

ELEMENTAL

64TH EXHIBITION OF CENTRAL NEW YORK ARTISTS

MARY E. MURRAY, CURATOR

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ELEMENTAL: AN INTRODUCTION

Elemental showcases the work of eight Central New York artists whose expression is of or about earth, fire, water, and air—forces of nature that forge being and spirit. The exhibition honors two PrattMWP artist-faculty members, Bryan McGrath and Lisa Gregg Wightman, as they near retirement. Bryan is a ceramist whose medium is earth itself, transformed by water and fire. Lisa embraces natural phenomena as she seeks the transcendent in her meditative works on paper. *Elemental* presents their work within the context of Central New York peers with whom they have contributed to the artistic community of this region for decades.

Humankind has been in the thrall of nature's power since maybe always, and in the 21st century, we continue to respect nature, even hold it in awe, for its destructive potential of searing drought, annihilating flood or wind storms. The elements are, of course, life-giving, as well. From those moments when peoples around the globe were able to conceive of spiritual forces controlling the sky, fire, rivers and oceans (and their own fortunes in relation to these elements), our ancestors deified them; within these energies one finds survival. The agrarian are dependent on seasonal planting and harvesting, and so we find the sun glorified and revered, as Ra in ancient Egypt, Helios for the ancient Greeks, or Inti for the Inca. And the Inca's god of weather, Illapu, gave rain from the Milky Way, the heavenly river. For coastal populations, water provides bounty, and thus, there is the Mother of the Sea in the trans-Atlantic spirit Yemoja, from the Yoruba in Africa, to Iemanjá or Janaina for Portuguese-speaking cultures in Brazil.

In the monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition, the beautiful story unfolding in Genesis' opening stanzas describes light emerging from an abyss, followed by the creation of seas, land with vegetation, animals, and, then, a man from the earth itself. And all of it was deemed "very good"—all that emanates from God is worthy, and worthy of veneration. Even as the religions of Abraham no longer perceive nature pantheistically, one finds examples of natural allegories in later spiritual writing by authors such as Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), whose *Canticle of the Sun* offers a prayer of thanksgiving for Brother Sun as the luminous image of the Lord himself, for useful Sister Water and robust Brother Fire.

Since the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment, scientific study has illuminated many of our questions about geology, biology, astronomy, and meteorology, and has rendered many creation stories the stuff of mythology. Discoveries in medicine, physics, engineering, and the development of instrumentation have given humans the impression of holding some power over natural forces: with electricity we are not held hostage by the day's cycle of the sun for our activities; we can cross over great rivers, dam and divert them; with internal combustion engines and jet propulsion, our movement around the globe is virtually limitless.

And with power, as the saying goes, comes responsibility. Looking at 21st-century humankind's myriad relationships to the elements, is it still possible to attach spiritual meaning to earth, fire, water, air? If one believes in Nature or a great spirit or God, and further believes the earth is a manifestation of the divine—that it is "very good"—is one then compelled to celebrate its beauty? To practice attentive stewardship? And what of our belief in Science? What is our responsibility to future generations, relative to nature's health? Such questions are not new, but in the 21st century there is a new urgency to reassess humankind's understanding of its use (and abuse) of resources, the future of life-giving elements for an increasingly populated planet. *Elemental* offers some perspectives from artists who have thought closely on such questions.

THE ARTISTS

Lisa Gregg Wightman's work exemplifies what *Elemental* aspires to: an examination of humankind's place within the wider orb of natural phenomena. Gregg Wightman trained as a printmaker; paper is a constant for her and an ideal foundation for her diaristic collages. She incorporates leaves, stones, and similar other discoveries that are like talismans combined with her own imagery to create deeply personal, poetic compositions. In these, one senses as much as sees Gregg Wightman's reflections on seasonal rhythms, stages of life, and one's place within a larger order. At times, her collages and monotypes seem spare, dotted with markers along a path. These are meditative and can be quietly tragic with loss. In other instances, the images—perhaps with flocks of birds in flight—evoke an open spirit of wonder. Most recently, Gregg Wightman projects the eye skyward with a sensation of marvel in its beauty and mystery. In all, she remains consistent, seeking, as she says, "the transcendent qualities of the natural world and how those qualities connect us to it."

If Lisa Gregg-Wightman's work becomes spirit through material, Bryan McGrath's is essentially of the earth. His vessels are a marriage of Asian ceramic traditions and a Western sensibility. To choose a most ancient artistic material used by cultures globally is to place oneself within a continuum that could bury a creative spirit under millennia of conventions. McGrath works respectfully within a practice that honors the past (an ethos very different from our modern taste for novelty), and finds freedom rather than constraint that this context allows. Traditional forms present opportunities to perfect craftsmanship—not for the sake of virtuosity, but in tribute to one's artistic heritage. McGrath's carefully wrought objects explore nuance of shape, placement in space, and subtleties of surface through his choice of clay or of glazing and firing techniques. His are seemingly humble things of genuine beauty upon which we might slow our over-wired selves to contemplate the sensation of materiality, the imprint of McGrath's hand on a form, the feel the vessel might have in our own hand, and, finally, the great length of history that unfolds behind it.

Chris Irick's fascinations are eclectic, from Victorian decoration to aviation technologies. Her work in *Elemental* centers on a longstanding interest in avian migration and flight patterns. Like McGrath, Irick is inspired by material mined from earth, primarily silver, to which she may add manufactured stuff in surprising combinations. She, too, finds herself working within an ancient tradition, here the practice of adorning the body. Jewelry is an intimate artistic expression, dependent as it is on the touch to skin and to motion, as the body shifts in space and through light. Its small scale

has seductive power, inviting a viewer into a more personal sphere to discover its details. Irick's work always rewards in this respect, for her craftsmanship is impeccable. And as we are drawn in to appreciate the beauty of Irick's brooches and pendants, we may be induced to contemplate hazards to birds—diminishing habitats, rise in global temperatures, extinction.

Many of the *Elemental* participants walk in the metaphorical footsteps of Henry David Thoreau and artists such as Richard Long or Andy Goldsworthy, moving through their environments for inspiration, to collect materials, and to create ephemeral interventions. Leigh Yardley's practice centers on her contemplative interaction within the Madison County farm country in which she lives. Her intention is to slow herself and be present. What does one notice at this moment: a sparrow chattering a message to its cohort, the veining of leaves seen through a particular slant of seasonal light, a pattern of ice crystals on the sidewalk, a soft, humid breeze on the skin? For Yardley, the land around her home is her creative source. She might place cheesecloth in a pond or meadow to capture random detritus, the accumulation of which is transformed into her installations. With these mediations, Yardley observes natural cycles or the passage of time, and invites us to do the same, in the gallery and in our lives afterwards.

Similarly Rob Licht walks through the world with sensitive awareness to, in his words, the "intersection of human activity and natural organization." Trained as a sculptor, an injury has expanded Licht's practice from object-maker to something else. He immerses himself in an environment, experiences its "intersections," creates interventions, and documents his actions in photographs. For *Elemental*, Licht presents the series *Tangle/Untangle*, made during a recent residency at Baie-Sainte-Marie, Nova Scotia. This region is renowned for its extraordinary tidal action, rising or falling fifty feet in some spots. Licht describes the Canadian coast and the action of the sea with awe and admiration, but he was also chagrined to find the rocky shore awash in so much man-made trash. The tides create a perfect feeding ground for whales and for human fishing, too; Licht found cut line from fishing vessels in abundance. During his residency, his actions included collecting, organizing, and placing the nylon rope within the rocks, and watching as the tides overwhelmed his attempts to place order there. Licht understands that his practice is his own, an intimate experience that reflects his being within a specific context, but, like Yardley, he hopes his photographs seen in the gallery will inspire viewers towards greater sensitivity to their own environments.

Dorene Quinn has for many years created works of art that reflect on humans' interface with nature. She, too, has created ephemeral, performance-inspired mediations as well as sculpture. Poetry is an important, enriching component of Quinn's studio practice, so all of her projects, regardless of their form, distill meaning to essence. Her most recent objects function as haiku, isolating a word like a voice (in the wilderness) for inspiring awareness and change. In *Elemental*, there are two such works. Quinn describes *LAST* as "just a fragile layer of what is considered low but is actually essential and finite—soil." But if her work is cautionary, it is by no means pedantic; in fact, Quinn's installations



Dorene Quinn
Off Road
2009-10
canvas, bark,
silicone,
dimensions
variable

can be droll, like the tire tracks made of tree bark in her piece *Off-Road* that once ran through the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Museum of Art galleries. *HISTORY*, included in *Elemental*, almost conjures the slapstick. The word is spelled out, backwards, with faux grass pressed up to the gallery wall and faux dirt facing the viewer; Quinn refers

to the piece as "the wrong side of history," or where we humans will find ourselves, with only faux and no living, at the rate we are warming up the globe.

Central New York is a landscape of dairy farms, idyllic like the Eden of John Milton, gentle in summer and resplendent in autumn foliage. Interspersed are industrial towns and cities stretching across the state, born from 19th-century commerce of the Erie Canal. But in this Great Lake state, Central New York feels winter's ferocity keenly. In her new videos, Yvonne Buchanan quotes the poem, *Ice Child*, by John Haines, noting the natural beauty of other seasons is rendered ugly as snow is shoveled into parking-lot mountain ranges through urban winter. At face value, Buchanan's videos comprise a meditation on this harsh season, but her observations of nature's cycles serve a metatext. She presents weather conditions to introduce metaphor of frozen and freezing out; these videos examine the creation of identity, by oneself and others, and the reception of that identity. Descriptions of temperatures that fall to the point that the skin burns raises an alarm about other instances of skin-burning. Observations of winter's muffling effects on people, bundled against the inhumane climate, beg questions about other perspectives or voices that have been or continue to be muffled. Buchanan uses found sources, old movies and music, and manipulates them digitally to the point the original can no longer be recognized, but the sources remain very much at the root of the art work's content.

Richard Barlow would seem to be working on the continuum from Hudson River School paintings through John Ford films that have nurtured American iconography, our associations between majestic landscapes, the divine, and national identity. In his series of chalkboard-paint drawings, Barlow immerses the viewer in a recreated woodsy experience. He appropriates nature photography but in his hands, it is at a few removes from Ansel Adams. Like Buchanan, Barlow borrows from popular culture; his source materials are 19th-century photography or sports utility vehicles advertisements. The latter are trucks promoted as a symbol of freedom to travel widely and to escape the confining limitations of "civilization." The irony, of course, is that, as fossil-fuel-burners, such vehicles contribute to the demise of the great outdoors. But this isn't even Barlow's main point. He is more intrigued by human perception, how we invest spaces—and nature—with meaning and how that in turn informs memory.

Elemental is presented with profound respect for the forces of tectonic plate shifting, tsunamis, and hurricanes. It is presented to celebrate natural beauty. It is presented to open up avenues of perception about natural phenomena and humankind's relationship to them by offering such questions as

- What meanings do we ascribe to the natural world?
- How do we allegorize nature and why?
- How do we personally, nationally, and globally use natural resources?

Mary E. Murray
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute

RICHARD BARLOW

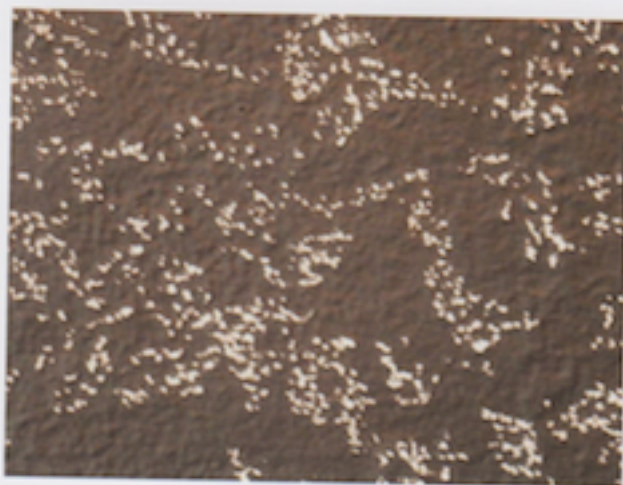
Oneonta

I am interested in how images and objects become invested with meaning, and how that process is always reliant on contingencies—of culture, medium, history and display—and how fleeting those meanings can be. As part of this investigation, I have become interested in the history of landscape painting. Though inherently meaningless, the natural world is again and again imbued with meaning in visual art. It is treated as a repository of emotion, emblem of nation, and expression of spirituality, inscribed with myth and history and controlled through our gaze. When viewing the natural world and its representations, there is a seductive tendency to assume that the meanings we ascribe to it are themselves natural. These meanings are arbitrary, ephemeral and dependent on context, but the desire to render them universal is powerful.

A majority of my recent landscape work has engaged with images appropriated from popular culture: album covers, SUV advertisements, and early photography. This interest in 19th-century photography took me to England in the summer of 2014, where I sought out the site of a landscape photograph by Fox Talbot, the inventor of the silver negative photographic process. The photograph depicts trees reflected in water, and has been the source for many of my own works.

On the same UK trip, I visited the house where I grew up. It had occurred to me that the copse of trees nearby, in the center of which I had played as a child, might have some kind of similarity to the Talbot trees image I had revisited so many times. Upon arriving I found the site transformed from my memory. Several of the trees had recently been felled, changing the site from what I had remembered. Several children were still playing there, though, so some things remained the same. I took multiple photographs,

unsure if there would be any way to use them for an artistic project. I started to imagine a drawing that wrapped around the viewer, placing them in the center of the copse, apparently re-constructing the site as I remembered it. I have worked with temporary chalk drawings in the past, with the ephemeral nature of the medium mapping onto environmental concerns. In this case I am hoping it references the fleeting and constructed nature of memory, and its eventual erasure addresses loss and acceptance.



A View of the Copse
(detail)