

Near Nature

Rebecca Brand

Gordon Art Fellow

Mentored by Bill Davis

Western Michigan University

For my Summer 2011 Gordon Art Fellowship at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute (PCCI) in Hastings, Michigan, I successfully proposed to incorporate nature into my art through close interaction with the natural world. Today, our world has an unbelievable amount of synthetic materials. It is hard for people to decipher what is natural and what is synthetic. For my project, I juxtaposed artificial plants with naturally occurring ones on Pierce Cedar Creek Institute's property and photographed them. I want people to become aware of their surroundings and the effects they are having on the natural environment. I hope this project will encourage people to think critically about the actions and choices they make.

Artist Statement:

"If industrial man continues to multiply his numbers and expand his operations he will succeed in his apparent intention, to seal himself off from the natural and isolate himself within a synthetic prison of his own making."

~Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire

Today, our world has an unbelievable amount of synthetic materials. In many circumstances it is hard for people to decipher what is natural and what is synthetic. These images are meant to encourage viewers to become more aware of the natural world by asking them to consider what may or may not be a natural experience.

Each image is comprised of natural and non-natural elements. Can viewers tell the difference between the two? Is the synthetic vegetation readily apparent? Today, everyone is bombarded with artificial materials. We as a society are very dependent on manufactured goods. They have been subtly integrated into our everyday lives. After seeing this work, I hope people will critically evaluate the role the natural world plays in their own lives and develop a greater appreciation for nature.

I want my images to illustrate the differences between organic and inorganic materials. How have these materials become a part of our everyday life? Can we even tell the difference anymore? My fear is that nature is becoming synthetic and people are unaware that it is happening. Where do we draw the line between the two? How long will it be before we lose our natural environment to manufactured materials? Where does it end? How well do we truly understand the natural world? The lines are blurred between what is real and what is artificial.

I would like people to see how our manufactured world has interfered with our relationship to nature. To better understand nature we must get out and experience it firsthand. I hope this work will encourage people to think critically about their actions and the choices they make within the natural world.

Background for the Project:

This project stems from my love of nature. Throughout my life, I have always loved being out in the natural world. In today's society, I feel both children and adults spend too much time inside. Many people do not have a strong connection to nature and therefore cannot see that they live in a manufactured world. This unnatural environment that we live in has been incorporated into our everyday lives. The lines between real and fake are blurred and are unclear for some.

The Gordon Art Fellowship at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute was a chance for me to dedicate a large period of time to create and develop a body of work on a subject that I am passionate about. It has allowed me to convey my concerns

about our world through my art to the surrounding communities. This fellowship was also a way for me to deepen my connection with nature.

Background:

My previous work focused on the human consumption of pesticides. Through photography, I intended to make viewers question the food we consume each day. Through research, I have found information that implies pesticides sprayed on food pose potential health issues. Based on some of these statistics, I paired the fruit or vegetable with possible contaminants, including reproductive toxins, developmental toxins, hormone disruptors, neurotoxins, and carcinogens. How does the accumulation of these chemicals affect our bodies over time? I wanted to make photographs visualizing this topic because it affects society as a whole.

Methods:

For my project at PCCI, I used a Canon 5D camera borrowed from Western Michigan University. The lens was 24-105mm. I found that I did not always want to photograph in harsh sun. As a way to solve this problem, I used a reflector as a diffuser to shade some of the plants I was photographing.

Lighting and Image Making Strategies:

For lighting my subjects, I used all natural light. I started off using strong, direct sunlight. However, as time passed, I grew to prefer the soft, diffused light of open shade. To achieve this look on sunny days, I used my reflector to diffuse the direct sunlight. The results of these two lighting methods yield images with subjects rendered in open shade or direct sunlight. I photographed artificial plastic plants juxtaposed with natural vegetation to parallel the relationship between people and their connection to the natural world. I felt that given my location, surrounded by wildflowers at PCCI, it would be best for me to photograph a combination of artificial plants and flowers with real plants and flowers. By using the flowers in my photographs, I was able to incorporate color

into my images. The fake plants that I purchased were of a higher quality. This, along with the style in which I photographed, insured their realistic look. They blend well with the surrounding natural environment. However, upon closer inspection, each of the imposters contain subtle hints of deception. By doing this I wanted people to question what they may be viewing since these images are not the average documentation of natural flora.

Style/ Post Processing:

I photographed my images in a nontraditional style. I chose to employ a technique called, "selective focus," which employs a shallow depth of field, mainly using an aperture of f/4. This created a selectively focused image with only a small portion sharp. I made work this way to present my synthetic flora with the natural flora so that the background would not detract from the main focus of the plants. I also chose to use a shallow depth of field to emphasize that the lines between the "natural" and the "synthetic" are blurred. I crop my images in a specific way in order to create the illusion that the fake plants were actually growing among the real ones, as well as to imply the disturbing reality of our synthetic world.

After exposing my images, I used Photoshop as my post-processing tool. Because my images were made under a variety of different lighting situations, the colors in every image needed to be balanced with one another. By doing so, each of the images harmonize collectively as a series.

After I color balanced and made other adjustments such as changes in contrast, image size, and image sharpening, the next step was to make test prints. Tests are necessary to check for color and other factors that may change from a backlit monitor to ink on paper. After the correct test has been achieved, printing is the final step in creating an ink jet print photograph.

While printing may be the final step in creating the photograph, it is not the final step in creating an exhibition-ready print. For my exhibition-ready prints, I chose to frame my work. PCCI was generous enough to allow me use their old barn wood to turn into frames. In this process, I cleaned off debris from the wood

and removed old nails. After this, it was ready to be cut, planed, and processed into useable frame wood. Once the bodies of the frames were complete, I used an oil-based stain to paint the freshly cut sides of the frames.

The next step in framing my work was to cut mats for my images. I used 100% bright white archival cotton museum board for mats. I left 4 inches on 3 sides of each image, with 5 inches at the bottom to add visual weight. I used a thin razor to bevel cut my windows in each mat. Acid-free archival linen tape was used to adhere the two pieces of mat board together. The final step in the process is to add glass along with the mats and image to the frame. I have 11 images framed to 22"x30" and 6 images framed to 23"x29".

Results/ Discussion:

I want the images to illustrate the differences between organic and inorganic materials. I have selected 17 images that I feel work well with my vision and concept. Each of the images is comprised of both natural and non-natural elements. I chose my final images because they are less traditionally composed. The lines are blurred between natural and synthetic. They each contain organic and inorganic aspects, in order to convey my concerns.

Summary:

I have learned a great deal during my stay at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. This summer, as an artist, I have found a new way to photograph a subject of interest to me. I have never photographed this subject or quite this style before. I was able to expand my original idea and create what I feel is necessary for viewers to consider. I was able to come out of this experience with a body of work ready to show to the surrounding communities. As a bonus, and what I feel is essential to create this type of work, I was able to deepen my connection with nature.

Living with researchers this summer has been a new and interesting experience for me. At first, I was apprehensive about being the only practicing

visual artist living with student researchers. However, after a short time, I warmed up to everyone and was able to learn a lot from them. Whether it was learning about the vegetation I was photographing, animals that live in our climate, or just the scientific community in general, they were able to enhance my experience this summer. I appreciate and am grateful to have had this great opportunity.

Future Plans:

My future plans for my fellowship are to exhibit my work in Western Michigan University's Eleanor R. and Robert A. DeVries Student Art Gallery during my culminating exhibition. It will promote Pierce Cedar Creek Institute as an outlet for education, research, preservation, and appreciation of our natural environment. This capstone exhibition will take place October 17-28th. I plan to exhibit 17 pieces framed in barn wood from PCCI. Six will be framed to 23"x30" and 11 will be framed to 22"x30".

To fully utilize the exhibition space my show, titled Near Nature, will also include two other environmentally based artists. Zac Varela will be exhibiting three sound pieces and one video. The footage he used was made when I invited him to visit PCCI this summer. He created work that is similar to mine in that he is juxtaposing both natural and synthetic elements into his work. With his work he is "observing the raw essence of our natural habitat through disseminating the frequencies in which they exist. By listening to such sounds, he strives to sequence a connection to what he sees as truth in our collective reality." Jake Huizenga's work "questions and explores the influence that capitalism holds over the concepts of reality, labor, and the natural environment. As well as direct observations of the results these influences produce."

Comment: I am reluctant to edit a quote, but I think this is what Jake intended.

After my exhibition in October, I also will exhibit my photographs at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute in March-May of 2012. I will also work toward exhibiting this series of artwork elsewhere in the surrounding communities. I plan to approach galleries and businesses in order to showcase my work there as well.

I hope that sharing this work with the Pierce Cedar Creek Institute and exhibiting in the larger community of Kalamazoo will encourage people to think more critically about the choices they make and to go outside and enjoy what nature has to offer.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank both Pierce Cedar Creek Institute and George and Barbra Gordon for this wonderful opportunity. They provided the funding and housing necessary for me to complete this project. This enabled me to dedicate a large amount of time to devote to making this body of work. I would like to thank Bill Davis for helping be further develop my artistic concept I would also like to think the URGE students who helped enhance my summer experience by informing me on the natural world.

References:

Desert Solitaire by Edward Abby

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson

Ishmael by Daniel Quinn

Endgame Vol. 1 & 2 by Derek Jenson

What We Leave Behind by Derek Jenson

Hot, Flat, and Crowded by Thomas Friedman

Green Intelligence by John Wargo