Based in taxidermy, Steve Rayner’s Tree on Allenford goes further by suggesting re-animation. Here the hide of a dead black bear appears uncannily to momentarily take breath and thus take on embodied form. Prompting us to consider numerous problematic ideas such as the relationship of body to spirit, this work also explores our distance, technologized and even predatory relationship to nature. Rayner’s Bonfire, a video loop projected on the ceiling, suggests a window opened to the heavens where what appear to be soft white clouds pass overhead in a big blue sky. Providing us with a meditative moment of infinite space and tranquility, what is recorded here in fact is billowing smoke from the burning of leaves - the almost pagan annual fall nature ritual of transforming the organic world and returning it once again into the earth.

Jean Sommors’ three exquisite mandala-like paintings of natural materials speak to our physical and emotional intimacy - our entwining - with nature. One of these paintings is titled All Earth is Burial Ground and is described by the artist as depicting “a weaving of remembrance.” It suggests our deep connection not only to the earth but to death - and to remembering its constant presence. The circle evident in all of Sommors’ images here not only suggests the wholeness and completeness which can be found in and through nature but more suggests eternal return - and in this way, immortality.

Reminding us of an old carnival arcade device that tells one’s fortune, Sylvia Ziemanns’ small tabletop sculpture is emblazoned on the outside with the question: “What Lies Beyond?!” She fails to answer that question in this piece of course but does offer in the interior various options and choices that attempt to do so, sourced either from the world’s great religions or populist but traditional ‘new age’ beliefs. Shifting from brightly colored on the exterior to darkly spooky in the interior which resembles a gothic corridor, Ziemann’s work plays with but recognizes the monumental divide between the known and the unknown - and that the answer to her question is ultimately, well, unknowable.

Always the semantic provocateur, John Will plays with the word and idea of “Nothingness” as an operating principle for making art - an art that he hopes will itself be meaningless. Of course even the lack of meaning is meaningful so his project is doomed to fail from the start. In the context of this exhibition the word play on ‘nothing’ suggests that our death is in every sense of the word a final termination and we are rendered into nothing, that the afterlife is nothingness and that all of this clearly means nothing at all. This kind of existential bewilderment is not to be equated with Buddhist nothingness. However given this artist’s anachic mindset, the word more reminds me of a song by the early 1960s conceptualist music group The Fugs who operated on the extreme edges of the underground ‘beat’ movement. Their song “Nothing” is nothing more than a repeated cyclic refrain: “Monday-nothing Tuesday-nothing” and so on and so and so on.

Jack Anderson
Guest Curator

Jean Sommors, “Earth is Burial Ground”, acrylic on canvas, 30x30”, 2007

Tamsin Clark, “Memento Mori” (detail 1 of 16), Polaroid SX70 color photograph, 12” x12” (framed), 2011

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