Environmental Influences on Contemporary Cleveland Artists

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In considering current directions in the art of the Cleveland area, it is important to realize that nothing occurs in a vacuum. Accordingly, environmental influences on Cleveland artists must be understood in the context of developments that are going on among artists all over the country. Therefore, I begin by discussing three works by artists from outside Cleveland, before focusing on work produced locally.

There are indeed identifiable, shared tendencies in the work of Cleveland area artists. Although I hesitate to use the word "school" in reference to art produced in our pluralistic era, with so many different directions and mediums being employed, there are a number of artists working today who are all heavily influenced either by their environment or by environmental issues. To some degree, they all use the medium of photography and their approach is largely conceptual to the point that some also include text.

To preface this discussion with a view of the national spectrum, I begin with the work of Peter Campus, an artist whose roots are in video art and technology, but who more recently has been using the computer to alter photographic imagery. In the process of so doing, he has developed work that calls attention to the environment. In the work *Wither*, 1992, Campus has taken photographic imagery which he has scanned with a computer. His process is to zoom in to see the microcosmic infrastructure of the photograph, which he can play around with as if performing surgery on nature. Then, he can zoom back to get the resultant image, which appears to be nature having been affected by some kind of strange aberration.

Another artist who uses photography, but alters the photographic image to call attention to problems in the environment, is the New Jersey artist Geanna Merola. For the work *Fish Dust #4*, 1992, which is actually a very small image, the artist began with a photograph of a fish and then used a variety of drawing materials and mixed-media to alter the image so that what we ultimately face is a rather sublime and nightmarish image of fish exploding in a sea of pollutants.

A similar response can be found in the work of an artist who would not initially be thought of as working in this genre--Kenny Scharf, who surfaced in the early 1980s as part of New York’s East Village scene, which was perhaps identified most closely with Keith Haring and other graffiti artists. Scharf has always used a style that derives from the acid-rock cartoons of the 1960s and 1970s. In recent work, he adapted this style to address concrete issues about problems in the environment. In
the fairly large painting Junkle, 1992, he also used photography—in the sense that he employed silkscreen to transfer photographic media images of various pollutants (including weed killer) to the field of the canvas and then superimposed painted images of the rain forests looking very unhealthy. And, to add a sense of deadpan humor to the composition, he framed the whole work in black Astroturf as a funerary reference to what is happening to our natural world. Now, let us examine similar developments and responses to the Cleveland area by a group of artists who have shared these concerns. Not all of them, however, would be called environmentalists.

Penny Rakoff is an artist who works primarily in straight photography, although in the past few years, she has also begun doing installations. An example is the outdoor installation she created at The Cleveland Museum of Art during the 75th Anniversary celebration. Rakoff’s attitude in photography is demonstrated in Cuyahoga Falls, State Street, a photograph from 1989 which was done during the time she was living in Akron. Having grown up in a residential section of New York, Rakoff had never lived in an industrial environment. Upon moving to Akron, she was intrigued by the almost eerie quality or, in her own words, “the banality” of huge expanses of land that seemed to be unpopulated by people or by homes. With her camera, she sought out areas that were characterized by the dominance of industrial landscape and began photographing the references to industrial setting by using light, in particular, to emphasize those areas. For example, in her photograph the light reflection on the metal seems to create an almost surreal feeling, suggestive of a "twilight zone" where people do not exist.

Rakoff next moved to Cleveland and lived in the downtown area. In View from Eagle Street Bridge of 1990, she was fascinated by tires covered with snow, such that, from a distance, they tend to look almost like Lifesavers. Once again, there is a surreal, eerie tone to the composition. Light dominates, particularly in the reflection in the water, and suggests that people do not exist in this land. Rakoff is also interested in the idea of archaeological metaphor. The ambiguity of the circular forms in the composition suggests that they might be relics from some kind of civilization lost. In another series, the issue Rakoff seems to be addressing concerns how civilizations or cities seem to rise and fall and rise again. While she was living downtown, prior to her having been chosen as on of the artists to create public art for Gateway, Rakoff began photographing the Gateway site—during the initial period of its deconstruction. In the photograph Gateway #1, 1991, she was intrigued by the workers at night, huddled around a barrel of fire to keep warm. She was also quite fascinated by the contrast between Terminal Tower, a familiar monument, and all the rubble that is beginning to fall and crumble. Rakoff thought that it was rather ironic to see the workers in what seemed to be a very primitive ritual, standing around the barrel to keep warm, in the context of what they were going to build there—this great industrial feat that represents Cleveland in the last decade of the century.
As the deconstruction progressed, Rakoff began to work, for the first time, in black-and-white photography, which allowed her to focus on abstract patterns of rubble. In *Deconstruction Gateway Site*, 1993, the rubble seemed to her to be a metaphor for the idea of downfall, deconstruction, or the decline of a civilization. As the building progressed, she became intrigued by just the opposite—the rising again, the renewed spirit, the almost cathedral-like presence that she could find in the skeletal structure of scaffolding that emerged as Gateway began to rise and become something real and concrete. Rakoff exhibited this series of photographs in the *Artists of Gateway* exhibition at Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, in November 1993.

Another artist who felt a sense of cultural displacement upon moving to Cleveland is the photographer Masumi Hayashi, an Asian-American who lived in Los Angeles and Florida prior to coming to Cleveland. Her characteristic format is one that she has employed for a number of years. The idea is to construct a panoramic view by using individual modules, smaller photographs which are joined together in a manner that recalls the photographs of David Hockney, who was clearly an influence on Hayashi when she began working this way. However, Hockney’s interest in working with modules is primarily in creating a sense of cubist structure in a composition. In the work of Hayashi, the modular format serves more as a means of enabling her to function like a cartographer, visually mapping out the territory that she is investigating. At the same time, it tends not only to create a spatial map, but the system assists with the elevation of metaphoric content. For example, in a view of Public Square, the repetition of the modules contributes to the sense of vitality about the setting, which is defined by a lively, busy urban spirit.

In contrast to artists who find an industrial setting disturbing, Hayashi found it very intriguing and tended to romanticize the industrial landscape in some of her photographs of the late 1980s, such as *The Flats in the Fog*, 1987. When applied to large expanses of sky or land, the modular system suggests a prism, through which we view a space that is somewhat magical and which should be treasured. Also, this system allows Hayashi to isolate elements that act as clues about the setting. In another work from her industrial landscape series of the late 1980s, *Steel Mill Clay Road*, the cracks in the clay surface of the road are given aesthetically intriguing treatment. With the repetition of the modules, Hayashi heightened that effect. Her system is to work with a tripod. She places herself at the center of the vista that she is recording and then, very methodically—and not intuitively at all—she works in registers, at different heights from left to right, as she moves the tripod up and down. This is why it is appropriate to refer to this process as a cartographic approach to recording landscape.

The subject of environmental problems did begin to enter into Hayashi’s work around 1988, when she began traveling to various EPA Superfund sites in Ohio and elsewhere, photodocumenting these areas. In *EPA Superfund Site Uniontown, Ohio*, 1990, the prism effect is even more appropriate because the subject is an area that has been declared in need of protection. In addition to the
reference of a prism, the metaphor of prison bars also makes sense here. Another example of the EPA Superfund Site works is Deerfield, Ohio, 1990. Again, the artist isolates in a single panel a detail such as the barrel. In another example, EPA Superfund Site 666, 1990, the landscape looks very fragile as a result of the repeated modules.

An artist who appropriately has a post-industrial aesthetic, as we have learned from Wayne Draznin's paper, is also related to the artists I am discussing—in that he works conceptually, he uses photography, and his work is about the environment. That artist is Don Harvey, who actually lives in the Flats, where he has a very good view of Lake Erie and of areas of the Cuyahoga River. In Sky, Slick, Sea, 1990, Harvey uses technology most innovatively. A computer robot jet spray device has been used to transfer photographic imagery directly onto metal, hence the references to the sky are in the upper regions of the work which depicts fragmented zones of sky on metal, with the metal referring to an industrial setting. To refer to the fact that the landscape being documented is deeply affected by pollutants, the artist has incorporated industrial fluids into the work. The two fluids with which he has filled the industrial tubing are oil and windshield wiper fluid. Another work, Songbirds and Chemical Plants, 1991, deals with the challenges that animal life face living in an industrialized landscape and living in the late twentieth century. The right half of this diptych contains photographic imagery of actual plant life along the river in the Flats. The imagery has been robot-jet sprayed onto metal surfaces, while actual metal was used to cover the left half of the diptych. Affixed to that are attachments which consist of water whistles with little toy birds atop them. Each has been filled with an industrial fluid that pollutes the environment. To add yet another level of information to the work, Harvey has transferred words or, in this case, chemical symbols for various elements or the names of chemical elements. This serves as an additional device for informing us about the various pollutants that exist in the area.

In a very direct work by Harvey, entitled Landscape for Young Explorers, 1991, young explorers are shown pioneering atop a mountain, heading towards a giant cancer cell at the bottom. The artist is referring very directly here to the fact that our environment, because of pollutants, is giving people cancer. In a work entitled Finding Order, from his 1993 exhibition at the William Busta Gallery, Harvey very lyrically and poetically refers to the plight of animals facing the challenges of an industrialized setting. He uses just two materials, a rectangle of yellow vinyl and a vertical steel attachment. The title of the work functions on two levels, since the geometry of the attachments suggests a geometric order, while at the same time, paradoxically, those elements act as obstructions to the order being sought by the birds. Slider with Floaters of 1993 recalls the work of Masumi Hayashi in its suggestion of prison bars. The turtle, photographed from the Flats, is weighted down quite physically by floaters, which are normally used in industrial tanks.
The fourth artist under consideration is Michael Loderstedt, who creates conceptual puzzles that invite the viewer to participate in the work by questioning our relationship with various natural as well as industrial environments. While living in Akron, Loderstedt created a series of works on an abandoned BF Goodrich site. There he installed photocollages in bulletin-board boxes that existed on the site. In *Saving Your Energy*, 1989, he superimposed a diagrammatic chart, taken from a 1950s catalog used to instruct women on how to conserve energy, over actual images taken from elsewhere on the abandoned factory site. His works are very enigmatic and paradoxical in that they invite more questions than they provide answers. In the diptych *Beauty and Mimesis*, 1990, Loderstedt juxtaposed a photograph taken of a sculpture, outdoors at The Cleveland Museum of Art with landscape behind it, and an image of a psychological puzzle. At the top is a mosaic from the facade of the Rockefeller Greenhouse. The juxtaposition brings to mind the idea that both the human brain and plant life are suffering as a result of conditions outdoors.

For a 1992 installation at the William Busta Gallery, entitled *Utopia Unrealized*, the artist took a nostalgic look at the lost art of the greenhouse. In that series of work, he collaborated with staff members of the Rockefeller Greenhouse in creating sculptural elements which are actually miniature greenhouses. They are treated like museum relics with labels identifying all of the components. The greenhouses were accompanied by photocollages, exhibited on the gallery walls. The photocollage *Ocean Greenhouse* sets up a viewer-participatory situation. It shows a photograph of aquatic life, accompanied by text which gives the viewer options—a kind of multiple choice game that makes one think about how we relate to the depicted imagery. Another kind of participatory sculptural work by Loderstedt is the table and chair set entitled *Picture Chairs, Table of Questions*. For the chairs, Loderstedt used images from The Cleveland Museum of Art and, for the table, images from the Garden Center. The placement and juxtaposition invites the viewer to sit down and question the museum’s role as archivist in preserving the environment that has been gradually deteriorating throughout our century.

Of all the artists under discussion, Shawn Godwin is perhaps the most active as an environmentalist. His environmental concerns are illustrated by an installation created in 1990 at the FAVA Gallery in Oberlin. Godwin works in a variety of mediums and favors no single style. His main interest is in creating art that reinforces the idea of restoring to nature its role as a sacred space.

The installation was composed from several individual works, including *Forests Converted to Newsprint—Clear Cuts to the Horizon, Northern Amitibi and James Bay, Quebec*, 1990. Godwin actually led an expedition through this area and brought back some photographs and notes from his journal. He then combined these with bark paper, gold leaf, moss gathered in the area, and text from his journals and photographs, to create a triptych. He uses the triptych format to evoke a deliberate reference to an altarpiece, suggesting that nature is as religious as the imagery that Old Master artists depicted in
their altarpieces. In a work that was actually commissioned by the Nature Conservancy, entitled Beaver Dreaming at Morgan Swamp, Ashtabula County, Godwin documented a nature preserve. When the doors are closed, viewers see the landscape that one must pass through before reaching the nature preserve. The doors can be opened to reveal the nature preserve set within glass, which suggests that, like Alice-through-the-looking-glass, one enters into a world of splendor. Another triptych, executed in drawing and entitled Tamarack Dreaming at Flat Iron Bog, Portage County, 1990, also documents a nature preserve, one that Godwin knows very well from personal time spent there. In the right-hand panel there is an area and a bridge that one must pass through to get to the nature preserve. On the left side, there are iconographic references that have a great amount of meaning for this work. Beaver tracks refer to the fact that, since the 1930s—when beavers were actually extinct in Ohio—they have been gradually reintegrating themselves into this area. There is also, in the left-most panel, an aboriginal symbol that refers to a river. The center of the composition is intentionally very wide and panoramic, as Godwin wanted to signify the idea that most people know this place only through their automobile window as they drive by it—hence they see it as a kind of panorama in their peripheral vision.

Godwin’s work also reveals some affinities with that of Don Harvey. In Five Animal Dreamings, 1992 he has included three different references in each strip to different animals who are seen out of context, a device that calls attention to the fact that, today, animals face serious challenges as the environment that they once knew no longer exists as it was. In the upper levels, the five animals are rendered photographically. They are shown as specimens in the center and then, in the bottom of each panel, wood paneling refers to the indigenous culture or environment of each.

In short, while each artist has an idiosyncratic manner of responding to the environment of this area, as well as to the larger global problems, I think that as we look towards the bicentennial and the new century, we should be very proud that Cleveland artists are making socially relevant art that raises serious questions about the future of our planet.

Bibliography

