

Susan Hobbs

Laurie Walker

- 1962 Born in Montréal
1987 Master of Fine Arts, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax
1984 Bachelor of Fine Arts (Distinction), Mount Allison University, Sackville
2011 Died in Montréal

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2011 Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
2002 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Wave*, Canadian Embassy Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
2000 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Wave*, Oboro, Montréal
1999 Optica, Montréal
1996 Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
1994 *Laurie Walker - Seeing Blue*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal
Laurie Walker - A Material Writing of Things, Oakville Galleries, Oakville
1993 Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
1991 Centre culturel, Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke
Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
1990 Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge
1989 Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
1988 Galerie Powerhouse, Montréal
1987 Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2021 *Ecologies a Song for Our Planet*, Musée des beaux arts de Montréal, Montréal
2012 *Flora and Fauna*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
2011 *Colour and Lights*, Musée régional de Rimouski, Rimouski
2008 *Ideas of Landscape/Landscape of Ideas 2*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
2004 *À coup sûr. Une sélection d'oeuvres de la donation de Patrice et Andrée Drouin*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec
2001 *Artité*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
Bruits defend, Orford Arts Centre, Orford
1999 *Sustentation*, Plein Sud, Longueuil
1997 *Voir, savoir, croire*, Musée régional de Rimouski, Rimouski
New Science, The Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton
Les Iconoclastes, Chapelle historique du Bon-Pasteur, Montréal
En Cause: Brancusi, Axe Néo-7, Hull
1996 *Rise and Fall* (with John Dickson), Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston;
Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph
The Eye of the Collector, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
Nature Redux, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge
Espaces baroques et figures allégoriques, Centre d'art de Baie-Saint-Paul, Baie-Saint-Paul
La Collection: oeuvres phares, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
1994 *Pièces de collection*, Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
1993 *Artistes de la galerie – Dessins*, Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal

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- 1991 *Tombeau de René Payant*, Maison de la culture Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal
 1989 *Eye of Nature* (with Bill Viola), Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff
 1988 *Dessins*, Galerie Christiane Chassay, Montréal
 1985 Anna Leonowens Gallery, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax
 1984 Struts Gallery Inc., Sackville
 1984 Owens Art Gallery, Sackville
 The Little Gallery, University of New Brunswick at St. John, St. John

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‘Ecologies’ at Montreal Museum of Fine Arts explores humanity and nature

by Art Critique Published on 28 March 2021

After a softening of restrictions on spaces throughout Montreal, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts has been able to open its doors to the public once again. After a long autumn and winter without the presence of many physical arts spaces, the acclaimed museum’s reopening has been met with a warm welcome. And as one of their first exhibitions of 2021, *Ecologies: A Song for Our Planet* serves as a strong return to the community and a reminder of our role in our own natural communities.

Curated by Iris Amizlev, the MMFA’s Curator of Intercultural Arts, *Ecologies* highlights artists and works from the museum’s collection which have dug into the topics of our natural environment. Many of the works will be on rotation throughout the exhibition’s run, which will be on display until February 27th, 2022—giving more than enough reason to experience the thought-provoking collection multiple times throughout the coming year...

Yet despite the weighty feelings and dark realities that are necessarily depicted across *Ecologies*, the exhibition is not at all without its lighter side. Laurie Walker’s *Sisyphus, the Dung Beetle* is already engrossing from a distance—a large sphere of rolled dung with a perfect split of it painted gold—but upon closer inspection, the miniature beetle and the Superman logo that adorns its shell are a perfect pairing. Walker’s brilliant mix of mythologies, pop culture and nature beams with humour and brightness and encapsulates much of the positivity that curator Iris Amizlev is expressing through this collection.



Laurie Walker (1962-2011), Sisyphus, the Dung Beetle, 2003, fibreglass, sheep manure, peat moss, straw, gold leaf, "Kheper" scarab beetle with coloured logo printed on paper. MMFA, gift of Evelyn and Lorne Walker. Photo MMFA, Denis Farley



A closeup of the titular Sisyphus, the Dung Beetle

After the tour of the exhibition space, one piece remains of *Ecologies* that is situated in another wing of the building—the video installation *Requiem for a Glacier*. While there was only time to see a fragment of the forty-minute loop (and will be covered in full at a later date), it goes without saying that creator Paul Walde has captured the sheer immensity and ominous essence of a glacier threatened by global warming and industrial development, and serves as a gripping cap to the ideas behind the collection.

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts has done a tremendous job with the presentation of *Ecologies: A Song for Our Planet*. Highlighting our world, those who live within it, and those who capture that relationship, it displays the positives and negatives of human capability in a graceful balance. It is a breath of fresh air when wanted and a cold shock of truth when needed, but above all else, it is a stunning collection as we look towards what a new year on this planet holds for us.



Art Reviews

Mythic message

Laurie Walker reinvents Prometheus

By David Jager

LAURIE WALKER at Susan Hobbs Gallery (137 Tecumseth), to January 21.

Laurie Walker's Prometheus chained to a rock is one of a quartet of powerful drawings.

Though Montreal artist Laurie Walker focused primarily on sculpture, Susan Hobbs is showing four large-scale drawings she completed just before her death last year.

Entitled Prometheus Rebound, the exhibition displays the signature elements that helped forge Walker's reputation: exhaustive research, and a complex involvement with the symbolic and theoretical underpinnings of her process and her chosen subject.

In these graphite drawings on paper, tinged lightly with washes of colour, she reimagines the myth of Prometheus, imbuing it with a contemporary preoccupation with the environment.

Walker's take draws on several tellings of the story. The playwright Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound treats the demigod as a tragic hero punished by Zeus for stealing fire and giving it to humanity. In the poet Shelley's version, Prometheus Unbound, Zeus is overthrown and Prometheus frees himself along with humanity.

Here, however, he's Rebound and finds himself chained to a glacial wall instead of a rock. Fire has given rise to the oil industry, and the father of industrialization is confronted with the consequences of his crime in the spectre of global warming. A tiny oil rig on the horizon of the second drawing bears out this allusion.

There are art historical references as well. The third drawing recalls Barnett Newman's early painting Prometheus Bound, in which an inky sea of black presses down on a single frothing line of white. In Walker's version, an immense wall of ice presses down on an inky black line, a cheeky echo of Newman's painting.

The fourth drawing is an aerial view of the Torngat mountains in Labrador, Walker's supremely disciplined rendering illustrating her love of naturalism. The symbolism is once again cryptic and open-ended: a magic lamp, an allusion to letting the genie out of the bottle, releases the roiling clouds that cover the range.

With her curious blend of romantic landscape, mythological symbolism and a nod to abstract expressionism, Walker's last drawings are a window into an eclectic and unique art practice that compressed weighty conundrums into elegant images.

NOW Magazine January 12-18, 2012

Laurie Walker:

RESURRECTED

Nancy Campbell

Let us start with the Last Supper. Piero Camporesi writes in his essay *The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess* that the:

awesomeness of the sacrifice (being that of Christ in the Roman Catholic tradition) caused the dislocation of natural laws. It violated them through a series of impossible alchemic reactions that upset the relationship between substances and their accidents. Color, odor, flavor survived the annihilation of the substances that expressed them. By turning into flesh and blood, the primary substances — bread and wine — changed radically in essence, but their physical attributes survived their metamorphosis. The sacrifice turned the inanimate into the animate. The life of the heavenly enzyme, the Incorruptible, fermented out of unleavened bread. Vital, vivifying, beautifying food was born out of dead food.¹

Transubstantiation is the assimilation of the divine into the human which permits the fusion of the human with the divine. This cycle involves a transcendent belief that the object has value greater than its inanimate self, that it can signify, essentially, new life.

This is a rather ominous departure point for the consideration of art. The idea of transubstantiation implies that objects such as bread and wine are not metaphors for the body but the body itself. Transformation is a more often used term when discussing the connection of the arts to the real world. It is standard practice for an artist to “transform” an object, make it *seem* to be something other than what it actually is through the manipulation of materials and metaphor.

Transmutation is another term that implies changing states. Historically the term transmutation is rooted in alchemy — a traditional chemical philosophy involving the changing of base material into gold — allowing for materials to assume a higher form. The alchemist held seemingly magical powers by which he effected the process of transmuting. I would compare an artist to an alchemist; however, it is the viewer's interpretation of the magic that is the transmutation.

This preliminary discussion of terminology is more than an exercise in semantics. These three principles of change — transubstantiation, transformation, and transmutation — are particularly useful to recall when reflecting on the work of Montreal artist Laurie Walker. She uses transubstantiation and transmutation as a source of metaphor or symbol to bring about transformation. She offers a wide range of objects and materials, each loaded with metaphor and pristinely crafted, presented in clever juxtaposition. It is the delight of piecing ideas and references together that gives strength to the work. Many of Walker's references are based in western mythology and religion. It is not her intent to use these sources as critique, but rather as vehicles for the consideration of transubstantiation and transmutation. This labyrinth of ideas and materials allows each viewer to access Walker's art personally in order to reflect on the cyclical nature of life and the spirit.

In *Pyx* (1995) one can connect the notion of transubstantiation to the Host. A pyx is an ornamental vessel or casket, usually constructed out of precious metal, in which the Host is kept. Through an understanding of transubstantiation and the purpose of the pyx we can compare the delicate object, constructed by the artist herself, to a coffin or casket literally intended to hold the Divine flesh. The enamel pyx is marked with the letters IHS, which is a standard inscription on many pyx. These letters, adopted from the Latin *in hoc signo, in hac salus*, or *Iesus Hominum Salvator*, refer to Jesus Christ. Walker's version of the tiny vessel replaces the Host with a flame, above which sits a tiny crucible. Historically, the crucible was used by alchemists to melt metals or minerals. Here, the crucible heats a tiny wad of clay. Clay could be read here as a metaphor for the creation of human beings as seen in Genesis II.7 — or in terms of artmaking. In the context in which Walker places the clay it also refers to the transubstantiated body or an alchemic experiment.

Hive (1996) replicates a traditionally shaped beehive which would have been constructed out of straw. Walker's is made of wax; however, instead of the product of bees she uses paraffin, a by-product of oil refineries produced by humans. Trapped within the structure are hundreds of dead bees, seemingly victims of their environment. It is said that of all insects bees are the closest to man. Shakespeare echoes this sociological view in *Henry V*:



Laurie Walker, *Pyx, Hive, Alembic* (1996)

for so work the honey-bees
 Creatures that, by a rule of nature, teach
 The art of order to a peopled kingdom.²

The fact remains that people do not know what causes the collective will of the hive, what causes total integration and co-operation in building the comb, care for the larvae, or mutual feeding. This intricate system, like the systems of religion, holds no answers or no known scientific rationale, though it fascinates and provides participants with promise of a better life. We can view the hive, like the pyx, as a vessel for a system.

Transubstantiation is also interesting to consider here.

Just as honey lends its own incorruptibility to the fruit that is dipped in it, so does the body of the Savior, in joining ours, lend us some of the seeds of immortality He served, and the special right to live forever.³

Like the Host, honey is seen to hold magical regenerative powers. Honey is the by-product of a successful, vital hive. Nature (or more specifically pollen) is transmuted into honey and harvested from the hive. Similarly the Host becomes the transubstantiated body held within the pyx. The pyx and the hive are brought together by Walker in a beautiful watercolour rendering titled *Pyx, Hive, Alembic* (1996). The pyx and the hive are united with an alembic — an alembic being a container that tests, purifies or transforms, and historically a chamber or vessel used for distilling. The alembic further informs the connection between the pyx and the hive.

Prayer Beads again recalls transubstantiation through its materials — flesh and wine. Walker covered a number of small loaf-size rocks with pigs' bladders. Each bladder was carefully stitched around a drilled rock and over time it has dried and formed a strong but crusty skin. The rocks are linked together by a clear plastic tube forming the exaggerated shape of traditional prayer beads, or a rosary, on the floor. The tube is filled with wine which flows through the fleshy rocks, enlivening the inanimate forms. Reference is made to the transformative powers of religion and the transcendent belief in everlasting life — as Giacomo Correglia put it in his *Practica del confessionario* "salubrious elixir vitae of His blood." The rocks, however, maintain a connection to the earth.

Seeing Blue (1993–94) although not intended as a partner piece to *Prayer Beads* offers many similarities. The main component of the work is a large sponge, approximately the size of a garden shed, which is meticulously carved to resemble a human brain. From this central piece circulate tubes, a wire armature, burettes, all the essential scientific equipment standardly used in experiments. Within this system of tube and wire flows a blue liquid, the life-blood of this mutant brain. The liquid appears to flow from the brain through tubing into



Laurie Walker, From "Seeing Blue", 1993-94



Laurie Walker, *Prayer Beads* (1995)

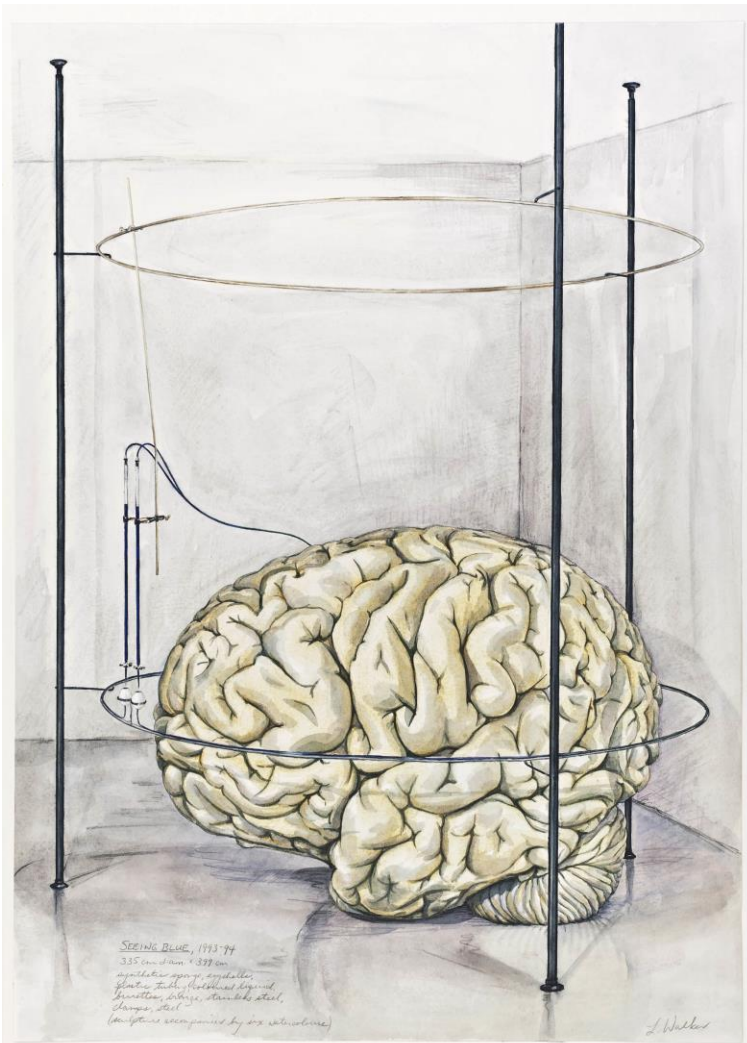
two burettes. A burette is a glass tube with a stop cork at the bottom which regulates the flow of liquid through its chambers. It is also interesting to note here that historically the word *burette* comes from the Old French word *cruet* meaning “a vessel for sacrificial wine.” In this work, the burettes regulate the flow of the blue liquid into two hollow eggshells, which when filled with the dark liquid resemble eyeballs. From the eggs the liquid flows through a tube encircling the brain. The liquid then re-enters the brain, resulting in an area of greenish saturation. One reading of the piece allows for the consideration of transmutation. The blue liquid leaves the brain (body) and through some sort of mutation within the eggs re-enters the brain as food or sustenance. Like the wine, the blue liquid becomes blood recalling the life cycle. *Seeing Blue* is appended with six exquisitely rendered watercolours to affirm this reading. Rebirth and creation are represented in the symbols Walker uses in these works. The egg, for example, is representative of birth. The ouroboros (a snake swallowing its own tail) represents the life cycle of evolution.

Ashen Wing (1995) a bird's wing covered on the top side by ashes derived from wood and palm leaves, and the underside appliquéd with a mirrored surface, refers to resurrection. The wing refers to the story of the phoenix. Depending on your source, the phoenix lives up to 500 or 600 years before it burns itself on a pyre and dies in order to rise from the ashes young and beautiful to live another cycle. By immolating itself over and over again the phoenix has become a symbol for immortality. Like the wine and the Host, the phoenix offers the possibility of eternal life. The mirrored surface on the underside of the wing puts the viewers in the position of seeing themselves and becoming players in the eternal life cycle of which the artist speaks.

Like alchemic reactions, the work of Laurie Walker intends to upset the relationship between substances and their accidents. Like the wine and the Host, her objects change radically in essence but their physical attributes survive their metamorphosis. Her objects, whether a pyx or hive, rocks or a brain, reanimate or resurrect themselves within the context in which they are presented. Essentially, through Walker's meticulous and engaging practice we are allowed a glimpse of the transformative power of artmaking; we witness the possibility of vital, vivifying, beautifying food born out of dead food.

Endnotes

1. Piero Camporesi, “The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess,” *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One*, ed. Michael Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 226.
2. *Henry V*, act 1. scene 2.
3. Piero Camporesi, “The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess,” *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One*, ed. Michael Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 227.



SEEING BLUE by
Laurie Walker
MUSEE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN
de MONTREAL
April 9 - June 5, 1994

The installation revolves around the notions of creation and perception, illustrating a large sponge carved out to represent a brain. Grafted to this central form are various components (eggshells, plastic tubes, wire structure, burettes) which are linked so as to form a cyclical network through which a blue liquid seems to circulate.

Since the mid-1980's, Laurie Walker has produced sculptures and watercolours wherein nature, science, and symbolism play a preponderant role leaving a lot to the imagination. According to curator of the exhibit, Pierre Landry, "The strange seductive power of these works stems as much from the mastery they show in their use of techniques

and materials, both varied (wood, copper, marble, watercolour) and sometimes, uncommon (peat moss, bioluminescent bacteria...) as from the symbolic information..."

Pierre Landry continues to say that "At first glance, *SEEING BLUE* seems reminiscent of some kind of scientific device or situation. Spread out through the work is an organic and mechanical system that we might say was intended for the study of the human body...The whole thing is constructed in nearly scientific detail (a very precise rendering of the cerebral convolutions), the medical apparatus (burettes, tubes, etc.). However, the scale of the brain as well as the use of uncommon materials (sponge, eggshells,...) bring out the metaphorical side of the work..."

Laurie Walker's intention is not so much to comment on a reality of a scientific nature but rather to lead the viewer to explore, intuitively, the symbolic potential of devices associated with science.

In conjunction with the installation, six watercolours were created to illustrate or suggest different forms presented in the sculpture.

SEEING NATURE:
AND THE WORKS OF BILL VIOLA
AND LAURIE WALKER

D a i n a R u g a i t i s

Neutrality is not one of the qualities of vision. "The eye is not a camera," Raymond Williams explained,

or if it is a camera, it is a camera the results of which have to be developed. That development is by a human brain which of course has evolved over uncountable generations, but which at the same time is built up in our growth as children and towards maturity, by sets of rules from our society, from the relationships we are actually in. These rules to a large extent go on determining what we see and what we can describe.¹

Thus our physical eyes comprise only part of a complex process of perception, calling on the mind's eye for cultural codes that inform the translation of data and symbols into meaning, changing an unintelligible world into one in which human beings can function. It is impossible to remember how, as infants, we learned to see. Similarly, it is difficult to understand changes in the codes for visual translation that have occurred over the centuries. For example, when the first natural historians attempted to chart their environments – mazes of natural phenomena that had not been enumerated – the authority of science alone did not dictate norms for determining what was significant and worth noting. Nor could hindsight draw on accumulated material for relative analyses in this cognitive process. Perception then, is appropriately referred to as "both foretaste and aftereffect in our physical and mental worlds,"² having the capacity of responding to and shaping ideas.

With its utilitarian perspective and growing emphasis on scientific quantification, the late eighteenth century brought numerous changes that implicated vision. Improvements in travel, for example, required that the eye adapt to a moving landscape through the frame of a vehicle window and learn new methods of composition at increasingly higher speeds. In his account of the history of perception, Don Gifford describes Henri Matisse's automobile rides through the Provençal landscape, during which the artist insisted on speeds no greater than five kilometres per hour in order to see his subject accurately, "otherwise you have no sense of the trees" as the "middle ground and horizon advance to lay claim to the eye."³ Such changes in travel, along with other developments of industrialization, in turn

1. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 21.

2. Don Gifford, *The Farther Shore – A Natural History of Perception, 1798–1984* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 30.

affected the mind's eye – the personal and social interpretations of visual stimuli. This increasing emphasis on a perspectival scopic regime⁴ marked the transformation of the Western relationship with nature characterized by domination.

The cultural eye responded to a progression of optical devices such as the stereoscope, camera obscura and camera lucida, all of which reflected the world through a lens that altered and interpreted the properties of the image. Cameras and other such tools were usually heralded as inventions that would present truth and statistical exactitude. The shifts in what we saw and how we saw it were subtle at first; however, as our eyes extended outside our bodies to inhabit the technological space of various apparatuses, the subjectivity of sight became more apparent. And today, technologies that simulate virtual realities bring new and unknown challenges to cultural and physiological thresholds of perception, amplifying the subjective realm of human experience. With the aid of new communications media, the facts and fictions of what we see merge into a saturated blur.

4. Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

Nature – the untampered physical environment – is read and perceived no differently than other mediated images that we encounter. After all, natural history is written through human history; descriptions of natural phenomena are filtered through scientific concepts and modified by contextualized analysis. Nature is invested with cultural meaning and does not elude fictional characterization. As the effects of industrialization cast a pall around the globe, Western cultures now seem to be recoiling from the tainted environment, craving an untampered nature and an immediate contact with it. Yet, for many of us, the practical and emotional understanding gained from intimate experiences in nature is fading since our urban environments no longer allow for such access or involvement. As nature plays a decreasing role in the lives of large urban populations, the vision of it begins to fracture and dissipate. Nature becomes an image imbued with longing and nostalgia but, simultaneously, it is pronounced as alien, described in relation to anthropomorphic concepts of machinery and information systems, relegated to the territory of the non-artificial. A longing for nature was once a longing for one's origins, but now these origins are increasingly distanced.

How then do we as individuals navigate this minefield of histories, codes and perceptions that separate us from our environment? Laurie Walker and Bill Viola each make their own forays into this territory, exploring these questions in their respective art practices. The works of both are commentaries on cultural perception and its place in contemporary society.

In the development of his video work, Bill Viola has sought to comprehend video technology and its mediating effect on the image. At the same time, he has immersed himself in the analysis of the viewing experience and the position of the viewer. In doing so, he has found it necessary to understand human perception, "not only how the camera works, but how the eye functions, and the ear, how the brain processes information..."⁵ His installation, *Theater of Memory*, exhibited in *Eye of Nature I*, exemplifies his exploration of the metaphysical characterization of reality as a whole.

5. Raymond Bellour, "An Interview with Bill Viola," *October* 34 (Fall 1985), 94.

In *Theater of Memory* the viewer enters a dark cave-like room – the non-verbal timelessness of the subconscious – and finds a large uprooted tree lying on its side, lit only by small electric lanterns flickering on the tree's branches. A wind chime tinkles in the darkness, its delicate sounds intermittently superseded by loud and abrupt electronic crackles of static, as if to shock the mind and jolt it out of stasis. Beyond the tree is a wall-sized video screen on which a stream of television "snow" is projected; degenerated images sporadically come into focus. The images seem out of phase and out of sync with the human receptors that read them. Our eyes search for recognition as these moments of television, art and history flutter on and off the screen, in and out of memory. Rather than subdue the electronic static, as television viewers may attempt to do, Viola foregrounds it and questions how these properties of sound and image interfere with our perceptual processes. The artist's description of one of his own discoveries finds parallels in this installation:

I remember reading about the brain and the central nervous system, trying to understand what causes the triggering of nerve firings that recreate patterns of past sensations, finally evoking a memory.



Laurie Walker
False Solomon's Seal (Smilacina racemosa) 1988
drawing/sculpture installation
Photo: Centre de Documentation Yvan Boulerice

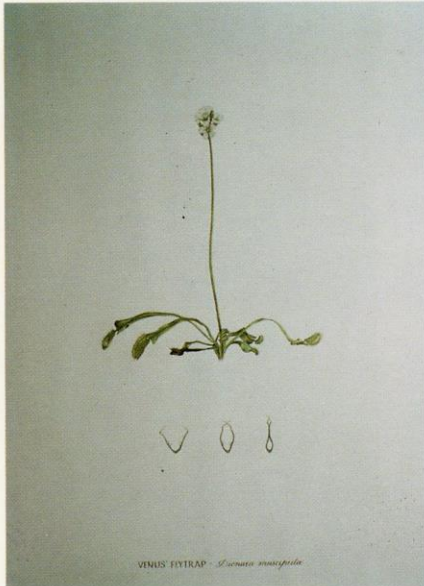


Laurie Walker
False Solomon's Seal (Smilacina racemosa) 1988
 drawing/sculpture installation
 Photo: Laurie Walker

The artist depicts four flowers with highly suggestive names – Common Ragweed, Venus Flytrap, False Solomon's Seal, Wandering Bower – in detailed botanical drawings accompanied by sculpture steeped in connotative associations. Her drawings appear to be objective analyses executed by a natural historian, but their three-dimensional counterparts project characteristics that implicate industrial and post-industrial societies as well as their mythological antecedents. Each of these works draws on layers of reference which entwine historically constructed notions of knowledge, authority and beauty with contemporary understandings of natural environments.

Wandering Bower (Solanum planetum) is rendered physically as a meticulously placed book on a wooden lectern. The book is quite rare – *Historia Naturalis* by Pliny the Elder – one of the first chronicles detailing an encyclopedic knowledge of the natural world. Berries have been brutally pressed between pages of the book, their blood-red juices staining the scientific text. The artwork delineates the moment of a violent unredemptive killing, as the plant is pressed into words and nature is subsumed into culture. The fiction of knowledge is further exemplified in the artist's scientific drawing of the plant. Seemingly anatomically correct, it is a fabrication, mocking the widespread indelible faith in science. Together, the falsified drawing and manipulated textbook speak aggressively about the transformation of previously held facts into modern day myth through the imposition of new information. The result is a provocation or destabilization of current systems of knowledge.

As a plant, *False Solomon's Seal (Smilacina racemosa)* might epitomize a victorious nature, buttressed by invisible forces. The plant exists as a rhizome with an underground network of concentrated genetic material that can spring up and regenerate anywhere, each node encoding the entire history of the plant. Walker's sculptural equivalent is created from a series of four manhole covers, each with the emblematic imprint of a different city, emphasizing travel and progress. At the tip of the work is a scythe-shaped stem that seems to protrude from a manhole cover inscribed with a six-pointed star (the Star of David, which would have been Solomon's seal). Solomon was a Biblical figure, possessing powers of healing: the



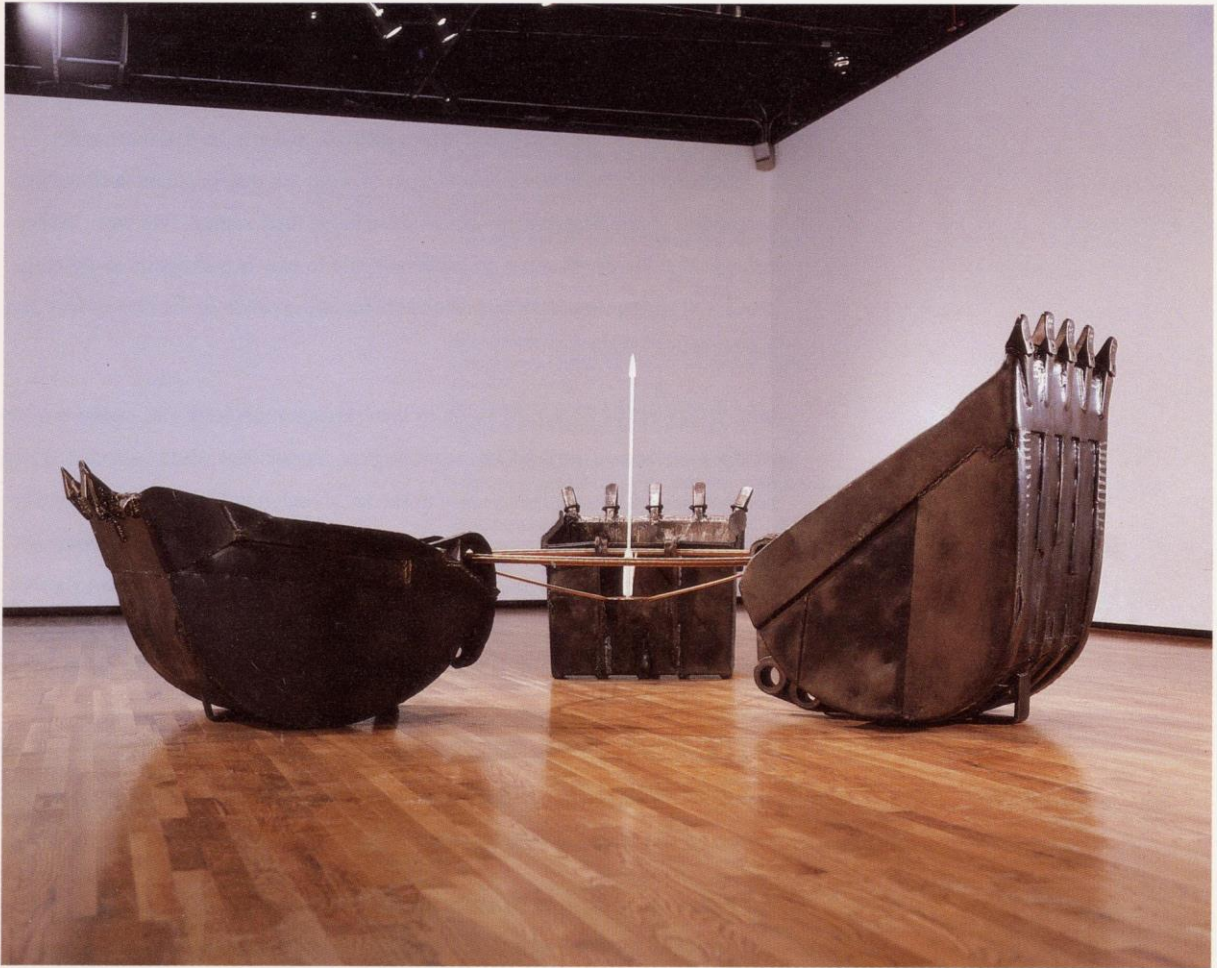
Laurie Walker
Venus Flytrap (Dionaea muscipula) 1989
 drawing/sculpture installation
 Photo: Laurie Walker

10. Laurie Walker (M.F.A. paper, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987), 3.

plant too is known to have medicinal properties. However, manhole covers identify the city's underground network of putrid waste, a system with the potential to pollute and lethally infect. In Walker's sculpture, the tops of the manhole covers are sealed in red wax and the scythe has not dealt its final blow. The work suggests the inevitable has not yet occurred; the impenetrable wealth of the plant (and the sealed sewage of the city) is still intact, if only for the moment.

The artist tells of a Greek myth in which the fallen scythe was used by Kronos to castrate Uranus. As the severed genitals floated out to sea, they produced a white foam which gave birth to Venus. The *Venus Flytrap (Dionaea muscipula)* is another revenge of the plant world. Walker's sculpture, paralleling the artifice of the plant, consists of three enormous shovels from earth-moving machines joined together by a copper ring. An arrow is poised at its centre, ready to pounce on its prey, shoot off its seeds. Seduction figures prominently in the circle of opened cups, reflecting a range of possible desires, from sexual love to capitalist greed. The artist uses highly symbolic materials that conjure celestial love: copper is the metal linked to Venus, the goddess of love (often accompanied by Cupid with his arrow); the steel of the buckets is associated with Mars, the god of war. These symbols, used in astrology, botany and mythology, are combined here to form a hermaphroditic union of love and war, not unlike the current confused response to nature in Western cultures. Using animism as a tool, the artist imparts life-like attributes to inanimate objects as a "process of analogy and projection by which the inanimate becomes animate and therefore closer and more understandable."¹⁰ Although animism is thought to be a primitive view of the world, perhaps now more than ever it is a concept worth considering. It is entirely human to implicate ourselves in whatever it is we try to understand: an awareness of this complicity disrupts the binary vision of subject and object that frames a widespread world view.

The courtship of Venus and Mars suggested in *Venus Flytrap* comments upon specific relationships used by ancients to interpret planetary movements from the images, patterns and hieroglyphs used as repositories for complex astronomical knowledge. Contemporary society is inclined to believe that linear quantification rather than



Laurie Walker
Venus Flytrap (Dionaea muscipula) 1989
drawing/sculpture installation
Photo: Monte Greenshields

CHIMERA

(excerpt from "What's in a Blue Moon" by Lorne Folk in *Continuum*: Laurie Walker)

*"... the only direct relationship most of us bare with animals is with pets: animals made over in our own image. Yet still the memory of animals haunts us, symbols of another kind of life, of other ways of being."*¹

What happens to the body when it breaks its silence and casts adrift without anchor?

Imagine the body wrapped in angel hair, its arms and legs emerging from the cocoon like a distaff, reaching out, spinning and diving through time like a cosmic spider. Not yet fully conceived, still she grips an unspun thread from her cocoon, a tenuous umbilicus by which she weaves her own creation into the fabric and pattern of the world.

Follow the thread to a shuttle in the mouth of her creation: a monster, an impossible and foolish fantasy, a particularly incongruous composite of the imagination, trusting and playful as a puppy, yet capricious, sly and complexly evil. Imagine what happens when the thread, which makes this symbiosis possible, is broken. Who will do the weaving then? Who will take whom for a walk? What mental visions of the body will be constructed then?

As archetypes, the cosmic spider and chimera are shared but gendered knowledge, the consensual hallucinations of a traditional male view. As a frozen narrative, they continue to function as empty mirrors or literal *déjà vu*. It is the *thread* linking them which poses a serious question about the role of metaphysics in nature/culture: "What does it mean for a woman to turn into an animal? What does it mean to dream, to fantasize . . . (bodies) . . . turning into animals? It can represent escape into wilderness and the delights of strength and sensuality, or it can express the limitations of a purely physical existence, the frustrations of being denied a share in human culture."²

To follow the gendered body into the world of *Chimera* is to experience a crossover of four-dimensional to three-dimensional frameworks. The magic of the cosmic spider and chimera comes from our ability to empower their relation, or not. When we do, *Chimera* becomes a virtual constellation floating in a personal cosmology where the potential of nature/culture is embodied. Then cosmic spider and chimera are contingent symbolic constructs whose function is to activate the heterogeneous architecture of the gendered mind, to suggest a world that is not based on the logic of making pets.

Riddle: Is there life after the death of the "and" in nature and culture?

Answer: Let's see how the flotsam is bricolaged.

¹ Lisa Tuttle, "Pets and monsters: metamorphoses in recent science fiction," *Where No Man Has Gone Before – Women and Science Fiction*, Lucie Armitt, Editor (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 97

² *Ibid.*, 97

To long to be fully intimate with nature and suffer its elusiveness is to experience melancholy, however playful this longing may be. However, something very different happens if we can momentarily suspend disbelief and experience the intermingling of senses: the subject as agent. This desire to live in that which we construct is not at all like restoring ideal models for contemplation. The former is medieval, the latter is classical.³

The phenomenon of neomedievalism could account for Walker's dismantling and reconsideration of the nature/culture relation, the additive and compositive features in her work and the implicit acknowledgement that she is working with "the flotsam of a previous world, harmonious perhaps, but by now obsolete."⁴ If it is not possible to be fully intimate with nature/culture, one can aspire to be in permanent transition with it.

- Lorne Folk, *Banff*

³ Umberto Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," *Travels in Hyper Realism*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, Inc., 1986). pp. 67-68

⁴ *Ibid.*, 'Living in the New Middle Ages,' pp. 83-84