GERRI ANN SIWEK: Chance Encounters
May 16 - June 23, 2012

Gerri Ann Siwek studied at the Ontario College of Art and Design, the University of Regina, and the Art Student League in New York. She currently lives in Regina, Saskatchewan where she maintains an active studio practice.

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“My background is all steel cities - Hamilton, Toronto, and New York. I wasn’t that interested in wildlife, I mean I didn’t even camp until I moved to Saskatchewan… once I started to go outside, I started to be inspired.” Gerri Ann Siwek, 2012

Gerri Ann Siwek tells me a story
One day she is sitting outside painting at a retreat at St. Peters Abbey in Muenster, Saskatchewan. At the time her hair is dyed golden blond. It glistens in the sunlight, as she sits she is suddenly swooped by a hummingbird. Startled by the bird, she looks up from the garden she is painting, suddenly aware of the birds and insects that share the environment.

It’s a simple story of a chance encounter: the story points out a key factor of Siwek’s artistic journey. You can call it chance or perhaps curiosity. Siwek’s work is often rooted in exploration stemming from a collision with found material. In the past (inspired by an article in the newspaper) she has explored magical occurrences. She also built a collection of pop culture artifacts into a “Timemoves Mobile Museum of the Word and Strange”. It is her willingness to follow up her curiosity with a thorough exploration of subject matter, material, and methodology that propels her studio practice.

In the summer of 2009, Siwek set up a studio space at Regina Beach. That fall she took on the role of Artist in Residence for the Saskatchewan Arts Board at Agribition in Regina. Her project, entitled “Let There Be Flight”, was inspired by her growing interest in the wildlife that she observed as she walked in the area around her Last Mountain Lake studio. Influenced by her hummingbird encounter, Siwek was beginning to closely observe the waterfowl and other animals that shared her locale. Sightings led to research, both in books and online, as she tried witnessing a magnificent bird exploding from the water. It’s experiential based. I think my work comes from that.”

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In Audubon’s process, a specimen was collected, the bird was killed, mounted using a system of wire and stuffing, and then repositioned into lifelike poses. Her fascination with this process seems to be with the sense of character and life that Audubon managed to bring to his dead subject matter. Siwek also borrows some of Audubon’s compositional strategies. This is evident in the work entitled “Going Up”. The form of the bird dominates a simplified habitat; a devise that as Siwek acknowledges, is frequently used by illustrators like Audubon. But it is a push-pull in her artwork, a resistance to simple reliance on this type of illustration that makes the work fresh. That struggle is heightened by the method she has used in the creation of the artwork.

Siwek seems to be moving on two parallel paths of exploration, one of subject matter and one of methodology. “Chance Encounters” features monotypes, a single print pulled from encaustic medium worked on a hotplate, collage with encaustic on panel; and large acrylic paintings on canvas. The artists utilizes several different mediums but each method she explores is time sensitive. With encaustic painting and printing, a medium that combines wax and pigment, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the image as the wax heats. Siwek describes the process as “I’m very fluid and very fleeting... It’s in the moment, you’ve got to strike while the iron is hot. You pull that print in a second because the next second the image changes, because the medium is so fluid.”

“The prints, like the word “White-breasted Nuthatch”, are simple and spontaneous, the result of Siwek’s quick strokes in the fluid wax. This spontaneity actually results from creating multiple studies of each image. Some of the images were etched into the wax more than twenty times before she was satisfied with the completed monotype.

The large acrylic works on canvas echo the sensibility of the monotypes, simple but somewhat bold. It feels like the forms of the animals have been scribed into the thick acrylic medium in a single gesture. The application of a thick layer of molding paste required the image to be quickly finalized before the acrylic medium started to dry.

Siwek seems to thrive on this kind of material challenge, “I like the fact that I don’t have full control, its more humbling. I think it gives the work that intervention... what happens with the chaotic connections of the medium...” Compositionally, the paintings exude a sort of joyous abandon, realistic relationships of scale and habitat are cast aside in favour of rhythmic design and simplified form. The success of the work is her ability to mask the laboured nature of collage, where layers of material and medium can often become visually overwhelming. In this series, Siwek seems to have found the alchemy of combining complex methodology and content, into work that exudes a playful simplicity.

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For Siwek both the method and content seem to be influenced by an emotive connection, a methodology driven by personal experience; a lived connection with subject matter and a tactile connection to media, it is this fusion that makes her emotional investment in this particular subject matter. Ultimately the work is like a good story, where content and execution are used to create work that connects with the audience.

Heather Cline
2012


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