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PALO ALTO'S RADIUS IN THE CONTEXT of DE STABLER AND MATTES

Mankind Merges into the Impermanent Ecosystem

By Erin Goodwin-Guerrero

Somehow nature and the natural world seem to assume the biblical and primordial states of dust, earth and mud in the Palo Alto Art Center's summer exhibitions, *Wetlands*, *Continuity* and *Radius*. Stephen de Staebler and Danae Mattes set the tone in their galleries at the front of the Center with references to archeology, geology, the ever-changing wetlands, and the fossilization and ultimate return of the human body to the earthy substances from which it sprang. Both artists use clay, and in the context of each other's work the importance of the clay as a fundamental of creation myths and the notion of a bigger destiny for mankind on earth is enhanced. Many of the assumptions I had made about de Staebler's work over the years, were subject to reassessment. The active quality of de Mattes' site specific installation *Evaporation Pool* elevates the ever-changing continuum of organic material and its descent to the inert into a very vital and present process.



Stephen de Staebler's *Leg with Green Path*, 1996-98

Stephen de Staebler has long managed an alchemy of the human figure as landscape, archeological dig, and Modernist abstract sculpture. Big chunks of clay mixed with fragmented tubular forms and an occasional foot or hand, — preserved as if it had been unearthed from permafrost — are fired in numerous rich glazes and earthy colors. They can be seen as sections of a thigh, an arm, bone and flesh, sometimes preserved still in the strata of earth where they were discovered. The small sample of de Staebler works seen in this show should whet the appetite for his upcoming retrospective to be seen at the San Jose Museum of Art.



Wetlands II, 2008, Clay on canvas, by Danae Mattes.

Mattes paints with pigment and clay on canvas. Her subtle, pale colorations and suggestions of a casual natural process of evaporation on the canvas create a delicate and fragile appearance. There are references to landscape but in great expanses and atmospheric perspective. They are frighteningly beautiful. The metaphor for a larger and fragile ecosystem cannot be missed.

Radius is a regional juried exhibition at the Palo Alto Art Center that is curated this year by new Art Center Director, Director Karen Kienzle. The greys and delicate colors of the earth continue. Permutations from

Nature's Perimeter is a title that nicely explains the theme within which this particular group of seven artists present their work.



Ulla de Larios' *Transparency?*, 2009, in silk and wool, is a strong presence in the gallery. On entering the gallery, an impressive installation by Ulla de Larios dominates most of the center of the main room. Vertical columns of textiles that are transparently woven at the top and progressively become heavier and darker material as the cylindrical shapes approach the ground, are suspended like a gathering of village elders. Each one is slightly different, in its transition from delicate, silky transparent beige to a heavy, shrunken, opaque gray at the bottom. I thought of beautiful silk pajamas ruined by crossing a muddy street, and stepping into unseen pits. The artist is interested in political transformation and healing, which may or may not be obvious, depending upon whether the viewer sees the genesis of each piece to be the top or the bottom.



Dana Harel's *Circus ranivorosus*, graphite on paper, 2009

Dana Harel's graphite drawings are notable for their scale alone, but present even more challenging content in the manner of her morphing human and animal parts. In this series of highly detailed and exquisitely drawn situations, there are repetitions of the human hand in different postures, and different states of metamorphosis to scaly skin and bird feathers with an occasional claw, all posed against the vast white mystery of an untouched field. A human evolution out of the primordial swamp via a succession of flying scaly creatures, sympathetic anomalies in nature, regressive genes, and the eternal flying dream all come to mind.

Harel's figures show an intellectual playfulness, a penetrating curiosity, and an imagination working to its logical conclusion. Each patiently observed feather, carefully rendered patch of scaly skin and exploring human hand is a complex, never-to-be-completely-explained event. Yet there is such a real impression on our senses and we feel the particular softness of feathers and roughness of an alligator's skin, that we know it must be real.



Tracy Burk's curious armored animal with indecipherable glyphs

In the Radius Exhibition, Tracy Burke offers a pair of her jewel like biological treasures that she typically shows

amongst the everyday detritus of nature, an aging branch losing its bark, a few leaves and other small organic elements that seem to fit with the habitat of her creations. Sometimes her installations are complex and the weaving of her branches, and the creation of spaces on and around the walls from which they emerge are the art in itself. In her small cast metal inspirations, cocoon-like forms, segmented worms or scarab beetles are treated to Burke's stylization — formal shifts turn a beetle in to a grenade, or a segmented worm into a high heeled shoe presenting its own offspring on the heel. Strange glyphs on their bodies raise the question of whether they might be fetishes from a lost culture or artifacts from a small culture in a parallel universe. They are curious and wisely avoid being cute miniatures.



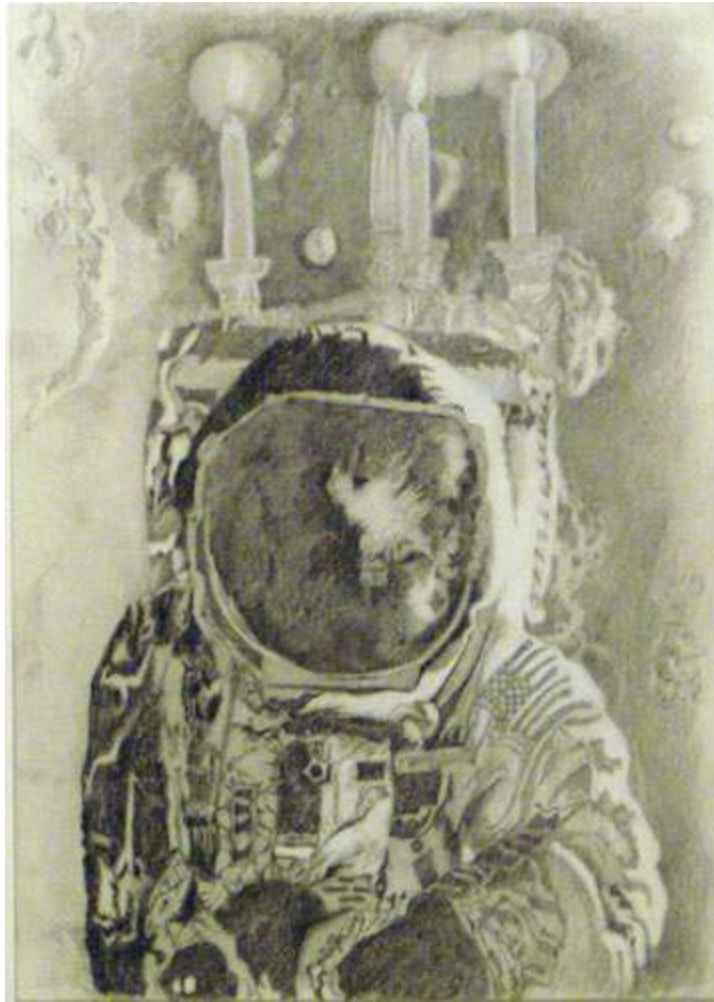
Sukey Bryant's *Exit Falls* gets to the heart of water.

The water paintings of Sukey Bryant get right into the essence of water, especially the spray and foam of rapidly falling or moving water. Sometimes she gives us a little bit of the context of the banks of a creek and the stream in perspective. In her waterfall, the water is everything, powerful, important beyond our imagination.



Amy Hibbs' *Carriage*, 2006 Oil on Wood, speaks to the great expanse of nature compared to our diminutive human investigations.

Amy Hibbs is interested in the scale and power of nature, especially as contrasted with our somewhat inadequate attempts to explore it, know it and become more intimate with it. A helicopter, small in the distant sky, flies like an insect approaching a flowering branch in *Entropy*. Caterpillars on the branch rise up as if they recognize the creature, but in fact it is a long way away and cannot hope to enter the magical kingdom of spring blossoms on a fruit tree. In *Carriage* the funicular cables and a solitary carriage are suspended across the great expanse of a mountain valley. Again the installation of such a seemingly frail device against the great untouched mountain puts human endeavors in their place. In her paintings on wood surfaces she reenacts the process of human action on nature, and perhaps says that she knows the painter's work to only lightly touch the mysteries of the medium.



In Sarah Ratchye's *Transcending mith*, graphite on paper, 2007m the astronaut is guided by unexplained light. Sarah Ratchye, has long extolled nature in paintings that shout the lush color and texture of a garden or bouquet of flowers, petals, seed pods and leaves. In *Radius*, her black and white prints and drawings are subdued by comparison, but they hold our larger universe in awe. Her astronauts enact a spiritual journey to the heavens. Enclosed in a placenta with umbilical cord tied to the Earth, one floating astronaut awaits rebirth on this journey. Another is guided through the darkness by a ghostly candelabra that hovers above his head lighting the way. In this series, Ratchye, like Hibbs and perhaps in contrast to Harel, puts our human realm of endeavor somewhat outside the course of nature.



Catie O'Leary's collage, *Still Life (foot)*, 2006 creates odd juxtapositions of the animate and inanimate. Catie O'Leary takes a comical look at the junctures between nature, architecture, humanity and mechanical inventions. Her quaint collages from illustrations and engravings in old books take on the look of the original epoch of hand drawn visuals in publication. Most of the images are a jumble of contrasting forms growing out of each other, creating a pattern of lines and textures that demand close examination to sort out. Her simpler, single figures seem to come closer to the themes of Radius.

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