

The Wayward Symbionts

Monique Blom, Tamara Rusnak, Stacia Verigin

January 30 to March 6, 2013

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Tamara Rusnak, "It's what's inside that matters", (detail), ink, charcoal, gesso on papier maché approx. 12' x 24'



Stacia Verigin, "Pod 02", glue, 2004

Cover: Monique Blom, 'The Story of She' (detail) 2012

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Organic forms meld, entwine, permeate and transform the gallery space in the exhibition *The Wayward Symbionts*. Here we are presented with three distinctive bodies of works by Saskatchewan artists Monique Blom, Tamara Rusnak and Stacia Verigin. In their shared use of natural materials, there is a sense that these works first affect a sensory, pre-lingual, visceral experience. Blom's sculpture and Rusnak's drawing especially incite a bodily reaction in their raw, organic nature, with leanings towards the abject¹. Like the intense visceral works of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Kiki Smith, these pieces impose themselves on the clean architecture of the gallery in their unruly display of uncontrollable organic matter. Verigin's encased objects, in contrast, offer organized, contained, museological presentations of organic forms. Though each driven by individual artistic concerns, these artists' practices share conceptual ties and a commitment to using organic, recycled or repurposed materials, each being informed by the natural world and its symbiotic relationship with humanity.

Living on a section of land north of Saskatoon along the North Saskatchewan River valley, Monique Blom and her family are committed to living a sustainable lifestyle in harmony with their natural surroundings. Drawing from her environment, Blom incorporates found natural materials (animal skulls, cow hooves, reclaimed wood, twigs, bark, seed pods, wax) combined with recycled consumerist products (like paper, fabric, wire, hair curlers, artificial flowers and shingles) into her sculptures, paintings and installations. It is evident that Blom works intuitively, letting her gathered materials speak to her and direct her compositions to create layers of embedded organic textures. As a sculptural assemblage or installation piece, *The Story of She* is a strong example of these constructions of repurposed materials interspersed with quirky found objects. Much like Kiki Smith's figures that offer visceral, archetypal representations of the feminine, a wax figure of a young girl animates the work within the space. This figure is presented as a host or living sculpture, being embedded with flowers bulbs and mushrooms that will sprout and grow within the materiality of the form, and eventually find its way into Blom's garden in the spring to be transformed by nature and contribute to the surrounding ecosystem.

The Story of She and the diptych of paintings in *The Otherness of Self* speak to the intergenerational exchange of knowledge regarding growth and life cycles, sustainable living and environmental consciousness that is important for future generations. A video projection activates a second layer of *The Otherness of Self*, whose images play across the surface of the paintings. Featuring images of a spider weaving a web, a colony of ants and a hive of bees, the video focuses on creatures within nature that know instinctively what their tasks are to create a sustainable ecosystem. This begs the question, what innate knowledge do humans possess? Blom's work ultimately explores ways of knowing and being in the world, leading her to explore a complexity of subjects that include notions of motherhood, the exchange of intergenerational knowledge through cell memory, as well as ecological questions of how genetically altered natural systems will affect and evolve human life.

Tamara Rusnak's large-scale drawing, *It's What's on the Inside that Matters*, operates like a collaged paper installation, taking on a distinct physical presence in the gallery space. Possessing an organic, skin-like or hide quality, its paper-machéd, wrinkled surface moves off and away from the gallery wall and onto the floor. Collaged sections of the drawing function like passages, linking images of bodily organs, intestines or veins with laboratory viles, test tubes, coils or mechanical parts. Each section of the drawing is presented like different stages of a filtration system or process, creating an imaginative, hybridized alchemical digestive system. Investigations into the science of digestive health and how this impacts our psychological and emotional states informs Rusnak's artistic inquiries. These investigations along with the study of ecological sciences have led her to question how our digestive systems are connected to our mental health. Rusnak is interested in how our thought processes are influenced by what our bodies digest and absorb and how our bodies are connected to and impacted by our environment.

Rusnak is conscientious about using environmentally-responsible materials that are natural and biodegradable in her work. Using ink, charcoal, shellac, gesso and natural pigments, her drawing reflects a sincere and elegant quality of line used to describe the complex forms, while her depiction of textures reflects

a visceral rawness, suggesting a variety of fleshy forms like nodes, polyps or even tumours. This combination of elegant line and poignant abjection is similarly found in the drawings of Ed Pien.

Building on her previous projects, this new work positions the biological or natural world in relation to science and other structures of knowledge. In resourcing medical and academic textbooks, dictionaries, atlases, architectural drawings, phone books and bank statements for the purpose of constructing handmade paper for the drawing, Rusnak identifies these sources as systems of language and structures of knowledge that organize and govern our thinking and societal structures. Having this organic, hybrid entity drawn on top of these existing structures and presented as a system in itself, Rusnak positions the body as encoded with knowledge. This corporeal knowledge reflects a wisdom that overrides conventional systems of knowledge and traditional scientific thought that emphasize the dualism of mind over body and culture over nature.

Stacia Verigin offers viewers a museological experience of fabricated objects that shift easily between the natural and the artificial, the scientific and the fantastical. Establishing a traditional museum setting, Verigin displays a fascinating collection of objects in plexi-glass cases. Like Blom and Rusnak, Verigin, too, uses repurposed and discarded material in the creation of her works. Using leftover remnants of plastic and sawdust from her job as a commercial fabricator for film and television, along with glue, silicone and resin, she meticulously fabricates her sculptures using moulds or manipulating the materials by hand. This collection of creations includes tree limbs, branches, pods, crystals, geodes or geological rocks and unicorn horns. Works like the tree forms and geodes are slowly built up, taking form through multiple layers of sawdust mixed with glue.

Verigin's practice is like that of a contemporary-day naturalist, discovering and recording specimens as a means of initiating dialogue on ecological concerns. The museum-like display cases are a playful strategy, making these specimens seem strange, like curiosities of a by-gone age to be investigated and deciphered. The artist is perhaps suggesting that these organisms or specimens from the natural world may become the things of myths and legends, like her object of fantasy, the unicorn horn, facing extinction if we continue on a path of environmental destruction.

A new character to join Verigin's collection of displayed specimens is a miniature whale sporting a party hat, titled *The Life of the Party*. Here, Verigin is playing with scale, presenting the tiny replica made of silicone as a creature resigned to face its own extinction, to perhaps become fable or myth itself. These fabrications serve to question the knowledge that we have about the natural world, how our understanding is constantly evolving, and how in time, many accepted scientific theories and schools of thought, too, become myth, as they are disproved and new theories or stories are offered up.

As the title suggests, each artist comes to her concept of symbiosis with the natural environment in a wayward manner, working through her own questions, uncertainties and obstacles. These questions extend to conventional or scientifically accepted ways of knowing and being in the world. Theorist Merleau-Ponty predicted that the modern evolution of thought would reject the dualism between body and mind, stressing that "bodily is already existence, openness to and dialogue with the world. The body understands its world, it is permeated with intentions and thereby gives meaning to its surroundings."² Subscribing to this philosophy, Rusnak and Blom look to the wisdom encoded within the natural world and the body, while Verigin sees scientifically accepted knowledge of the natural world as myth. Presented together, these artists' works offer a complex dialogue on the interwoven relationships of nature and culture, body and mind, knowledge and memory.

Jennifer McRorie

Footnotes:

¹ Abject refers to something that covers all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion; the uncontrollable matter of bodily existence.

² Francois H. Lapointe, *The Evolution of Merleau-Ponty's Concept of the Body*, Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 5:2 (1975: Spring) p. 390.



Monique Blom, "Moth Alterclose", (detail)



Stacia Verigin, "Pod 01", glue, 2004