

Three Artists Who Give Voice to the Silent



by CHRISTINE THOMSON

Alberta Wilderness Association's offices played host to a timely exhibit in April earlier this year. The exhibit was titled *A Shifting Balance* and featured three Alberta emerging artists with a focussed directive. The art of Dana Bush, Amanda Oberacher, and Elisa Sereno-Janz worked as a cohesive exhibit at a most appropriate venue. To enter into the AWA's offices was less like entering into a white walled box gallery, and more like being welcomed into the warmer environs of an artist's studio. The lighting and wood floors added to the intimate feeling of the exhibit, as the artists wanted less to hit you over the head with their message, but to educate and beguile the viewer with the imagery and their reality of shifting balances in the environment.

The background of the three artists lead them to take different approaches to their subjects. Bush, as an ecologist and biologist, takes as her subject matter the interconnectedness of the species. Oberacher, like Bush a recent graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design, focuses her paintings on the effect of environmental abuse on wildlife. Sereno-Janz is still a student at ACAD, but the maturity garnered from her professional career as a musician is evident in her masterly paint strokes, and the lyrical sinuous lines of her paintings.

Dana Bush's three mixed media pieces in the show were entirely concerned with ecosystems and the delicate balance of relationships. From *Only 13 Males Left* (Greater Sage-grouse)(2011, Silk, natural dyes, mordants, and wood) which outlines the tragic status of the sage-grouse on the prairies, to her *Sweetness of Bees* (2013, silk, natural dyes, mordants, soywax, maple and cherry wood) detailing the intricate role that bees play in the pollination and success of the development of fruiting plants, she gently steers the viewer to a greater awareness and appreciation of her message. Incorporating "didactic panels" with her work, Bush seeks to educate her viewer scientifically, while illustrating her message in visually arresting format. Using compostable products such as silk, natural dyes, and organic subject matter, Bush shows a sensitivity about her belief system that is intrinsic to the subject matter.

Amanda Oberacher is a painter who critiques the abuse of the animals and mammals who inhabit this earth with humans, and yet systematically lose in the human quest for "progress". Her work concentrates on current environmental issues such as oil exploration into caribou calving grounds and the effects of oil spills on marine life and water fowl. Her painting *AT1 Transients: Prince William Sound* (2012, recycled acrylic paint,

acrylic paint and polybitumen, 48" x 96") is a stunning canvas of a pod of Orcas striving to break through a thick surface crust of polybitumen. Research into the title shows us that prior to the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, there were over 22 whales in the AT1 group. This AT1 Transient Killer Whale group was one of the most frequently encountered groups and in the 1980s was sighted year round in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Scientists estimate that there are only 7 killer whales remaining in this group. Her dramatic representation of this pod, struggling to breathe through the thickly encrusted layer of oil, while tear shaped droplets of oil coat their bodies and sink in the sea around them, is visually arresting and heartbreaking.

Elisa Sereno-Janz's work was the least representational of the three artists exhibited at AWA's Hillhurst Cottage and thus complements and allows for a moment of quiet reflection between the other artists' work. Her oil on wood panel paintings are abstractions of Google Earth satellite images of prairie river valleys that she has walked, hiked, and known intimately. Her love of the earth and fascination of the role of prairie rivers in the arid climate of Alberta informs and shapes her paintings. The symbol of a river as it cuts through her paintings are read as such, but the hay fields, grain farms and evidence of



Only 13 Males Left (Greater Sage-Grouse)

PHOTO: © D. BUSH

the human hand are almost romantic in their rendering. We wander with her in the valleys of her memories, and the paintings are dreamy reflections with initially little statement about man's effect on his surroundings. In *The Bow River, South of Bassano* (2013, Oil paint on panel, 48" x 48") we are beguiled by the colours and shapes she creates on her panel. It is only when we break out of this state that we notice the shapes of the fields as created by human-kind and of our impact on the ecosystem. Sereno-Janz's musings reflect the force of water and flooding (as we so recently experienced in June earlier this year) and comments on the intractable capriciousness of waterways and the



Area 1002

PHOTO: © A. OBERACHER



A Sweetness of Bees
PHOTO: © J. Kelly

effect of human intervention. What did it look like before the imprint of the human hand?

In experiencing the three artist's work in the exhibit, one comes to a horrifying realization that the viewer is complicit in the disasters that are crippling the artists' subject matter. In the quest for more oil and industrial development on the prairies, the habitat of the greater sage-grouse is being destroyed. Between 1988 and 2006, 90 percent of this species' population died out. Although we have succeeded through the courts in forcing the federal government to issue an emergency protection order for this iconic species we still wonder

if actions will be taken in time to save the sage-grouse. Tanker routes off the coasts of Alaska and British Columbia invite human error and, if it occurs, the destruction of sea life. And the hand of man again plays in Sereno-Janz's paintings as she reflects on the manner in which we reshape our environment to suit our needs and too infrequently the needs of the animals that depend on natural grasslands, woodlands, and clean water.

The three artists in the show *A Shifting Balance* tried to illustrate to us what is happening to our planet and our relationship to it.

Their practice is concerned with illustrating and educating their viewer to become more than a bystander. Become instead an active positive force for protecting those who have no voice in their destruction. In their poignant and arresting art, Bush, Oberacher, and Sereno-Janz have succeeded in bringing the message to us that we need to be active in protecting those that have no voice and our shared environment.



Christine is a fourth year student at ACAD with a practice concerned with social and environmental issues. Her most recent exhibit was part of a reflection on Treaty 7, entitled Past, Present and Imagined. A professional costume designer for film, she spends as much time as she can exploring Alberta's wilderness with her horse. 🐾

PHOTOS (from top to bottom):

ATI Transients, Prince William Sound

PHOTO: © A. OBERACHER

Red Deer River, South of Schrader Creek

PHOTO: © E. SERENO-JANZ

Bow River, South of Bassano

PHOTO: © E. SERENO-JANZ

