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FEATURES

Feminine Nature

By Michael Cleverly

Portrait by Tyler Stableford
07.09.18

These eight artists have a few things in common: They're contributing to the valley's cultural conversation, they're inspired by the outdoors, and they're all women.

It would be difficult to come up with a material that **Ajax Axe** isn't willing to use in her sculpture. She'll often weld a metal skeleton and then build on it using found objects, everything from skulls to gun stocks to traditional sculpture materials. Much of her work is interactive, demanding the viewer's participation, whether it's simply cranking the gears of a mechanical device or being enveloped by the art itself. A piece called "Modern Man" resembles a mummy morphing into, or out of, something else. Having spent eight years in Africa as a journalist, her work clearly acknowledges a debt to the figurative art, particularly masks found there. Axe's solo show, *Palace of the Beast, Dark and Light Incantations to the Imagination*, will be at [Skye Gallery Aspen](#) through Aug. 9.

Laura Betti is currently working on a typographic series of highly conceptual large format and detailed ballpoint pen drawings, called *Typography*. One image begins as a topographical map of Aspen, and upon closer inspection, the shading and details consist of tiny lettering. The piece tells a story of the symbiotic relationship between Aspen locals and tourists, the complete history of Aspen and a sequence of countless comical ski bum quotes. A series called *Biodiversitree* presents the cross sections of trees, in which text can be

found within the tree rings. These drawings emphasize the importance of biodiversity and bring attention to man's effect on the natural world. Another piece depicts a 44-by-60-inch fingerprint comprised of 3,500 labels that affect one's identity (i.e. if someone is labeled a criminal, they are more apt to act criminally). Betti's works are currently in several private collections.

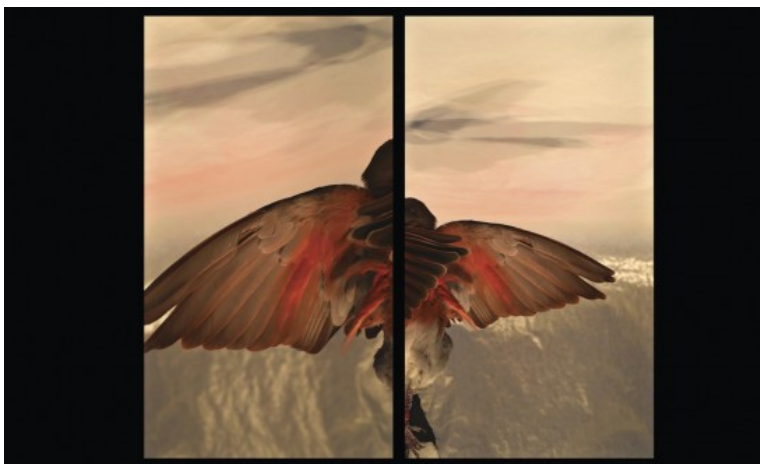


Tania Dibbs, "Talisa"

Isa Catto's connection to the environment is direct and empathetic. Catto vacillates between abstraction and representation. As in action painting, the hand of the artist is present in her images, as are her naturalistic references. The gestural brushstrokes that appear in her landscapes are also present in her nonobjective abstracts. An admirer of the great Japanese artist Utagawa Hiroshige and also of Japanese brush painting, Catto worked long and hard to develop the skill set required to convey the maximum meaning and mastery required in a single brushstroke in Japanese brush painting. Unafraid to go sideways at any given moment, Catto produced a series of highly formal paintings inspired by Victorian wallpaper and the minimalist work of Agnes Martin. The tight control required in making the wallpaper designs can be seen as the antithesis of her gestural work. "I like to move around (artistically); it's a reflection of my thought process," she says. Her next body of work is inspired by macrobotanical imagery and irrational numbers. She will be honored by The Art Base Aug. 18 at its annual gala.

Tania Dibbs' relationship to nature can almost be described as adversarial, though with no ill will. The clearest examples of this are her large canvases; she starts with a lovely subtle landscape, horizon low on the bottom of the canvas, and then overlays a grid, often of glitter, that has no relationship to the landscape behind it. It's similar to the existential premise that man, by virtue of his consciousness, is incommensurate to nature. The two things have no place on the same canvas, yet there they are. Her three-dimensional work is similar. She'll take a found object—an antler, piece of dead wood—and then affix bling culled from costume jewelry and deftly crafted tiny tentacles of clay, and force them into the same place at the same time. The effect is jarring in its incongruity. Dibbs has shown nationally and has a gallery/studio in Basalt (227 Midland Ave., Ste. 17A).

Linda Girvin's reference to nature is literal and hands-on: She works with dead birds. She finds them, or friends will bring them to her. She digitally scans them, and while the scanner is in process, she manipulates the birds on the screen creating images that are at once representational and abstract. Her use of the deceased birds is reminiscent of photographer Joel-Peter Witkin's use of cadavers. While Witkin's images are visually and intellectually compelling, they are grotesque. Girvin's bird images are beautiful, giving the creatures a second chance to bring that quality into the world. Girvin is currently working toward a show at the prestigious Bellas Artes in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. That show will open in October, on the Day of the Dead. The exhibition will include a large two channel video projection of her recent bird videos.



Linda Girvin, "Video Still III."

Jody Guralnick's connection to the natural world is intense to the point of being microscopic. Guralnick literally takes to a microscope for visual inspiration while being mindful of the larger issue of global warming and the destruction of the planet's resources. Her art exists in a micro-macro world. In one series, she dips vegetation, household objects and books she loves into liquid porcelain and then waxes them, giving the sense that the man-made and natural objects are all created from the same material. One piece, "Thursday Four O'Clock," involves a folding chair, book and teapot. Guralnick will be showing at Skye Gallery Aspen in August.

Laura "Missie" Thorne could be called the grande dame of Aspen artists. Working professionally in the valley for more than 40 years, Thorne, along with Dick Carter and Diane Lewy, was one of the founders of the Aspen Center for Visual Arts. In retrospect, it seems a no-brainer, but when the center was conceived in 1977, it was met with considerable opposition. The center came to be, and thrived, eventually morphing into the Aspen Art Museum. "In my art, be it sculpture or works on paper, I contrast and combine handmade, found and fabricated objects to create works that are at once familiar and mysterious," says Thorne. "Sometimes, contrasting elements are combined; sometimes, they are used in aggregate to create unique aesthetic forms that reflect my preoccupation with harmony and balance as well as complexity and diversity. In doing so, I celebrate the existence of the natural world with the industrial forged by man's creativity and craft. Like the surrealists of the 20th century, I strive to make the familiar look different, even strange."

For **Andrea Wendel**, interior space is a large part of the natural world. Her family was steeped in architecture, building and design. She loves the idea of marrying art to function to create edgy avant-garde furniture that combines various woods with metal and other disparate materials that underline and highlight, rather than compete, with nature's contribution to the aesthetic. Wendel feels that unique pieces of furniture transform a living space, which bonds the individuals inhabiting the space to the artist and the materials used. She is working on a series of carving large doors. Usually one confronts a door with the intent of passing through it, but when the artist invests a door with the kind of beauty that makes the traveler pause to briefly appreciate its art, an unexpected moment occurs.

Main image from left to right, back to front: Jody Guralnick, Andrea Wendel, Isa Catto, Ajax Axe, Tania Dibbs, Laura Betti, Missie Thorne and Linda Girvin, all inside Skye Gallery Aspen

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