bane of modern life is materialism,—the divorce of spirit from power, order, bounty and beauty in our thought of the world. We look upon nature as a machine, a play of forces that run of necessity and of course. We do not bow before it with wonder and awe as the manifestation of a present, all-animating will and art... if we could fairly perceive of the constant order and glory of nature, our materialistic dullness would be broken.

The collection of bar codes, representing a family's consumption record, reminds us of consumer-oriented industry which devours nature, reconstitutes it, and then offers it up in the form of packaged goods for our convenient use. Perhaps because we have become divorced from the glory, power, and beauty of the earth, we find it easy to unthinkingly consume it in unsustainable ways. In "Consumption #001", hidden somewhere behind the art of UPC symbols, is the animating art of nature, the awe which connects us to spirit, as well as the agents for their destruction.

We would not be on the path of destroying nature if it were not for the values we hold as a society and the choices we make. Through the textural contrasts in the steel structure of "Remains To Be Seen II" Ventana Amico invites us to put those values "on trial" and reflect on how our decisions impact the environment: beauty and darkness imbedded in the work signify our "struggle with progress." Certainly our relationship with the planet is out of balance, and we have not maintained the role of conscientious steward and instead have become a reckless consumer. A steward in some respects is not unlike what the Sufis call the *khalifa*: God's vice-regent who supports and sustains the world. It is a position to which we might aspire but should also approach with the humility emphasized in the Quran's *Surah Ghafir*: "Surely the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of man; but most people know not." It seems more than likely we have long abandoned our sustaining and supportive stewardship. We don't see ourselves in subordinate relationship to heaven and earth, and are thus perhaps upending the natural order, as Amico suggests, through our self-interested carelessness.

The beauty and darkness that is currently a part of the landscape of relationship between human and earth is expressed in Edward Foley's works "Future Logs" and "Two Lakes", Steven Holloway's "The Wound", and Elizabeth Kenneday's "Wood Product: *Hallorms-Stadurs Kogur*." The pieces speak in that aforementioned prophetic voice about the past, present, and future: the beauty which once existed naturally, the dark devastation that is, and innovative attempts to negotiate a new future. Reclamation in some form is at the heart of the four works. The photographic collection of "Wood Product" informs us, however, of the folly of thinking that we can easily replace that which has been destroyed without having to address future consequences. It recalls perhaps the people of whom Isaiah speaks "that say in pride and

arrogancy of heart, the bricks are fallen down, but we will build of hewn stones: the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them for cedars.” We must turn around and forthrightly acknowledge the implications of the damage we are inflicting upon the planet—the wound, if you will, which is poignantly represented in Steven Holloway’s piece. The prophets and the artists may be right: there is no turning back solely through the act of substitution, our future will be built somehow upon the remains of what was. Perhaps, however, we can still find ways to be cognizant of and honor the natural processes which we’ve disrupted.

The remnants of birch and piano scrolls, which are recycled into Katherine Richardson’s “Held Notes” for the purposes of poetic inquiry, stirred in me several responses. Both the rolls of birch and the piano scrolls are themselves records—either a record of a tree’s growth cycle or the documentation of a song. I am reminded of the medieval Jewish philosopher Bahya ibn Pakudah’s admonition that “days are scrolls, write on them what you want remembered.” These “scrolls” have been discarded but are now thoughtfully integrated into Richardson’s art, and in this light her invitation to make of them poetic meaning should be embraced. I will note, therefore, that on a personal spiritual level, both music and nature are what connect me with the transcendent. I envisioned those scrolls as perhaps containing some of my favorite music and the birch brought reminiscences of frequent and precious moments in the nature. I could not live in some ways without either experience. The fact that the two are conjoined in this one composition evokes within me a sense of urgency about preserving and protecting that which sustains my own soul.

The concepts of preserving and protecting are actually etymologically integral to the term steward. It comes from the Old English and German meaning something akin to a “guardian of a hall.” How appropriate, therefore, that within in this hall my own sense of guardianship is summoned forth through the aesthetic of the art. The aesthetic of the artwork recalled for me the aesthetics of music and nature. And the aesthetics of music and nature connect me, as they did Starr King, to the transcendent. This is the juncture at which my own voice met those of the artists. Just as my encounter through the exhibit was a complete cycle of experience, so too is nature a perfect cycle. An interruption to the former might have represented, in miniature, a

disruption of the later, and I want to guard against an interruption to either and be a steward to both processes.

As I moved around the room from the art and then to the permanent collection, I first noticed the ossuary exhibit. With its skull and other reminders of death it arrested my progression through the hall. I lingered over the display for a moment. Perhaps in part because I was now accustomed to looking at art *qua* art, my mind was trying to adjust to the different orientation of the display. What is being communicated here? In this transition from art to artifact I recalled a last voice, that of *Qohelet*, or Ecclesiastes, who's message concerning the tension between impermanence and the enduring is universal to all being. : "A generation departs and a generation comes, but earth abides." How and in what condition, however, earth will abide is the looming question in the gallery for our generation and for those to come.