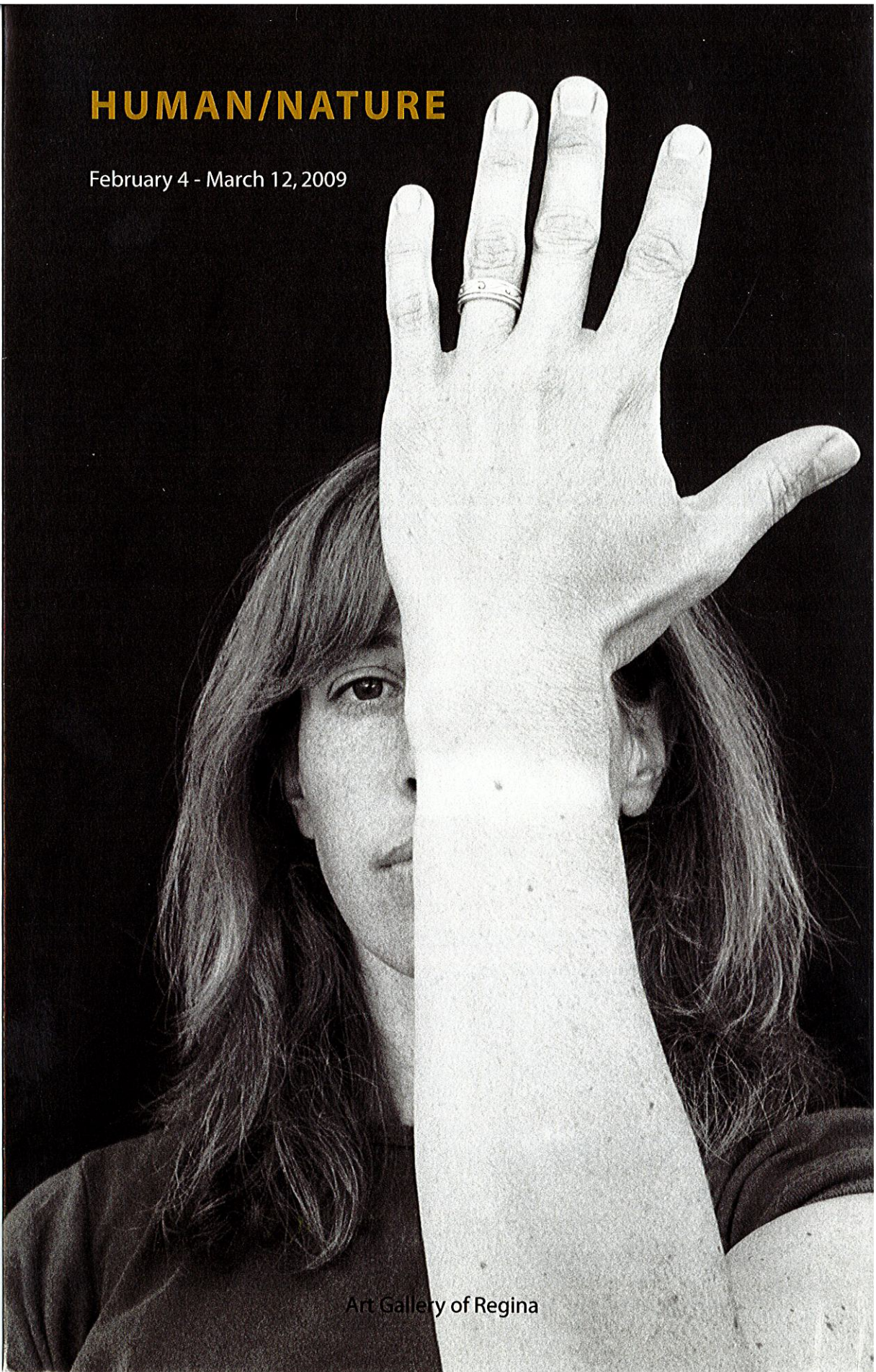


# HUMAN/NATURE

February 4 - March 12, 2009



Art Gallery of Regina

**Holly Fay**

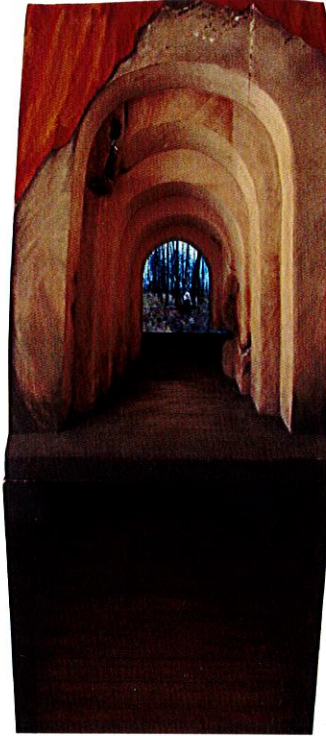
**Marsha Kennedy**

**Shelley Sopher**

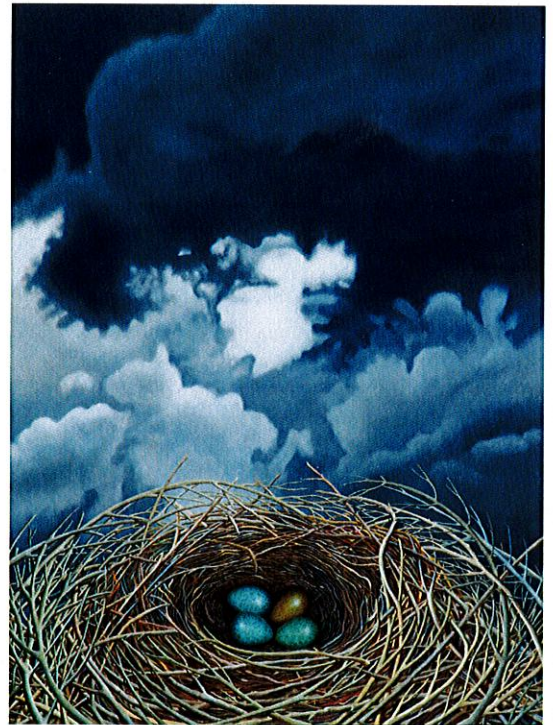
**Doris Wall Larson**

**Cherie Westmoreland**

**Debbie Wozniak-Bonk**



Doris Wall Larson, *Burn*, basswood, casein, dvd player and looped video, 2002 - 2008



Marsha Kennedy, *Faith*, American Crow, oil on canvas, 2008

Cover: *Tree (Cynthia)*, inkjet print (Ultrachrome) 2005-08

## HUMAN/NATURE

*"Wonder and humility are wholesome emotions, and they do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction" - Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, 1962*

The exhibition Human/Nature features the work of six dedicated artists: **Marsha Kennedy, Shelley Sopher, Holly Fay, Debbie Wozniak-Bonk, Cherie Westmoreland and Doris Larson**. Their work rejects an authoritative ideology that, for the past century, has resisted spiritual and physical relationships with the natural world. Presented here are manifestations of loss, grief, awe and courage in response to the recent collapse of nature's abundance, and in so doing, confirms our true interconnectedness with all things.

The Transcendental movement of the 19th century Romantic period spawned early iconoclastic ecologists. Writers, poets and artists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, William Blake, William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich responded to the trappings of modernization and the scientific movement. There was a rebuttal that emphasized not only the purity and truth found in nature's simple, smallest beings but also flagged the majesty and power within nature's most spectacular phenomena. A century later it would take the courageous writer and biologist, Rachel Carson, to fully launch the present ecological movement as she unequivocally challenged the pesticide industry in her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*.

Like Carson, **Marsha Kennedy's** previous work has confronted the blanketed use of chemicals upon the land and has responded with images of death, loss and sorrow. But, in this most recent painting, she depicts birds in states of well-being – nurtured and safe in the foreground. Looming omnipotent behind her birds are grandiose, ostentatious skies, which summon the Romantic painters, like Turner and Friedrich, who envisioned nature as insurmountable, unmatched by human capacity. Her works are so carefully and lovingly rendered that Kennedy's reverence is palpable. It is through her strong identification with the bird, a creature of flight, delicacy, sweet sound, and mysticism that we are drawn to connect knowingly to these creatures and to assume their fragility and vulnerability.

**Shelley Sopher's** photographic series further explores the intersections between humans and other living things. The human subjects in her photographs were asked to select an animal as their 'Other', with whom they strongly identified. The subsequent photographs document their attempt to embody their chosen 'Other' through their bodily stance, gaze and minute gestures. Ironically, Sopher has inverted our tendency to personify, to stamp the other with human characteristics and she has given her subjects a very difficult, yet worthy task of doing likewise. The power of this work is two-fold. Her subjects' attempts at honest heart-felt connections are gratifying and fascinating. As well, the lack of believable correlation becomes equally apparent. This disconnection dutifully underscores the constraints and dangers of our disparities and requires us to accept and reverse our differences.

*"I have said to the Worm: Thou art my mother and my sister." – William Blake*

The allusive 'biotic' imagery of **Holly Fay** evokes an alternative bodily experience. Her paintings and drawings depict biomorphic forms, cell-like clusters, seed sprouts, and fleshy ribs suggesting biological patterns of growth, mutation, variation and order. Akin to the rich painting lineage nurtured by Abstractionists Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Georgia O'Keefe, Fay's pictorial language creates an associative experience in which we relate to her markings and forms in a physical, yet inward manner that allows us to "move with the appointed rhythm [Nature] has bestowed upon us!"<sup>1</sup> Her work requires us to not only consider our psychosomatic relationship with the visceral, physical world but as well as to examine our choice to either control or surrender to its intricate microscopic workings.

As author Colin Tudge has pointed out, "The human debt to trees is absolute."<sup>2</sup> Humans evolved as tree dwellers and, consequently, developed dexterous hands and pivoting arms, giving us capabilities over many other species. The trees were our ancestral homes and were our primary architectural spaces. To Tudge and others like him, forests are more akin to cathedrals and other places of great spiritual holding.

The paintings of **Debbie Wozniak-Bonk** indeed reflect this sentiment. Within her close study and depiction of Saskatchewan's birch and poplar forests, Wozniak-Bonk captures the essence of spaces that are supported by the strength and resilience of the tree society. Her painted forests look much like groups of humans, as they stand upright, gesturing towards the sky. They appear young or old, wise or naive and are, like us, subject to the forces of competition or cooperation. But, unlike us, trees are engaged in some of the most exquisite mutual relationships within the natural world - the case of fig trees and fig wasps is a brilliant example of this mutuality. Wozniak-Bonk's work suggests that trees, as superbly successful beings, exemplify the intelligence we could bring to our own relationships with the natural world.

It is true – trees are beautiful. Whether in full bloom, brilliant fall attire or in cryptic leafless state, trees are sculpturally, visually wonderful. **Cherie Westmoreland's** photographic trees and floras transcend their obvious splendor and their essence is revealed as otherworldly, metaphysical and transformative. Through her meshing of multiple exposures and play of texture and colour, she creates a series of pulsing images that oscillate between the document and the spirit, employing them as a type of channel towards a closer sense of the natural world and the nature within us. This site, depicted from various vantage points, is in a seasonal transitional state and, like the other artwork in this exhibition, reaffirms the cyclical and revitalizing tendencies of natural processes.

**Doris Larson's** mixed media work incorporates video accounts of two devastating events: the fallout of a forest fire and the scars of her mastectomy. Like the assault on her body, this fire in the boreal forest north of Nipawin, Saskatchewan erased the bounty and identity of the forest denizens. Larson addresses the intensity of nature's own cataclysmic forces, as did the 19th century Romantics, but she also recognizes the purgative and renewing power of this event. Her video footage of the same forest five years after the fire proves the forest's recovery potential; the Quaking Aspen's underground root system quickly provides new seedlings while the nutrient rich ash feeds them. Although we are comforted by the cyclical, restorative ability of Nature, we cannot ignore the influence that we have had upon its systems. Have we created this fire or predisposed this bodily illness?

As of late, we have shamefully witnessed the devastating impact of our egocentric behavior upon the earth. We have had to honestly question what in human nature has brought us to this point. Alongside this self-scrutiny there is recognition of our constructive abilities. We do not need to "reject our own biology in order to behave unselfishly, as moral beings" but "simply to give the positives a chance."<sup>3</sup> In this exhibition, Human/Nature, the artists reinforce a concern for the environment as well as their belief in human nature as functionally, biologically and spiritually apt within a healthy, vibrant earth ecology.

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

- Mary Oliver, from 'Wild Geese'

Guest Writer  
Wendy Peart

1 Bliss Carman, *The Kinship of Nature*, (Boston: Page, 1904), 254

2 Colin Tudge. *The Secret Life of Trees*, (Crown Publishers: New York, 2005), preface XV

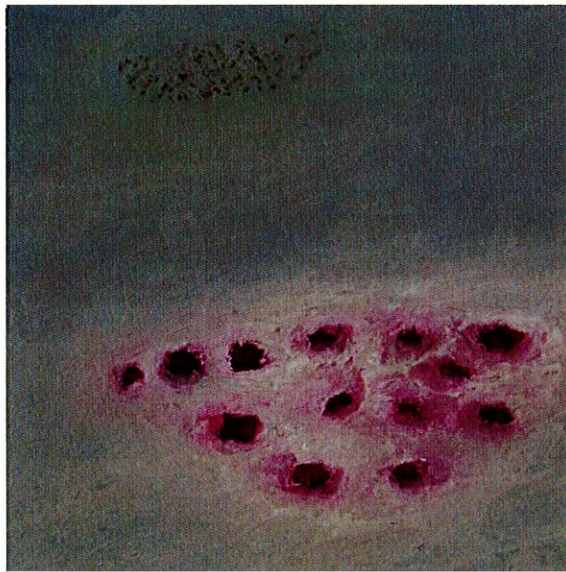
3 Ibid. Tudge. 322



Cherie Westmoreland, *Untitled*, photograph, 2008



Debbie Wozniak-Bonk, *Autumn Cleansing*, acrylic on canvas, 36"x54", 2008



Holly Fay, *Drift*, oil on paper, 56 x 56 cm. 2008

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## ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre  
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790,  
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

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Curator: Karen Schoonover  
Essay: Wendy Peart  
Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ dalek.ca

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