

Transcendence Through Ephemeral Sculpture of Foreign Fauna

Andrew Romero

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2020

Committee:

Michael Swaine, Chair

Doug Jeck

Ann Gale

Adair Rounthwaite

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Art + Art History + Design

© Copyright 2020

Andrew Romero

University of Washington

Abstract

Transcendence Through Ephemeral Sculpture of Foreign Fauna

Andrew Romero

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Assistant Professor, Michael Swaine
3D4M: ceramics + glass + sculpture

The overarching purpose of my practice has been an effort to find personal fulfillment while living my religion through making sculpture. For the last several years, I have primarily used plants as my subject. I have always loved enveloping myself in nature and experienced a significant awakening to the bizarre and wonderful world of flora in Micronesia at a young age that continues to permeate the best of my dreams. The excitement of adventure and discovery has never left me, resulting in the creation of fanciful objects or immersive experiences. The complexity, natural attractiveness, and variety of nature provide an enticing challenge that fulfills a personal and cultural desire to invest labor or careful dexterity into my work. Careful observation of nature has led me to appreciate and even celebrate its more gruesome or unpleasant aspects such as death, decay, and disease. To this end, I have utilized impermanent media such as unfired clay, wax, and metal that decompose or rust while on display. This work has established a foundation of curiosity for an immensely satisfying life-long occupation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Minority Influences.....	2
Doctrinal Influence.....	3
Religious Cultural Influence.....	5
Observation of Nature.....	11
God and Nature.....	17
Sexuality, the Bizarre, Adventure and Discovery.....	19
Conclusion.....	25
Appendix.....	26
Opposition in All Things.....	31
References.....	33

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Intercessory Offering</i> , 2019.....	4
Figure 2. <i>Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish</i> , 2019.....	10
Figure 3. <i>(Still) Life with Plastic</i> , 2019.....	10
Figure 4. <i>Life and Death</i> , 2018.....	12
Figure 5. <i>Beauty in Decay</i> , 2019.....	13
Figure 6. <i>Grace in Death</i> , 2019.....	13
Figure 7. <i>In the Valley of the Furnace of Affliction</i> (before the heat detail), 2019.....	14
Figure 8. <i>In the Valley of the Furnace of Affliction</i> , 2019.....	14
Figure 9. <i>Doryanthes palmeri transiens</i> (leaf detail), 2020.....	16
Figure 10. <i>Adventure and Discovery</i> , 2019.....	20
Figure 11. <i>Intercessory Offering</i> , 2019.....	26
Figure 12. <i>Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish</i> (day 3), 2019.....	27
Figure 13. <i>Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish</i> (mist detail), 2019.....	27
Figure 14. <i>(Still) Life with Plastic</i> (detail), 2019.....	28
Figure 15. <i>(Still) Life with Plastic</i> (Chiranthodendron detail), 2019.....	28
Figure 16. <i>Grace in Death</i> (detail), 2019.....	28
Figure 17. <i>Doryanthes palmeri transiens</i> , 2020.....	29
Figure 18. <i>Doryanthes palmeri transiens</i> (detail), 2020.....	30

INTRODUCTION

My experience at the University of Washington has been an ever-increasing clarification of the most fundamental questions about artmaking, an intense effort to get as close to *truth* as possible. These efforts have led me to study psychology, religion, botany, craft, technology, anthropology, art, and art history. Because of my research, I believe I have come closer, but I know there is still much to uncover.

Why have I chosen to be an artist? At the beginning of my time as a graduate student, I felt compelled to acknowledge that as a religious person, I strive so that everything I do and every decision I make is based on the foundation of my religion and my relationship with deity. I am studying art because I sincerely believe God specifically wants me to study art, culture, and nature. There is an infinite variety of choices within these topics, yet I have, in large part, almost explicitly chosen foreign plants as my subject. The simple reason for this choice is that these are the things that I find the most significant personal satisfaction in creating. In a sense, this is a matter of survival. Finding satisfaction through one's daily efforts is a primal desire. This can be alternately described as a search for happiness. I feel privileged and blessed that satisfying hunger is not the principal fulfillment of my endeavors.

It may be easy to deduce that as a religious person, God and religion are the foundation for my search for happiness and survival. I have recognized that this influence has two branches that affect my views of art and artmaking. My belief in the principles of doctrine is separate from the influence of cultural biases that exist in my church. Doctrine dictates how I view and interact with nature, where cultural bias effects how nature is represented. Both have an impact on what I have attempted to declare through my work. My observation of nature has led me to explore specific concepts such as complexity, perfection and imperfection, attraction and

repulsion, adventure and discovery, and to question and observe my own and other human interaction with nature.

MINORITY INFLUENCES

Again and again, the discussion is brought up surrounding those belonging to a minority. Are they a minority artist, or merely an artist that happens to belong to a minority? Queer art, Mormon art, Jewish art, Black art. We feel the strong need to apply labels to everything in an effort to understand it better, to have a means of comparison or context. Some feel strongly that they should first be considered through the lens of their minority regardless of what they make or its aesthetic ties to a particular movement. It is utterly inconsiderate not to address someone according to their preference. It may be hard, perhaps, to see the connection, and the individual may not have the correct words in their defense, but we surely should try.¹

¹ The following roundtable discussion occurred in 1968 during The Black Artist in America: A Symposium

Richard Hunt: I think you needlessly confuse the issues by insisting that there's something about living in a black community that makes your art black. That's just not true.

Tom Lloyd: I'm not just talking about me. The white community hasn't accepted Black artists for years and years, and they're not ready to now, really. And so I'm not just an artist. Therefore I'm a Black artist. If white society is not going to accept my work, I'm a black artist. I'm not a white artist.

Jacob Lawrence: I've seen a couple of your pieces and I would put it this way: I think you're an artist who happens to be Black, but you're not a Black artist. See, that's the difference.

Mr. Lloyd: No, I'm a Black artist who has refused to be conditioned...

Mr. Lawrence: Wait a minute. From what I've seen of your work—although you may be a terrific artist—there's no possible way that I can see anyone in the Black community *relating* to your work. They may respond to it aesthetically, they may feel that it's a terrific piece—but I can't see how anyone would relate to it, and I don't see why they should.

Mr. Lloyd: They would relate to it if they knew that I am Black. That's very important.

Mr. Lawrence: That's not important in a work of art.

Mr. Lloyd: It's important to black people, you know. I'm not only concerned with art. With me art is a secondary thing.

Mr. Lawrence: I think you're begging the question here and you're making an excuse that you don't have to make. You can be a very fine artist and I think you'll be contributing. There's no reason why you have to paint or work in a certain way and have the image of Blackness written on your work to be a fine artist.

Mr. Lloyd: It doesn't have to be written on. But don't tell me that black people can't relate to my work. I know what they say. They say, "Dig it, a Black cat did that." And that means something to them, I know it does.

William T. Williams: But happens when you're not there?

Mr. Lloyd: I'm talking about my work being meaningful to Black people, and that's very important.

Darby English has suggested Black abstract color artists were living the standards central to Black art by choosing to freely express themselves artistically (2016, pp. 36, 163).

It is undeniable that those with strong minority ties will be influenced by their beliefs in some way. That influence can be seen or described in everything I make, but my work varies in its direct ties to religion. Occasionally, the work may be best understood and appreciated by those with a similar background; other times, it may be best suited to those with an academically artistic understanding. Seldomly am I brazen enough to approach my religion by wrestling with my most sacred beliefs through vehement, unharnessed artistic expression. At these times, the work is off-putting, sacrilegious, and offensive to both parties, but perhaps, this is also where the most remarkable growth occurs.

Doctrinal Influence

The scripture that has the most considerable influence on how I view the world and its living inhabitants is:

Yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart; Yea for food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul. And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used, with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion.²

With this in mind, I feel the responsibility to be a trustworthy steward of earth's resources while portraying plants and flowers in their purpose to benefit the soul.

The other religious precept that has heavily influenced my work is that of sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice is an essential concept in my belief because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is

² Section 59:18-20, Doctrine and Covenants.

central to my religion: God himself coming to earth to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin to enable all humanity the possibility to live eternally with him again.³

This principle appears as references to altars, symbols of altars, or in the impermanence of the work. None of my pieces are a sacrifice themselves, but a metaphor for sacrifice.

Graduate school has been an unimaginably difficult experience, so continuing to make work at all in these circumstances is a sacrifice of my own wellbeing to do what I hope will be best for my family, and an act of obedience to study those things I believe God wants me to.

I am also interested in the need to sacrifice the negative things of our lives to become better people, such as sacrificing pollution, wastefulness, or sinful behavior. Perhaps the most directly religious work I have completed is *Intercessory Offering*. In this work (fig. 1 & 11),



Figure 1. *Intercessory Offering*, 2019

³“Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Ne. 11:14, Book of Mormon).

while dressed in all white, I used my body to wash away a drawing done in red clay of plants with thorns. The thorned plants represent sinful or negative behaviors, and my actions represent my belief that we can be washed clean and made pure through the body of Christ, specifically the sacrifice he made with his own body and blood.

Other subjects carry greater personal significance than plants, such as my wife and children. I also religiously believe that profound love and interest for other people is paramount to living a successful life.⁴ However, in the past, I have discovered that I have an extreme disinterest in rendering the human body either two-dimensionally or three-dimensionally. I have also found efforts to explore adolescence through cartoons remarkably unsatisfying. I have come to acknowledge without guilt that what I feel compelled to make in the studio, although related, may not directly reflect my top personal priorities.

Religious Cultural Influence

My research has recently led me to discover that a biased community has substantially shaped my artistic tastes and preferences. There appears to be a bias toward representation and realism in the art and education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In church buildings, the art on display is considerably didactic, visually representating a story or concept. The art that exists in the temples of the church is decorative, serving to create an atmosphere of purity, holiness, and reverence predominantly consisting of idyllic landscapes and portraits of Christ. Craftsmanship and skill-based techniques were the only things I observed being taught at my alma mater, Brigham Young University-Idaho. Those who choose painting almost exclusively

⁴ “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandments. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (Matt 22:37-39, Authorized King James Version).”

painted either landscapes or portraits, sculpture students created sculptures of figures in clay, and in “ceramics” we were only taught how to produce functional ceramic forms.

In 1972 Lorin Wheelwright, the dean of the College of Fine Arts at Brigham Young University published a book entitled *Mormon Arts Volume One*. Artworks were included in this volume because they were completed by artists who “believe that a work of art which stirs the human heart to love God and fellowman should have superior form, substance, and expression.”⁵

Laura Allred Hurtado, the current Global Acquisitions Art Curator for the Church History Museum, has noted that “Some have taken statements like these to suggest that there exists a form that is superior to others, often holding up realism as the ideal while simultaneously disparaging and dismissing all other aesthetic practices, not on grounds of preference, but on grounds of morality.”⁶

It is easy to understand why this bias might exist.⁷ As a people, church members have an affinity toward hard work. Church scriptures contain numerous verses that praise hard work and industry⁸, and when the early saints settled to the Salt Lake area, they named their territory “Deseret,” an ancient word for honeybee, “a symbol of hard work, industry, and cooperation.”⁹ It would therefore make sense that church members may prefer an artistic form that demands high levels of skill and craftsmanship, which representation often requires. Another possible explanation for this bias may be that as church members, we are frequently taught about the

⁵ Wheelwright, L. F., & Woodbury L. J. (Eds.). (1972). *Mormon arts volume one*. Brigham Young University Press.

⁶ Hurtado, L. A. (2017). *The Immediate Present*. Mormon Arts Center.

⁷ There is some evidence that representative artwork is generally preferred and perhaps more accessible. In 1993 Ulrich published findings on studies of psychiatric patients at a Swedish hospital where patients “responded positively to wall art dominated by natural content (a rural landscape, a vase of flowers) but tended to react negatively to abstract paintings and prints in which the content was either ambiguous or unintelligible.” After fifteen years, they noted the only paintings physically attacked by patients were those that were abstract in content (p. 105).

⁸ 2 Ne. 5:17; Mosiah 23:5; Alma 10:4; Alma 23:18; Ether 10:22; D&C 56:17; D&C 88:124.

⁹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (2020). *Saints: The story of the Church of Jesus Christ in latter days, No unhallowed hand* (Vol. 2).

creation of the earth by God, including all things on the face of it. We emphasize the beauty of this world, the beauty of the creation of God's hands. So, by representing what God has made aesthetically, we praise and glorify God.

It is also interesting to note that in the same volume, Wheelwright states one basic concept demonstrated by "Mormon art" is "the importance of finding and possessing truth and beauty wherever they exist..."¹⁰ I became aware that this was a mainstream philosophy that defines the art of the culture of the Church *after* I had decided to make it a key research topic in my graduate education.

It is somewhat disappointing to discover that even though I thought I had developed independent tastes and preferences toward art, I am honestly not starkly different from most members of my community. I find artworks that demonstrate a great understanding of material and craft refreshingly compelling. With this recent realization, I have come to accept that my work can be more advantageous by consciously contributing to the definition of art in the Church.

I love a good challenge. From the time of my first art classes, I always chose projects that would prove to be the most difficult. It continues to be how I choose what projects to work on now. There have been times observers ask why I do not just lead a group on a botanical tour instead of creating my work; in part, the answer is this need to challenge myself. In this way, I feel similar to the ceramic artist Richard Shaw who, when asked, "Why don't you make these out of the real thing," answered, "There's a certain kind of self-contest I have."¹¹

¹⁰ Wheelwright, L. F., & Woodbury L. J. (Eds.). (1972). *Mormon arts volume one*. Brigham Young University Press.

¹¹ Whittaker, R. (2006, August 25) *Interview: Richard Shaw: Magic Trick*. works & conversations. <http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=186>.

Shaw's work is the evident result of careful craftsmanship translating everyday objects into clay. Kristen Morgin has a similar process. She said, "I didn't want to make just any copy of green eggs and ham, I wanted to make my copy of green eggs and ham with all of its creases, wear and tear. These pieces were like little monuments to these sentimental things."¹² I agree when devotion and precision to detail are given to the work, it can become a monument to the subject. This is partly the reason I take advantage of every means available to replicating detail in my process.

As opposed to Shaw, and Morgin's more recent work, my work is not trompe l'oeil. Although I do have an interest in color, I have always been more interested in the structure and three-dimensional form of my work than reproducing color. When I use porcelain, I strictly use a specific recipe from a particular manufacturer for its superior translucency and whiteness. Combined with its fine particle size, this porcelain is an attractive medium capable of showcasing minute texture.

The word that likely best describes my process, in general, is representation, although there are also elements of translation. Reproduction would be an inaccurate label for my work as a whole because, to re-produce something assumes that the same materials are used, the copy maintaining the same characteristics as the original. As far as I am aware, it is currently impossible to reproduce anatomical objects that live and breathe and have a life and death of their own without utilizing the natural processes that already exist. No flower made of stone, paint, or clay, no matter how accurate or detailed, will ever be an authentic reproduction. Individual elements such as color, form, and size can be reproduced but not the living object as a whole. In this regard, my work will never be as compelling as the plants, fruits, and flowers that

¹² Crowe, J. (2015, July 9). *Exhibition | Kristen Morgin's unfired objects reveal ghostly realms at Marc Selwyn*. Cfile.Daily. <https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-kristen-morgin-unfired-objects-reveal-ghostly-realms-marc-selwyn/>.

they represent. Although the translucency of porcelain may mimic that in a leaf, the complexity and variation of the vein structure and cellular organization, the movement of nutrients, and miraculous chemical processes of a leaf outweigh anything that I have made. For this reason, it is fruitless to desire to copy the natural world, but I create my work as a monument to the subject and a satisfying artistic challenge.

I believe translation is an accurate word used to describe trompe l'oeil works where an object is presented as accurately as possible in a different material than the original. There are good and bad translations, as well as accurate and inaccurate. Some translations can stand as a work on their own, and others owe their existence to the original.¹³ The best translations I have come across in writing elevate the original, demonstrating a command of both languages' subtleties. The two works I have produced that come closest to being a translation are *Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish* and *(Still) Life with Plastic*.

Fig. 2 (see also figs. 12 & 13) was made entirely by hand, and the work of fig. 3 (see also figs. 14 & 15) was made almost entirely from molds of actual fruits, flowers, plants, and one fish. Both works' configuration is somewhat accurate but still contain variations to nature. The banana species *Musa basjoo* informed the overall size and structure of fig. 2 because this is the most common species decoratively grown in the Seattle area, which I could take pictures of and measure for proportion. Technically this species can reach this height with leaves this large, but it is extremely rare. Choosing the most idyllic version of a plant is inaccurate to reality. The fruit in fig. 2 derives from a picture found online of *Musa troglodytarum* L. This species has a minimal range in the western and southern Pacific Ocean. Again, it may be possible for the fruit to reach the size that I depicted them, but it is exceptionally unusual.

¹³ Benjamin, W. (1972). The Task of the Translator. In M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings (Eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings* (Vol. 1, 5th ed., pp. 253-263). Harvard University Press.



Figure 2. *Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish*, 2019



Figure 3. *(Still) Life with Plastic*, 2019

For these variations, it may be more accurate to describe my works on the spectrum of representation. Although great care is taken to maintain accuracy, some aspects are omitted or exaggerated that would be visible in nature. Even in fig. 3 where almost everything was mold-made, every part of the plant was not always included, and some plants are presented in a way that references its growth pattern but is ultimately inaccurate. Again, the individual items are exhibited in an idyllic state, not decay, and only the largest examples are present.

OBSERVATION OF NATURE

The inspiration for all my work comes entirely from my observation of nature. The presentation, however, has other influences. This observation is one of the most enjoyable aspects of my practice. With my camera's aid,¹⁴ I set out to explore and discover things I have never seen or examined. What an adventure of ecstasy these excursions have become! I make personal discoveries of new worlds that are governed by alien conventions in comparison with our own species.

When I first began my artistic observation of nature in earnest, I was overwhelmed by the perfection that seems to exist. Repeatedly I could discover flowers with perfect symmetry, void of a single blemish, or trees perfectly in bloom. I was beguiled. It was not until I captured the below image (fig. 4) of Camellia that I began to contemplate qualities of imperfection, impermanence, and decay in flowers and plants. This was a dramatic and compelling moment when I felt directly tutored by nature in a way that has affected my view ever since. The way that life and death, beauty and decay are so elegantly portrayed, the almost perfect specimen fully in bloom, basking upward in light facing away from its future, drooping in shadow.

With my professors' help I began to broaden my definition of beauty, trying to find its limits, if possible. I was introduced to Umberto Eco's book *On Ugliness*, which states, "Concepts of beauty and ugliness are relative to various historical periods or various cultures..."¹⁵ showing numerous examples of things that may be off-putting to some but considered glorious to others. This is something I have always known to be true but had yet to

¹⁴ see Diehl K., Zauerman, G., & Barasch, A. (2016). *How taking photos increases enjoyment of experiences*. Journal of personality and social psychology

¹⁵ Eco, U. (2007). *On Ugliness* (A. McEwen, Trans.). Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.



Figure 4. *Life and Death*, 2018

explore in my work. I began paying greater attention to those things that might be considered repulsive and attempted to discover their value or attractive qualities. In the works *Beauty in Decay* and *Grace in Death* (see also fig. 16), I made molds of dead animals and produced them in clay. When I first happened across a dead squirrel, including the innumerable maggots writhing inside its pungent, rotting corpse, I found it difficult to discern what could be attractive in this specimen. I decided its ability to provide life and nutrients to other species is a valuable and necessary function in nature. To the maggot, the dead animal is beautiful.

In the work *Grace in Death*, it was easier to see that although this was a dead bird, it had been exposed to the elements long enough that it contained almost no remaining flesh. Its position with one wing outstretched, dramatically arraying tattered feathers, its trachea, beak, and



Figure 5. *Beauty in Decay*, 2019



Figure 6. *Grace in Death*, 2019

talons visible and surprisingly intact showed impressive detail, the pose revealing true grace, despite death. Even its head was cocked backward at an angle reminiscent of Hellenistic statuary.

At the time of exhibiting these works, their similarity with vanitas paintings was pointed out to me. I enjoyed this comparison and studied it further. A key component to many vanitas is an emphasis on the fleeting nature of this life, and through my honest observation of nature, I realized that representing plants in a permanent medium such as fired porcelain is inaccurate to this crucial aspect. Nothing physical on this earth lasts forever. In *The Valley of the Furnace of Affliction* (figs. 7 & 8), I started exploring mediums that are temporary in nature. This work, made entirely of wax, melted while on display from the heat gun hidden in the box shown.



Figure 7. *In the Valley of the Furnace of Affliction* (before the heat detail), 2019



Figure 8. *In the Valley of the Furnace of Affliction*, 2019

Emotional survival also played an underpinning role in this work. At this time, I became deeply depressed and somewhat obsessed with death. I even attended an anthropology class entitled *The Comparative Study of Death*. Watching this work decay or “die” while on display was a cathartic experience being a public and expressive way to express how I was feeling without saying it verbally. The general demeanor of this work is over-ripe or already in the process of decay. There was included, however, a small glimmer of hope. Small translucent structures representing new life in the form of fungus appear in the cavity of the rotting pandanus fruit.

This is only one example of many works where some of the materials were chosen for their impermanent nature. For example, in fig. 1, great effort was made to render the plants in clay two-dimensionally with the intent of having an ephemeral life. The inability to preserve the work physically (discounting photographs) was less important than the experience of seeing the clay flash with vibrance just before turning into ambiguous drips. In figs. 12 and 13, although the sculpture is falling apart, there was a reverence in the room due to the unexpected change in environment: a warm humidity and subtle sounds created by the mist and drips of clay-laden water falling from leaf to leaf and then resounding on the hollow wood base. Spectators watched in anticipation when with a crash and splash, a clump of clay would dramatically fall, and then verbally exclaimed their elation. The tiny rivers of muddy water in combination with dripping clay left patterns of nebulas and galaxies on the floor to admire. Lastly, in *Doryanthes palmeri transiens* (figs. 9, 17 & 18), the opaque paper turned translucent as ice after exposure to heavy rain. The delicate skin pierced, revealing irregular cellular-like patterns, the thin filament clinging on just as saturated organic tissue.



Figure 9. *Doryanthes palmeri transiens* (leaf detail), 2020

It has been noted that emphasizing loss in my work, particularly in labor, emphatically evokes pathos from the viewer.¹⁶ Although it started as a necessity to express myself, choosing transitory materials to experience their unmaking has become a significant way I discover and share beauty and grace in an otherwise melancholic or dispiriting situation. This research has led me to believe that nothing in nature is inherently ugly. Everything has some redeeming quality, even some of the worst things can be remarkable when viewed differently.

¹⁶ Phoebe Cummings, a talented and dedicated ceramic artist, makes botanical sculpture with unfired, and therefore temporary, clay. She is also interested in the effort of spending significant time and energy on something that will have a relatively short lifespan. However, she does not document or speak about the decay or degradation of most of her works.

God and Nature

Seeing God in nature is an approach I have taken for many years. There are so many authors and poets that convincingly declare this as revelation.¹⁷ For much of my time in graduate school I clung to this concept, but during my second to last quarter I started to have moments of honest contemplation where I realized that I do not always seek wilderness to be close to God. It is true, I have felt close to God in nature, but if I am doing what I should, I should be able to feel close to God anywhere.¹⁸

My attraction to plants is so strong that I have felt there must be some deeper, perhaps innate, connection to nature that might explain the way I have felt for so many years. In a search for answers, I reached out to Peter Kahn, Jr., who teaches in the psychology department. He teaches courses such as *Ecopsychology* as well as *The Human Relationship with Nature*, authoring a book by the same title. In this book he deeply discusses the theory of biophilia, which, loosely defined, is a biological and spiritual affinity to life that ensures species survival. It is a theory that proposes that because diversity is necessary to sustain life, many people have an

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal that he seeks “to always be on the alert to find God in nature” (Journal 9/7/51).

The Irish poet, Thomas Osborne Davis wrote:

There is a lesson in each flower,
A story in each stream and bower,
In every herb on which you tread
Are Written words, which rightly read,
Will lead you from earth’s fragrant sod,
To hope, to holiness, and God

¹⁸ Loretta Ross-Gotta said, “We may mistake the creation for the Author of Creation, unwittingly endowing aspects of this earth with godlike character... We learn that no matter how beautiful and mighty, the mountain is not God...” (pp. 70). I am not ready to believe that God is not in nature at all, but perhaps it is more subtle than I had thought: “He that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; which truth shineth. This is the light of Christ... The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things” (D&C 88:4-13).

evolved, strong affinity toward nature. This affinity, however, is also influenced by experience and culture.¹⁹

The book details research that supports the subtopic, the savanna theory. That purports through numerous studies²⁰ people generally prefer natural environments that include low action waterscapes, open landscapes that are also defined, relatively smooth ground texture, and high canopy trees that help determine the depth of the scene. We also prefer complexity, but legibility and an element of mystery such as a winding path or meandering stream. These characteristics describe the east African savannah where humans lived as hunter/gatherers for two million years and are best suited for human survival.

Other research cited includes the work of Kaplan and Kaplan, who stated after reviewing the literature of hundreds of studies that “the immediate outcomes of contacts with nearby nature include enjoyment, relaxation, and lowered stress levels... People with access to nearby natural settings have been found to be healthier than other individuals; the longer-term indirect impacts also include increased levels of satisfaction with one’s home, one’s job, and with life in general.”²¹

For years I have been looking for some scientific or psychological backing as to why I feel such peace, serenity, joy, and excitement while experiencing nature. Biophilia offers some

¹⁹ Balling, J. D., & Falk, J. H. (1982). Development of visual preference for natural environments. *Environment and Behavior*.

²⁰ Kaplan, R., & Kaplan S. (1989). *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Ulrich, R. S. (1993). Biophilia, biophobia, and natural landscapes. In S. R. Kellert and E. O. Wilson (Eds.), *The biophilia hypothesis*. Island Press.

Wohlwill, J.F. (1968). Amount of stimulus exploration and preference as differential functions of stimulus complexity. *Perception and Psychophysics*, 4: 307-312.

Orians, G. H., & Heerwagen, J. H. (1992). Evolved responses to landscapes. In J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, & J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*. Oxford University Press.

²¹ Kaplan, R., & Kaplan S. (1989). *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

answers. It also reduces my previous insistence that the purpose of my work is a form of worship for me to get closer to God. Although I do believe there is truth in that statement, it is not always the primary impetus. An inherent, even subconscious yearning toward nature exists that I seek to satisfy, a power that I revere. I also believe that God is intelligent enough to design evolution in a way that our natural desires fulfill his purposes, but in seeking fulfillment, I am not always conscience I am fulfilling his will.

Sexuality, the Bizarre, Adventure and Discovery

One reason there is so much variation in plants is due to the extremely varied manner of reproduction. Plants propagate either sexually, asexually, or sometimes in both manners. For example, banana plants reproduce asexually through root-like rhizomes but contain fruit-producing flowers that do not require pollination. The near-infinite variety of angiosperms, or flowering plants, is due to the nearly numberless reproductive processes. Flowers that depend on pollinators have evolved in structure, color, and scent to attract a very particular species of insect or bird. Other flowers self-pollinate or rely on the wind alone.

There are species of flowers that have separate male and female flowers, and many others where both male and female organs exist in the same flower. When there is so much variety, it seems wrong to attribute the male/female binary to plants. Moreover, although I recognize the powerful sexual motivation in mammals, if all one sees is the likeness of human genitals in the reproductive organs of plants, they do not understand the vast complexity and variation in anatomy and physiology of plant reproduction. To relate plants, or my work, to human/mammalian intercourse is to ignore their unique and defining characteristics. Flowers do not have penises and vaginas; they have anthers and stigma that look and behave quite

differently. I think it is interesting that Georgia O’Keeffe said something similar: “I made you take the time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—And I don’t.”²²

Sometimes the variety of nature leads me to consider its bizarre qualities. Occasionally plants will mimic the appearance of having eyes or grow in ways that seem impossible. These characteristics heavily influence me in periodically presenting the work in a way that would be completely unrecognizable, truly alien to earth’s natural plants. Although this impulse is somewhat different from the desire to translate or represent nature, it is still related because I often do not do much to alter the form of the plants. Instead, I

combine whole parts to create something entirely different such as in the work *Adventure and Discovery* (fig. 10). This practice bears a resemblance to the collage of the Dadaists or the out-of-place nature of Surrealists. Susan Beiner is a contemporary ceramic artist that has been



Figure 10. *Adventure and Discovery*, 2019

²² O’Keeffe, G. (1976). *Georgia O’Keeffe*. Viking Press.

influential through personal conversations to present my work dissimilarly from nature. The level to which I agree with Susan is continuously in flux.

With all the diversity that exists with plants, it is impossible for me to grow tired. In fact, it is a source of increasing excitement and adventure. The evidence of a universal desire for adventure and discovery exists in many forms. We do not have to go too far into history to find “manifest destiny” and the westward expansion of the United States that sent trappers, explorers, cartographers, and settlers to what was then “undiscovered” land. It was partly this desire (as well as the motivation of riches) that caused Europeans to leave their shores to sail across the Atlantic in the first place. Perhaps the most apparent contemporary evidence of this desire is the popularity of movies categorized as “action and adventure” that gross billions of dollars worldwide. Although this desire is not contained to children, adventures in far-off places are ubiquitous in children’s books such as *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak as well as *Jumanji* and other books by Chris Van Allsburg.

Dutch still-life paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries are an example in the arts of satisfying adventure through plants. While discussing a recent painting, Jan Brueghel the Elder wrote it was remarkable “as much for naturalness as for the beauty and rarity of various flowers, some are unknown and little seen in this area; for this, I have been to Brussels in order to depict some few flowers from nature that are not found in Antwerp.”²³ Pineapple and coconuts from the newly discovered Americas and flowers from other far off places such as the middle east also began to appear in Dutch paintings at this time. Significantly, in statements made by Brueghel and one of his patrons, Cardinal Federico Borromeo, “neither makes allusions to vanitas, nor to concepts of transitoriness. The paintings were meant as an enduring monument, rather than as a

²³ J. Brueghel, personal communication (April 14, 1606).

dour reminder of fleeting pleasures.”²⁴ It appears they were simply enticed by flowers, particularly exotic varieties, and Brueghel chose to monumentalize the glory of his subject with extreme craftsmanship.

Personally, the desire for adventure and discovery has always been strong, but it was greatly enhanced when I was called to serve as a missionary in Micronesia. I had never even heard of Micronesia before, and without any language training, I was sent to Pohnpei, Micronesia, for two years. Life there was drastically different from the suburbs of Salt Lake City, Utah, where I grew up. It rained almost every day; I ate fruit that I had never heard of like breadfruit and soursop. I relished the blissful misty mornings when after exercising and then bathing in the nearby stream, I would walk out to one of the papaya trees that grew near our house without anyone planting and pick a tree-ripe fresh papaya for breakfast. I spent all of my time in the community where I was fed crab claws as large as my own hands and other animals such as sea turtle and dogs. I attended funerals and feasts, where one village chief honored me with a local title: Kroun en Pohnniahl. I also spoke to kings and others of high title. I became fluent in a language that sounded like nothing I had heard before: ni ehi keihu en rohng lokia wet, I leme me I rohngarohng lokia mwahl.²⁵ Our transportation was mostly by foot, often with a machete in hand as we walked narrow paths through the thick jungle. Pohnpei also happens to be the site of a thousand-year-old ancient city called Nan Madol built in a humanmade lagoon of monolithic basalt columns weighing up to twenty-five tons each.²⁶ Similar to other venerable structures, there is no evidence as to how these greats stones were moved, oral tradition stating

²⁴ Chong, A., Brusati, C., Kloek, W. Th., Cleveland Museum of Art., Rijksmuseum (Netherlands). (1999). *Still-life paintings from the Netherlands, 1550-1720*. Zwolle: Waanders Publishers.

²⁵ English translation: when I first heard this language, I thought it sounded like gibberish.

²⁶ McCoy, M. D., Alderson, H. A., Hemi, R., Cheng, H., & Edwards R. L. (2007). Earliest direct evidence of monument building at the archaeological site of Nan Madol (Pohnpei, Micronesia) identified using ²³⁰Th/U coral dating and geochemical sourcing of megalithic architectural stone. *Quaternary Research*, 86(3), 295-303 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yqres.2016.08.002>.

that two foreign brothers with powerful magic and the possible aid of a dragon moved the rocks. Ninety-eight small islets complete with intersecting canals make up the city, resulting in its nickname “the Atlantis” or “Venice of the Pacific.”²⁷ What experience could be more adventurous?

And before I knew it, I was back home in the deserts of the West, where the most common natural plants are grass and sagebrush. Is there any wonder that when I re-watched Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* a couple of years after I was home, I was exceedingly moved by and continue to feel passionate about the phrase, “I want adventure in that great wide somewhere, I want it more than I can tell”²⁸ After a few more years, I had an opportunity to attend the University of Florida. The intense pressure and stress of school, coupled with a more tropical environment, is likely the catalyst of the most vivid dream I have ever experienced. It was about two young boys on an incredible adventure sailing across oceans, overcoming obstacles, finding treasure in ancient ruins, and ending by watching the sunrise from the ocean while standing arm in arm on a pristine white sandy beach.

Since that time in Florida, I have directed my creative efforts toward sharing the excitement of the adventure and yearning for discovery that I have felt very powerfully. Perhaps adventure is so enticing because day-to-day life is rather mundane, but through our imagination we can escape to far-off places. This search for adventure in my life is also likely the reason I have moved to five different states in the last ten years.

Adventure in my work has evolved to be symbolized by foreign and lesser-known fruits and flowers. I am drawn to the most exquisite examples, often selecting the largest. One aspect

²⁷ Ballinger, B. S. (1978). *Lost city of stone, The story of Nan Madol, the “Atlantis of the Pacific*. Simon and Schuster.

²⁸ Hahn, D., Trousdale G., & Wise, K. (1991). *Beauty and the beast* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney.

of tropical plants is that they seem to be so much larger due to the fact that they can grow year-round in their ideal habitats, unstinted by the absence of cold seasons.

It has been a personal journey of discovery. This is a way for me to continue to find adventure. I highly prefer to not “cheat,” or spoil discovery by looking up plants on the internet because of the great joy and excitement achieved by being in a foreign place, traipsing through the jungle in a downpour, being bitten by at least a thousand mosquitos and looking up to discover vibrant, strange, huge, other-worldly plants in front of my nose! Upon these discoveries I often make molds of these plants, which I utilize to create my work. It is significant to me that the mold has physically been in contact and carries a closeness to the original. For this reason, it brings me great joy and deep satisfaction to look at my own works made with molds (see fig. 3), because I can remember and reminisce about my adventure with each of these plants from the San Diego coast, to the Redwood Forest, to the jungle on Maui, and even deep-sea fishing in the Pacific Northwest. This particular piece was also made partly from a mold given to me by a dear friend and mentor from South Korea.

I want adventure; I want to share adventure. I want to do it responsibly, in a way that does not ruin natural habitats or exploit indigenous people. In the global, complex, modern society that we live in, it is incredibly challenging to live in a way that does not negatively affect other people or the planet. With recent works (see fig. 2), I have discussed the plight of the Cavendish banana, its history of the exploitation of indigenous farmers, and its inevitable extinction. I have also addressed plastic and microplastic pollution (see fig. 3). These are incredibly complex issues, especially with plastic showing significant benefits to its continued use. I know I am not going to make any measurable change in global issues, but the hope of these works is to raise awareness, at least for some. After completing *(Still) Life with Plastic*, I

have noticed I am much more vigilant than I have ever been in trying to reduce consumption of single-use plastics, raise awareness, and properly recycle.

CONCLUSION

Nature is a powerful force. Its complexity and attraction has ensnared me for a lifetime. Soren Kierkegaard believed much could be learned from the careful observation of nature,²⁹ and one thing I have observed again and again is that beauty can be found in the most unlikely places. This insistence to tie myself deeply to nature, through my work, and explore the value in fleeting moments has produced experiences that are beyond normal or physical. It has been transcendent.

²⁹Kierkegaard, S. (2016). *The Lily of the field and the bird of the air: Three godly discourses* (B. H. Kirmmse, Trans.). Princeton University Press.

APPENDIX



Figure 11. *Intercessory Offering*, 2019



Figure 12. *Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish*
(day 3)



Figure 13. *Sacrifice and Musa dwarf cavendish*
(mist detail)



Figure 14. *Still Life with Plastic* (detail), 2019



Fig 15. *Still Life with Plastic (C.)* (detail), 2019



Figure 16. *Grace in Death* (detail), 2019



Figure 17. *Doryanthes palmeri transiens*, 2020



Figure 18: *Doryanthes palmeri transiens* (detail), 2020

OPPOSITION IN ALL THINGS

One question I have considered as I have pondered about beauty and flowers is, “Will heaven be beautiful, does God consider heaven beautiful?” This question arises because, in this life, it seems impossible to appreciate life without death or something as beautiful if nothing is considered ugly, although the definitions of ugliness and beauty can be refined on an individual basis. The scriptures are replete with visions of heaven. From the *Doctrine and Covenants*, “The heavens were opened upon us, and I beheld the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof... I saw the transcendent beauty of the gate through which the heirs of that kingdom will enter, which was like unto circling flames of fire; also... I saw the beautiful streets of that kingdom, which had the appearance of being paved with gold” (Sec. 137:1-4). We believe that “every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew...” was created “spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth” (Moses 3:5, *Pearl*) and “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form” (Alma 11.43, *Book of Mormon*). What is the perfect form of a plant or flower? Is it when it is in bloom? Certainly not when they are decaying and dying- but so much would be missed without this critical state. Deciduous trees are miraculous when their leaves are in the process *of dying*. This has been the point of this thesis: there is value and beauty in decay. Life is astounding because it is always changing. Perhaps our preferences will change when there is eternity to consider.

We also believe that this very earth will one day come to an end by being “rolled together as a scroll” (Mor. 5:23, *BOM*). The scriptures also talk of fire, and finally, “this earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal” (Sec. 130:9, *D&C*), and the “righteous shall inherit it” (Sec. 88:26, *D&C*). So, this earth will become heaven and be perfect, like a crystal, “and there shall be no more death” in any form of life: plant, human, or animal

(Rev. 21:4 *Authorized King James Version*). Even being eternally surrounded with beauty, I believe we will still appreciate it because we will remember this life “having a perfect knowledge” of all the negative aspects of living on earth (2Ne. 9.13, *BOM*). God must also appreciate heaven in its perfection because “he comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him,” including the corruption of his numberless other creations (Sec. 88.41, *D&C*). Therefore, in some situations, we do not need to have death and decay in front of us to appreciate beauty and perfection.

REFERENCES

- Balling, J. D., & Falk, J. H. (1982). Development of visual preference for natural environments. *Environment and behavior*.
- Ballinger, B. S. (1978). *Lost city of stone, The story of Nan Madol, the "Atlantis of the Pacific*. Simon and Schuster.
- Benjamin, W. (1972). The Task of the Translator. In M. Bullock & M. W. Jennings (Eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings* (Vol. 1, 5th ed., pp. 253-263). Harvard University Press
- Crowe, J. (2015, July 9). *Exhibition | Kristen Morgin's unfired objects reveal ghostly realms at Marc Selwyn*. Cfile.Daily. <https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-kristen-morgins-unfired-objects-reveal-ghostly-realms-marc-selwyn/>
- Eco, U. (2007). *On ugliness* (A. McEwen, Trans.). Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.
- English, D. (2016). *1971: A year in the life of color*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Hahn, D., Trousdale G., & Wise, K. (1991). *Beauty and the beast* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney
- Hurtado, L. A. (2017). *The immediate present*. Mormon Arts Center.
- Kaplan, R., & Kaplan S. (1989). *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. (2016). *The Lily of the field and the bird of the air: Three godly discourses* (B. H. Kirmmse, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- McCoy, M. D., Alderson, H. A., Hemi, R., Cheng, H., & Edwards R. L. (2007). Earliest direct evidence of monument building at the archaeological site of Nan Madol (Pohnpei,

- Micronesia) identified using $^{230}\text{Th}/\text{U}$ coral dating and geochemical sourcing of megalithic architectural stone. *Quaternary research*, 86(3), 295-303
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yqres.2016.08.002>
- O’Keeffe, G. (1976). *Georgia O’Keefe*. Viking Press.
- Ross-Gotta, L. (2000). *Letters from the holy land: Seeing god where you are*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- “The Black Artist in America: A Symposium,” *Metropolitan museum of art bulletin* 27, no. 5 (January 1969): 251. Emphasis in original.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (2020). *Saints: The story of the Church of Jesus Christ in latter days, No unhallowed hand* (Vol. 2).
- Ulrich, R. S. (1993). Biophilia, biophobia, and natural landscapes. In S. R. Kellert and E. O. Wilson (Eds.), *The biophilia hypothesis*. Island Press.
- Wheelwright, L. F., & Woodbury L. J. (Eds.). (1972). *Mormon arts volume one*. Brigham Young University Press.
- Whittaker, R. (2006, August 25) *Interview: Richard Shaw: Magic Trick*. works & conversations.
<http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=186>