

Under Glass, On The Wall, In the Wild- Earl Miller

Representing nature through art has become increasingly complex as humanity becomes increasingly distant from nature. The simple divide between culture and nature – Kant’s legacy of art imitating nature yet never becoming part of it - has become clouded, for one thing by culture’s omnipresent environmental imprint. Undeniably, the division is no longer clear, but we are not so alienated from the landscape that nature is equatable to culture. Accordingly, Jeannie Thib and Penelope Stewart explore the murky middle ground between culture and nature with acculturated representations of nature in their installations at the Tree Museum.

Walking along the unpaved road winding through the Tree Museum, passing by a line of permanent roadside installations, one will encounter two new site-specific pieces by Jeannie Thib and Penelope Stewart. Thib’s installation, *Equivalent (Tree Museum) after Muniz, after Stieglitz (2010)*, the first of the two, comprises a painting of clouds (6’ x 6’) mounted on a large erratic boulder looming behind a small marble disk (18” x18”) on the ground. For *Cloche (2010)*, Stewart has installed a colour photograph, printed on a 12’ x 9’ vinyl sheet, depicting a garden viewed through a transparent cloche or bell jar - a solid glass dome used to protect garden plants from cold and frost. The clouds and the cloche’s landscape view are both representations of nature, and so they belong on site. Yet as two-dimensional works, they seem, paradoxically, more comfortable in a conventional museum or gallery.

Thib's marble disk lies fittingly on the forest ground even though it represents the moon. Thib clarifies that "the patterning on this lichen-covered, curving granite slope suggested a celestial sky and hence a suitable place for the moon."¹ This poetic installation is spare enough to depend on natural surroundings to complete it. The painting of clouds behind the disk is rendered in black exterior house paint on birch bark in sharp linear brushstrokes that resemble the inky lines resulting from gouge marks on a woodblock. Sourcing from 19th and early 20th century Australian and North American wood engravings, Thib's finished painting is a conglomerate of cloud imagery.

Thib's installation may at first read as anomalous from her previous work. Marnie Fleming notes that Thib was exploring the human body "as artifact or archive."² Still though, Thib engaged in an approach that was "anchored in the museum's ordering and classifying structures."³ Returning to this approach for her Tree Museum installation, she references a photographic series by Vik Muniz, *Equivalent* (*Museum of Modern Art*) (1995), which responds to the museum through his remaking of Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalent* series, about 220 photographs of clouds taken between 1925 and 1934. They were canonical in the overlapping histories of Modernism and photography, as they are generally considered the first intentionally abstract photographs. Stieglitz states that in this series, "True meaning...comes through directly, without any extraneous or distracting pictorial or representation factors coming between the person and the picture."⁴

Over half a century later, Muniz, when viewing Stieglitz's photographs at the Museum of Modern Art, realized that patterns on the museum's marble floor coincidentally resembled Stieglitz's abstracted clouds. Deciding to photograph the floor to reconstruct Stieglitz's photographs, he then completed his simulation by cutting black paper silhouettes to represent landscape and placing a dime above the silhouettes as a stand-in for the moon. By connecting the museum's architectural features to the original *Equivalents*, Muniz satirically highlights how museum context affects viewing art - an ironical premise since Stieglitz intended to eliminate distraction between viewer and image. Conversely, Muniz illustrates how high Modernism depends upon the museum, with its attendant elitism and traditionalism, for exhibition - despite the museum's contradictory disruption of the intended private, if not hermetic, relationship between viewer and abstract object.

Thib recalls that the Tree Museum site "seemed particularly interesting within the context of an outdoor museum and suggested the possibility of incorporating reference to the collections and practices of more traditional museums."⁵ Indeed, Thib's piece is a chain of references, beginning with her representation of Muniz's *Equivalents*, which is, in turn, a representation of photographic representations of nature (Stieglitz's *Equivalents*). The culmination of this appropriation of the appropriated is considerable visual difference between Stieglitz's and Thib's work. Certainly, one would have to either note the piece's title or read Thib's artist's statement to know the *Equivalents* series is being alluded to. Moreover, Thib's installation includes none of Muniz's humble

everyday material – coins or paper– but her marble disc does reference Muniz’s photographing of the museum floor and harkens classical sculpture.

Further referencing the museum is Thib’s two-dimensional, wall-intended painting as well as the boulder, which despite its glacial origins, serves as a plinth – albeit a crude, oversized one. Alluding to a museum by using a natural site as a readymade, Thib’s installation is as absurdly displaced as it is appropriately site-specific.

Thib’s placement of her work outside in an alternative museum distances it from a conventional museum, but at the same time, keeps it within a museum paradigm. Distancing, but from the inside, is ideal for reflexive institutional critique. Thib, first of all, critiques the museum simply by allegorizing Muniz’s work; after all, Muniz performed what could be termed a neo-institutional critique (“neo” because it post-dates the work of Micheal Asher, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren *et al* by about four decades) of the museum’s defeat of Modernist ideals. Thib amplifies Muniz’s critique by only loosely referencing Stieglitz’s imagery because its dissipation outside of the museum implies his work cannot function at all when free of marble and columns.

In addition to highlighting Muniz’s critique, Thib points out how far-reaching the influence of the museum is for it to pervade in such a remote location. Siting her installations in a forest but not escaping the spectral appearance of the museum illustrates just how far culture has permeated nature.

Penelope Stewart, likewise, provides a culturally infused representation of nature amidst what is actually natural. Set slightly in from the road at the far end of a

clearing, trees looming behind it, Stewart's *Cloche* depicts the powerful sculptural form of an oversized bell jar. The cloche appears to be filled with greenery, but what one initially mistakes for its contents is a view of Kiwi Gardens in Perth, Ontario, which has been photographed through the glass bell jar. Stewart's cloche encloses empty space while nature surrounds it - the ironical opposite of a cloche's typical use. Additionally, creating a fractured image of nature, the glass knob topping the cloche acts as a camera obscura, causing the image reflected in the knob to appear upside down because of its curvature. Finally, Stewart printed photographs on either side of the vinyl and reversed them to create the illusion one is looking through the cloche. While thereby simulating a true image, Stewart clarifies that the work is allusional: "The scale of the photographs and the transparency of the glass immediately conjure up the Victorian glass greenhouse whose function it was to create, collect, and make spectacle of the magic of the natural and the exotic while in an environment of control and containment."⁶ Accordingly, *Cloche* recalls Stewart's earlier work, *Genius Loci*, which drew conceptually and sometimes imagistically from the many conservatories built across North America and Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Not only referencing a conservatory because of its large scale, Stewart's cloche also relates to a conservatory for its enclosure and control of nature.

Stewart's representation of culturally constructed nature is what could be deemed a heterotopia, Michel Foucault's term that refers to "real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are

something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”⁷ A garden definitively is certainly this paradoxical “enacted utopia,” a place of escape that is separate from overall public space - the “real sites” surrounding it. Still, it relieves the stress of real space, and is hence an inversion of it - an idealized foil. Appropriately, Foucault uses a garden as an example of a heterotopia.⁸

The garden, like all heterotopias, is a socially engaged construction. It is a manufactured paradise, which Robert Smithson was notably critical of, viewing it as a common but sadly artificial site for public sculpture. Smithson argues that “parks are idealizations of nature, but nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal. Nature does not proceed in a straight line; it is, rather, a sprawling development. Nature is never finished.”⁹

Smithson bluntly asks, “Could one say that art degenerates as it approaches gardening?”¹⁰ Smithson was interested in the reality of natural spaces, which he called “non-sites,” as places for art to attune to or blend in with nature. As Sue Malvern and Eckart Marchand put it, “Smithson saw his non-sites as a deliberate strategy to replace the man-made work of art in the picturesque landscape setting...”¹¹ Smithson’s intent was that his work form a dialectical relationship between his work and nature, therefore reaching a resolution with nature despite initial differences.

The natural, or nearly natural, forest Stewart and Thib have installed in is comparable to a “non-site.” However, their placement of acculturated natural

images in the forest – the museological moon and clouds or the cloche’s reflection of gardens - illustrates that Smithson’s attempt to bridge the culture/nature dichotomy dialectically is problematic because culture’s reach is too far. That Smithson’s earth works are now most often seen in a museum as documentation testifies to the fading idealism they once embodied. In fact, Craig Owens, in the second part of his seminal essay, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism” observed how a generation of post-modern artists in the late seventies had already conceded that nature was blending into culture: “The nature/culture opposition [is] a presupposition that postmodern artists - not to mention their post-structuralist counterparts - are determined to subvert. In postmodernist art, nature is treated as wholly domesticated by culture; the "natural" can be approached only through its cultural representation.”¹² There is no dichotomy awaiting resolution.

Owens continues by arguing that subverting the culture/nature divide “demonstrates...the impossibility of accepting their opposition...”¹³ Although this opposition is certainly becoming less pronounced, it is disingenuous to claim that no difference exists between culture and nature. Jacques Derrida, for this reason, believes that deconstruction is the best way to approach this opposition: “Despite all its rejuvenations and disguises, this opposition [between nature and culture] is congenital to philosophy. It is even older than Plato. It is at least as old as the Sophists...Lévi-Strauss simultaneously has experienced the necessity of utilizing this opposition and the impossibility of accepting it.”¹⁴ Thib and Stewart similarly enact a nature/culture split – either the museum or the greenhouse

versus the forest - but refuse to accept it, as they blur the boundaries between culture and nature by opening up the architecture of museums and conservatories, by emptying their contents— modern art and monitored gardens – into a natural space. Their work, consequently, meets Derrida’s definition of deconstruction – a critique of aspects of a system clearly troubled but unchangeable. While such a critique may ring pessimistically, Derrida continues that the culture/nature polarization should be addressed with a “readiness to abandon [it], if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful.”¹⁵ Thib and Stewart stress that it is currently impossible to see nature and culture as entirely merged entities, meaning they are closer to Derrida than Owens in maintaining but questioning the somewhat contradictory polarization of culture and nature. As The Tree Museum itself already intrinsically questions such contradictions, asking, for instance, how natural can nature be when it becomes a museum, it is an ideal site for Jeannie Thib and Penelope Stewart to further such conversations.

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Notes

¹ Jeannie Thib, Artist's Statement. 2010. 18 Oct. 2010
<<http://www.thetreemuseum.ca/treemuseum/index.html>>

² Marnie Fleming, *Jeannie Thib: Model/Mimic* (Oakville: Oakville Galleries, 1997) 7.

³ Fleming, 3.

⁴ Alfred Stieglitz, *Stieglitz on Photography: His Selected Essays and Notes*, ed. Richard Whelan (New York: Aperture, 2000) 238.

⁵ Jeannie Thib, Artist's Statement. 2010. 18 Oct. 2010
<<http://www.thetreemuseum.ca/treemuseum/index.html>>

⁶ Penelope Stewart, Artist's Statement. 2008. 18 Oct. 2010
<http://penelopestewart.ca/a_cloche.html>

⁷ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984). 20 Oct. 2010.
<<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>>

⁸ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces."

⁹ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, "Cultural Confinement," ed. Jack Flam. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 155.

¹⁰ Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," 105.

¹¹ Sue Malvern and Eckart Marchand, "Sculpture in Arcadia," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 29.1 (2009): 1 — 12. 18. Oct. 2010 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14601170701806908>>

¹² Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 13 (Summer, 1980): 58-80.

¹³ Craig Owens, 58-80.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 282-283.

¹⁵ Derrida, 284.

