

Confluence of Place and Vision: Art from the Sea of Cortez

Ironwood Art Gallery, Arizona- Sonora Desert Museum

March 16 – June 2, 2013

In the cutting edginess of the contemporary art scene, art shows themed on “natural history” may seem passé. In fact, in some minds, representational realism is cliché as a genre, its freshness wrung out by centuries of masters whose works saturate art history classes and world museums. But, somehow, the vitality and elegance of Nature and all her manifestations still inspire and inform great art.

Case in point, the Sea of Cortez exhibit currently showing in the Ironwood Gallery at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum—a collection of work whose diversity and quality took me by surprise, all the more so because I knew that it was the fruit of a gaggle of artists who were invited to explore the famed Nacapule Canyon, the pristine Estero Soldado, and a number of other seductive land and surfscapes near San Carlos, Sonora, to find inspiration and subject matter for a new exhibit. Apparently, the surf, beaches, mangroves, islands, canyons, mountains, and the creatures that sprout, crawl, ooze, flip, fly, walk, and pad within, above, or below them did not disappoint, because the vibrant life and wonder of that semitropical place where land meets sea is invested in the art now on the walls and stands of this gallery.

When David Wagner, art historian and author of *American Wildlife Art*, invited thirty-odd adventurers to participate in his bussed-in flash art colony, he chose accomplished artists working in various media and styles; so the show includes work in pen and ink, watercolor, gouache, pastels, acrylics, oils, and bronzes (bas relief and full form), as well as a terra cotta and photography. From mini to grand scale. From sketches to graphic expressions to exquisite hyperrealism. But, if the range of media is diverse and refreshing, the range of subjects and interpretations is a joy!

In fact, to describe these paintings by their subjects would almost demean their artistic expression. A Sally lightfoot crab (immortalized in John Steinbeck’s writings) painted in oils by Susan Fox is not just a crab. It is a powerful impression of light and texture and color in a hard shell, poised on the edge of dartage. The oversized portrait describes an intense being, whose eyes stare into those of the viewer. In Susan Fisher’s portrait of a green sea turtle, we *feel* the forward motion of its solid weight within a living froth of *mysisid* shrimp, grounded in tones of blues and reds that speak of darkly moving waters and seaweeds.

By virtue of Wagner’s immersion in the art of natural history and his experience as a curator, juror, and museum director (among his posts, the Leigh Yawkey Woodsen Museum of Art), he knew the artists on that bus to the Gulf of California were already hooked on the beauty, grace, power, whimsies, horrors, or humor of Nature. Most had already leapt on the explicit details of nature’s wild forms, organic or geologic. After all, art begins with Looking Carefully, understanding and interpreting the lines and colors, shapes and textures, and gesture, contrast, movement, and character of a thing in its place—be it a woman, a city, a war, a landscape, or a wild creature. So the men and women in this group were already dedicated, devoted “examiners”; one might say “by nature” but also “of nature.” Some are even

downright naturalists, and the tags with a number of paintings are primers in the ecology of that niche of landscape.

But attestations to general authority or inspiration will not suffice to convince you to see the show. Let me describe a few examples of the works to entice you to drive over Gates Pass to the gallery at the Desert Museum.

First, John Pitcher's large, elegant beachscape, "The Gathering," aptly entitled to convey one dimension of that place in that moment: birds, in cacophony and peace. You can almost hear the screams of those flapping. You can clearly see the hunger in the open beak of a larger-than-life and masterfully realized yellow-footed gull, a dead fish at his feet. Behind him, elegant and royal terns, black headdresses splayed, actively possessing the beach. The delicate break of the waves, the backdrop of mountains subdued. Exquisite use of light illuminates form and directs attention, orchestrating the action on the canvas. This painting, alone, is worth the trip to the Desert Museum.

But there are many more delights to be had. The miniatures of Wes and Rachel Siegrist caress the mind. Crisp, brilliant, colorfully rendered postcard-size watercolors of village, sea, and canyon—a phainopepla amid tropical foliage, Brandt's cormorants crowding on rocks, shrimpers in their boats, or the articulated space and old buildings in town. Solid forms, well visioned, delicately represented.

We are compelled to dwell on "El Dorado" sculpted by John Kobald. This big fish flies out of the sea to belie its medium—heavy bronze. Around it, also rising, flying fish rush to escape its quest for food. With convincing gesture and form, this operatic piece conveys monumental struggle. It is a magnificent eternal story in bronze.

Several acrylics by Carel Brest van Kempen fire up the aesthetic and analytical nodes in our brain, not to mention, the funny bone. The title of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" already instructs us to look beyond the superficial scene of an orange-throated side-blotched lizard chasing a blue-throated side blotched lizard into the foreground, while in the middle ground, two yellow-throated side-blotched lizards race to places out of sight. So skillfully are these lizards placed into their (oh-so-accurately depicted) habitat, they seem to leap across the canvas. And you can almost see delight in the yellow-throated lizard's eyes. If you read the entertaining anecdote of natural history in the caption, you'll know why. Then, Brest van Kempen's Nacapule Canyon is like a "where's Waldo" of literally dozens of species accurately depicted in a rich natural backdrop.

But there are too many artworks to detail. Nick Wilson's watercolor, "Lonely Cove," is simply stunning. Compact, strong, inviting—hard to tear your eyes away from. John Agnew's "Cortez Mangroves" captures a sublime stillness, a dignity between night and day on the edge of a purple evening, with green mangrove foliage vibrant against lavenders punctuated by white birds. In Kim Diment's "Three Amigos" three coatimundis travel, almost unnoticed, across the rocky canyon paths. Distinct but not overdone, the landscape and vegetation are as inviting as the charismatic creatures.

In Kim Duffek's subtle, engaging acrylic, the eye sweeps into the distance of a beach scene, with vulnerable flowers and aggressive invasives in the fore, called out, once again in caption. Rachel Ivanyi's

delightful illustrative watercolor of garden eels on the ocean floor easily elicits a smile (and an unavoidable affection for an otherwise poorly known creature.)

Each in his or her inimitable style, these artists present both a deep understanding of the ecological processes and forms, while they express the nature, the essence, the meaning of a thing. True, you won't find abstractions in this show, but you'll find the abstract tensions in line and contrast and color in the representations. True, you won't find surrealism, or cubism, or pointillism. But you'll find the inspiration these artists found where water meets land at the Sea of Cortez.

Finally, this show stands out as a slice of art history. Patrons of art are key to great creative production in any era, and for this place on earth the Susan K. Black Foundation and the Michael and Priscilla Baldwin Foundation provided support. But who were those individuals populating an ephemeral art colony at the seaside and led by Sea of Cortez expert, Richard Brusca. The full roster of those who had a rollicking good time, seeing the best of the best, connecting with the elements, species, and land in a real and honest way, you'll find at the museum gallery. And how will their creations affect the course of political or social events in our culture? Will they inspire conservation? Hopefully so.

The exhibit at the Ironwood Gallery will be up through June 2, 2013. Generally open 10:00 to 4:00 daily, and free with admission to the Desert Museum. Call to check gallery hours for the day you plan to visit. The Ironwood Gallery may, on occasion, be closed for special events. Kudos to all those at the ASDM Art Institute who helped put the show together.

Written by Linda M. Brewer

Linda M. Brewer is a writer, editor, and graphic designer working in southern Arizona since 1976. Currently, she is Manager of the ASDM Press. For nearly twenty-five years, she has worked and/or freelanced for The Nature Conservancy, the Desert Museum, and Tucson Botanical Gardens, among others. Early in her career, she was Assistant Curator of Education at the Tucson Museum of Art and served as associate editor of *Arizona Artist*. She holds degrees in Fine Art, Creative Writing, and English from the University of Arizona.