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Extinction of Experience

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EXTINCTION OF EXPERIENCE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
Eileen Ash Powell
May 2007

Accepted by:
Mike Vatalaro, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

Three interrelated themes—beauty, control, and loss of nature—emerge as integral to my artistic examination of humanity’s relationship to the web of life. My sculptures explore ideas of control, memory, and loss by contrasting organic ceramic forms that characterize nature with manmade materials such as ropes, chains, nets, or monofilament that represent the control humans exert over nature. All my sculptural forms are bound, wrapped, entangled, or in some way struggling against a physical force of great size and scale that symbolizes humans’ domination over nature. My work seeks to reveal the emotion of loss by enlightening the viewer to the nonexistent, the absent, the silhouette, or the impression of what was once there. Ultimately my art provides a faint memory or spirit of the beautiful places, creatures, and experiences forever lost as well as a warning sign for the future if we do not feel, understand, and act.

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INTRODUCTION

Everyday I am amazed and awed by the beauty and complexity of the natural world. I also recognize that humankind is dependent on a healthy and functioning environment for our physical wellbeing, which requires us to control and use nature for our ends. I am, however, concerned by the disconnected and callous way that these activities often take place. When examining my thoughts regarding this situation more closely, three interrelated themes—beauty, control, and loss of nature—emerge as integral to my artistic exploration and examination of humanity's relationship to the web of life.

Ultimately I am creating a visual statement of my views and thoughts regarding the beauty, struggle, and loss of species in hopes of inspiring an emotive understanding of the importance nature has to our quality of life; not only our physical well-being but also our emotional health. Author Robert Pyle warns that an “extinction of experience” would have dire consequences. Landscapes will lose meaning without the creatures that define them and our world will become lonely and silent without other life (Pyle, 1993).

My sculptures explore ideas of control, memory, loss and memorial by contrasting organic clay forms that characterize nature with manmade materials such as ropes, chains, cable, nets or monofilament that represent the control humans exert over nature.. Often the organic sculptural forms are bound, wrapped, entangled, or in some way struggle against a physical force of great size, scale, and magnitude. This in essence, symbolizes human's domination over nature.

By presenting sculptures at scales equal to or larger than the audience, I seek to create an environment that promotes direct physical and emotional interaction. This interaction compels viewers to consider the magnitude and seriousness of species loss as they weave through and around the installations. I want my audience to be confronted with the volume and size of the works in hopes they will feel the emotion of loss.

Ultimately my work seeks to reveal the emotion of loss by enlightening the viewer to the nonexistent, the absent, the silhouette, or the impression of what was once there. The ghost white clay provides a faint memory or spirit of the beautiful places, creatures, and experiences forever lost as well as a warning sign of what may pass if we do not feel, consider, and act. My hope is my art will awaken viewers to the remarkable splendor and uniqueness wild creatures give to our planet. If we recognize the beauty of these animals, perhaps then we will take the time to contemplate our role in their extinction.

“Humanity is exalted not because we are so far above other living creatures, but because knowing them well elevates the very concept of life.”

E. O. Wilson, 1984, *Biophilia* (Wilson, 1984)

MEMORY OF LOSS

“The air was literally filled with Pigeons; the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse, the dung fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow; and the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose.”

J. J. Audubon, *Birds of America, Volume V*, 1840

Do I miss the passenger pigeon? (To miss implies caring or love, so I must answer NO.) How can I truly miss or love what I have never known? Despite their once overwhelming dominance of the American landscape and skyscape (Audubon, 1995), passenger pigeons are not only absent from my generation’s experience, but from our stories, art, language, thoughts, and even memories. Since their extinction in the early 1900s, these once beautiful birds have vanished from our collective thoughts; we have no understanding of what we have lost. Our landscape is comparatively silent, forever changed due to our activities.

In my piece, *Memory of Loss*, I explore the ideas of loss and generational amnesia through the use of fossil-like forms. Generational amnesia, a term coined by psychologist Peter Kahn, refers to the idea that while change is inevitable, there is a general and pervasive erosion of what humans consider a “healthy” environment because each subsequent generation has no recollection of lost species or widespread changes and therefore has a different baseline of experience (Kahn, 1999).

In this sculpture I want to evoke the viewer’s memories and create a memorial by using the impressions of endangered animals—feet, skin, bones, skulls, feathers, scales, hoofs, beaks, teeth, and jaws—arranged on large interconnected tabular forms. Through the use of multiple and sometimes repetitive textures,

patterns, and forms, the tablets, which hang like a screen, juxtapose a sense of the exotic and wonderful with the cold white layered fossils of former life. The idea of fossils suggests a historical record of existence, but without portraying the essence—the important characteristics—of the creatures, which leave the audience with only the impression of what was once there. The clay records only energy, marks, and gestures. Whether locally or globally extinct, these creatures are unknown to our daily experience and therefore absent (lost) from our stories, language, and memories. Through the sheer numbers of impressions used to create the tablets, I seek to portray the idea of mass apocalyptic losses while also remaining personal through my choice of included species and the use of video projected photos of my past.

On the other side of the tablets a scrolling list of species provides a reminder of the endangered and what lives are at stake, while the emerging background photos help me remember my own personal losses. The video is a listing of world wide endangered species and the photos are of my family's chimpanzee farm. The photos help put a face to the names of the animals on the list and create a sense of empathy and understanding of what could be lost.

At one time in my life, I have experienced each of the animals and plants used to create these impressions, many of which are chronicled in the video projection. For example, the coconut palm was always a part of my childhood. The rustling of fronds in the wind and the smell and taste of the fruit color my earliest memories of my family, my father, and my home. Several were outside my bedroom window and at night as I fell asleep, the sounds of the palm fronds played in and out of my dreams. When I was sixteen, I remember reading in the paper about “Lethal

Yellow,” a disease that eventually killed all the coconut palms in Florida. I felt as if I was losing a family member; I knew this feeling of loss and the void that I thought would never go away.

Palm

Tall, slender, arching upward
Trunks bending and shaking
Each year bringing fruit and drink

Great fans of green, shading summer sun
Rustling marks the coming cool evening breeze
Soothing my restless soul

Flexible and lithe, withstanding storm
Part of my childhood—marking home
One day here, now gone forever

Now I struggle, not only with the loss of the palm (and my childhood home), but with remembering. Everyone will experience loss in their life, but forgetting what or who is lost may be the most distressing aspect of the passage of time and the inevitable amnesia.

An intriguing aspect of building this sculpture is the process of transforming a soft malleable substance into a permanent hard structure. Clay, in its wet stage, allows for freedom of movement and manipulation, yet, as it dries, it becomes fragile and brittle. However, once the clay is fired, it becomes hard and a more permanent sculptural form that can communicate history, culture and as evidenced in my work, specific concepts and ideas not unlike fossils that formed from thousands of years of heat and pressure.

Like Alexis Rockman and Mark Dion, I feel a commitment to address current issues by mixing art and science (Dion, 2004). My work portrays a fundamental concern for the disappearance of our natural world and its' biodiversity.

The idea of merging art and science has the potential to reach a greater audience and present the issue in a visual, compassionate, and emotional way. Also like Maya Lin (Glowen, 1991), I have created impressions and a list of names to memorialize the endangered and focus on the emotion of loss.

Ultimately what I have tried to create is a memorial to these animals and yet they are not all lost. So really this sculpture becomes more of a warning sign of impending death, for the future, if no one sees, feels, or acts. Our tendency toward amnesia suggests that we will make the same mistakes again and again. Will we find stories, art, or a language of beauty, experience, and loss, or are we destined for a lonely, silent world filled with only distant memories and fossils?

“Creatures who have traveled with us through the ages are now apparently doomed, as their habitat—and the old, old habitat of humans—falls before the slow-motion explosion of expanding world economies.”

Gary S. Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 1990

MARKET VALUE

"None of Nature's landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild."
John Muir, *Our National Parks*, 1901

What do we really value in our life? For me it is not a thing or an object. I value experience. I value the experience of walking in the woods, hearing a bird's song, smelling salt air or the pungent odor of a salt marsh. I value my senses becoming awakened to my surroundings. The idea of placing value on wild nature and its wonder is closely related to the time, experiences, and attention given to one's surroundings.

I chose the elephant for my examination of the themes of value, commodification, loss, and amnesia for several reasons. For me, the elephant is symbolic of my past. My family owned elephants, and as a kid I rode many. My father, who brought many exotic creatures into my life, died when I was young, which brought about the end of my relationship with elephants. Due to this event, the elephants ultimately symbolize the destruction of my 'Florida'. On a global level elephants are an icon for all threatened and extinct animals. They are the largest land animal. They communicate and socialize, cry and laugh, remember, mourn, love, and struggle to live; and, finally, elephants are charismatic creatures that capture our hearts.

My sculpture, *Market Value*, uses the imagery of elephant tusks to portray and memorialize the grandeur of the elephant. Through a gestural interpretation of the elephant form, the hanging tusks express the spirit of the elephant and create a memorial to remember this majestic creature. This representation however provides an incomplete experience that serves to stir memories of the viewers' own personal recollection of elephants. Like Rachel Whiteread (Schneider, 2002), I created a sculpture that portrays the absent, the void, or the negative of what was once there like a skeletal sketch of the elephant.

The industrial palette, stacked with tusks for export, portrays the historical and continuing commodification of the elephant, while the ropes represent the capture and control of not only the elephant but of all wild nature. This construct represents the idea of valuing a product made from an animal over the life of the animal. When tusks, horns, skin, or fur are taken for human luxury, enjoyment, or convenience, the product is valued over the animal's life. These items become objects, trinkets, adornments, or aphrodisiacs. But the ivory tusk will never equal a wild and living elephant in grandeur. Conspicuous consumption of the exotic is thought to bestow a sense of the exotic and worldliness onto the owner. The tusk may last for thousands of years and may be passed from generation to generation, but in the end we are left with only an object and not the grand experience of life.

This installation piece ultimately provides the audience with a scale that promotes interaction and reflection. By using life sized tusk forms, the piece contrasts the physical characteristics of the elephant—large, strong, and exotic, with the notion that killing and commodifying this animal in fact denies and potentially extinguishes these characteristics forever.

257: Estimated amount, in tons, of ivory poached worldwide last year

23,000: Number of elephants that were killed illegally to reap that much ivory

*\$340: Cost per pound of ivory on the black market, up from \$50 about 20 years ago
Time Magazine, March 1, 2007*

THE END OF THE LINE

The term control refers to imprisonment, repression, restriction, restraint, or suppression. Like all animals, humans are reliant upon nature to provide food as well as resources for our wellbeing. Currently, however, there is a tension between what humans need to exist and what we desire. This tension provides the backdrop for the sculpture *End of the Line* which addresses the idea of humans' dominance over nature. Like John Dahlsen (Spike, 2004) and Ernesto Neto (Malherbe, 2006), my work creates an undersea environment by using an installation of hanging forms that the viewer must navigate through. The repetitive grid of nets references humans' desire for control and order. This order and control provides an impression of efficiency and the manufacturing process. The number and density of nets seeks to dominate the viewing space in an effort to portray the scale of commercial fishing currently occurring. The nets are weighted down with a mechanical device suggesting they are manmade traps.

Inside the nets, the porcelain slip-cast fish forms appear to curl and resist the nets implying a consciousness and desire for life and freedom. The clay's easily manipulated texture allows my hands the potential to push, pull, fold, carve, slam, twist, pinch and maneuver to form and ultimately express this struggle. The abstract fish forms are hung at eye level in an effort to physically confront the viewer and evoke an emotional response to this struggle and fight for life.

CONCLUSION

In my work, I have used evocative ceramic forms to express the beauty, control, and loss of nature in an effort to communicate current issues of personal and global importance. I hope this body of work communicates the threat our natural world currently faces and demonstrates the potential losses we face. By conveying the idea of loss, I hope to memorialize place, time, and experience in a way that transports the viewer and causes reflection regarding not only nature's existence but our own. Ultimately I desire to initiate a conversation, and create an awareness that allows the viewer to contemplate their own experiences with nature's beauty, struggles, and its loss.

“The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us.”

E. O. Wilson, 1984, *Biophilia*

PLATES



1.1 Memory of Loss, 2007



1.2 Memory of Loss, 2007



1.3 Market Value, 2007



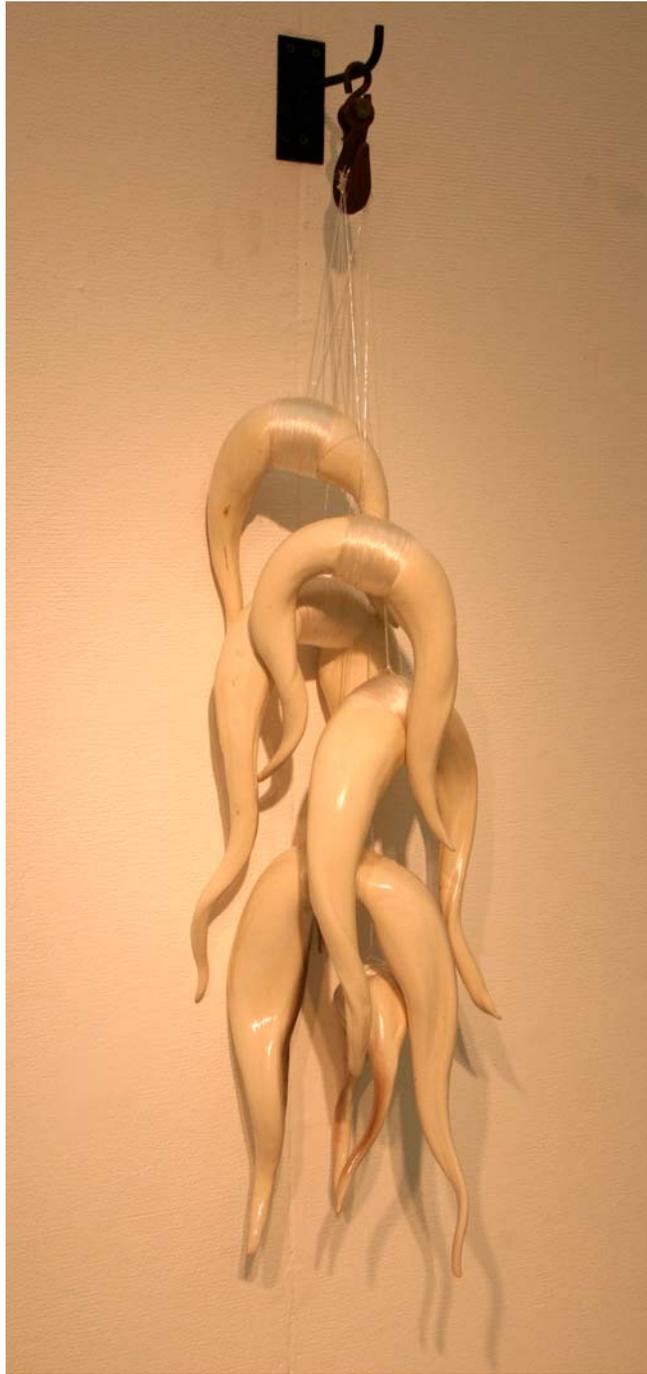
1.4 End of the Line, 2007



1.5 Collateral Damage I, 2007



1.6 Elliot Key, Florida Bay, Whitewater Bay, Ten Thousand Islands, 2007



1.7 Collateral Damage II, 2007



1.8 Wings, 2007



1.9 *Extinction (front)*, 2007



1.10 *Extinction (back)*, 2007

APPENDIX

Clay Bodies

Cone 6- White Sculpture Clay

Grolleg	20%
#6 Tile Kaolin	15%
Tennessee Ball Clay	15%
Frite 3124	5%
Alumina calained/Hydrate	5%
Wollastonite	15%
Molochite	25%

Cone 6 - White Stoneware

Grolleg	20%
Tennessee Ball Clay	20%
Foundry Hill Cream	20%
Hawthorne Bond	20%
Kona F-4 Feldspar	10%
Tale	10%

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