The Wayward Symbionts
Monique Blom, Tamara Rusnak, Stacia Verigin
January 30 to March 6, 2013

© Art Gallery of Regina Inc.
Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1791
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8
ISBN # 978-1-927422-03-8

Gallery Director/Curator: Karen Schoonover
Guest Curator: Marsha Kennedy
Essay: Jennifer McRorie
Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ www.dalek.ca

The Art Gallery of Regina gratefully acknowledges the support of the City of Regina Arts Funding Program, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture, & Recreation, SaskCulture, SaskTel, SaskEnergy, Council for Business for the Arts in Canada, Terrie Dunand RE/MAX Crown Real Estate Ltd., Saskatchewan Credit Unions, Greystone Managed Investments, Trinch Men’s Wear Inc., Framemasters Gallery and Art Supplies, and the Cathedral Free House.
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 work 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 experience. Blom’s sculpture and Rusnak’s drawing especially invoke a bodily response in their raw, organic nature, with leavings towards the object. The intense visceral work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Heus and Kiki Smith, these pieces impose themselves on the clean architecture of the gallery in their unruly display of uncontrollable organic matter. Verigin’s encasements, 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 employing 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. Drawn from her environment, Blom incorporates found natural materials (animal skulls, cow hooves, reaped corn, wigs, bark, seed pods) mixed with recycled consumer products (like paper, labels, 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. Within 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 dripstains 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 to 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 membranes, as well as ecological questions of how genetically altered natural systems will affect and evolve human life.

Monique Blom’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 hair 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 a hiv 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 membranes, as well as ecological questions of how genetically altered natural systems will affect and evolve human life.

Tamara Rusnak’s process driven sculpture is permeated with intentions and thereby gives meaning to its surroundings.2

Monique Blom 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 driven on top of these existing structures and presented as a system in itself, Rusnak positions the body as embodied with knowledge as its corporeal knowledge. The visual becomes a vehicle for 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’s practice offers a fascinating collection of objects in plug-geek cases. Like Blom and Rusnak, Verigin, too, uses repurposed and discarded collection material in the creation of her works. Using leftover remnants of plastic and salvaged 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 branches, pods, crystals, geodes or 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 creating 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 myth and legend, 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 poised to face its own extinction, perhaps to become fairy or myth itself. These fabricated objects 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 myths, as they are disproven 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, and that we would live in an already existence, open 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, Blom and Rusnak look to the wisdom encoded within the natural world and the body, while Verigin sees scientific and cultural acceptance of knowledge from the natural world as myths. Presented together, these artists’ works offer a complex dialogue on the interwoven relationships of nature and culture, body and mind, knowledge and memory.

Jennifer McFarlane

Footnotes:
1 I refer to that which 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.