

Vicissitude

In the spring of 2011, I assembled an exhibition simply called *The Birds and the Bees*. Certainly I was familiar with vintage songs such as Jewel Akens' "The Birds and the Bees" and Cole Porter's "Let's Do it (Let's Fall in Love)" that referred to "the birds and the bees" as a euphemism for love and sex. And I was especially intrigued with how this well-used figure of speech had lost potency now that these creatures are known more for their disappearance from our landscape than for their prolific reproduction.

Following a number of studio visits with contemporary artists, I found that many were engaging with birds and bees as a means of exploring ideas as diverse as ecology, architecture, migration, and the tenuous boundaries between nature and culture. A spring exhibition at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (once a private home surrounded by 11 acres of gardens) was an opportune time to provide a refresher on the various ways in which contemporary artists employ avian and apian characteristics. The resulting exhibition lent new metaphorical precision to once-exhausted imagery. It also served as a conduit between the gallery inside and nature outside.

Penelope Stewart was among the ten artists in the exhibition. She wanted to draw on the meaning of the site as a former grand home and asked if she could create an *in situ* installation in a former dining room that had a hand-carved grapevine frieze running along the upper perimeter of the room. As she figured it, the bay windows of this room would provide a link to the gardens beyond. Familiar with her previous installations, I instinctively knew that her penchant for the unconventional medium of beeswax could embrace the senses in such a way that the viewer could fully participate as catalyst and receptor.

Stewart's installation for *The Birds and The Bees* was called *Vicissitude*. It announced itself to visitors first by the fragrance of the beeswax, then by the undulating visuals of the amber tiles, and finally by the touch of the nubby, raised lines of those tiles. This mind-boggling work incorporated over a thousand wax tiles that featured multiple configurations of a contour map depicting a small section of Halton Region.ⁱ

Liquid beeswax had been meticulously poured and then cast by the artist in silicone molds. Each was fastidiously numbered and applied directly to the wall of the room with polymer adhesive. The tiles were rendered in various shades of golden honey: some milky, some dark, some light, others luminous and translucent. Stewart repeated and tessellated the tiles to inventively mimic the flight of a bee as it hovers from flower to flower – possibly over Gairloch Gardens – or some other imaginative apian journey in which the bee always returns "home" to the hive.

Another design was used on either side of the gallery's carved grapevine frieze. The artist borrowed it from a conceptual drawing (1958) for a Mexico City apartment building by the architect Jacob Königberg.ⁱⁱ This little known architect was drawn to honeycomb for its integral strength and visual texture. Moreover, the cells provided clean lines and simplicity of form typical for the modern architect. Appropriating the architect's drawing and then stretching the scan, Stewart created a pattern of her own making that when flipped and repeated, provided continuous architectural embellishment. In using beeswax and honeycomb motifs, Stewart did so with an acute awareness that apian structures were regarded as utopian architecture and fundamental to the practice of other bee-loving architects such as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd

Wright and Louis Sullivan, all of whom kept bees and looked to apiculture as a social democratic ideal.

So too, the artist's diligence of labour in the making of the work was analogous to the efforts of the purposeful worker bee. Stewart spent a couple of days on her hands and knees working out a pattern and a rhythm of colour and then applied her rigorous tiling system to the walls. Yet, in the end, it was crucial to her that the taxing amount of effort resulted in simplicity and ease.

Today, as I write these words, Stewart's compelling installation has just been dismantled in preparation for the next exhibition. Only a few traces and photographs remain as proof that she produced anything at all. Yet photographs —and, no doubt, these words — cannot convey the complex and varied sensations that arise from encountering this compelling work. They simply fail to capture what engaged and interested us in the encounter — the sensory responses triggered by the work's material attributes and our own participatory role as we unfold an immersive bundle of ideas that brings inflections of domesticity, labour and architecture to the fore.

Moreover, the artist fluidly raised philosophical inquires around cooperation, social determinism and the important role these endangered pollinators play in our ecosystem. Such reflections on the lives of the bees ultimately lead us back to ourselves, prompting not only consideration of our relationship to the natural world, but also intimating that there is much to be learned about the human condition. This arresting work continues to resonate in memory long after it has disappeared and its fragrance has worn thin.

Marnie Fleming
Curator, Oakville Galleries

ⁱ Located less than an hour's drive from Toronto and Niagara, Halton region covers over 967 square kilometres, including 25 kilometres of frontage on Lake Ontario. The map Stewart used was taken from a forestry register.

ⁱⁱ Juan Antonio Ramirez, *The Beehive Metaphor* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998). pg 160