

## An Art of Origins and Recycling

Kurt Germundson

My first impression upon entering Armstrong Gallery was that I had chanced upon a miniature desert, complete with desert animals. Tiny palm trees sprouted from the sand, while a coyote skeleton sprawled in a black circle.

As the artist, Shawn Skabelund, later explained to me, however, what's important to him is not only the visual aspect of *A New World Burial*, but also the materials used. What I took to be desert sand was actually cornmeal, standing in for Iowa agriculture. The palm trees were broccoli stalks, planted in row by row, regimented; Skabelund reversed the stalks, turning the roots of the plants into leaves.

According to Skabelund, his work "explores the physical and spiritual desecration of the earth through the ongoing process of Manifest Destiny." Manifest Destiny has changed its face, of course. It's no longer pioneers in covered wagons; today imperialism takes the form of treaties such as GATT and NAFTA.

For Skabelund, then, the broccoli represents Old World encroachment upon the native soil. The desert made of cornmeal is a desert of wastefulness and over-production. (While looking at the piece I recalled the recent images of piles of corn dumped on the ground near silos because there wasn't enough room inside. We don't produce what we need, but hope that we need what we produce. Meanwhile five bushels of soil are eroded away for each bushel of corn produced.)

In a text that Skabelund prepared for the show, then decided not to use, he expresses his conviction that U.S. citizens must "become native to the local ecosystems we inhabit." This would entail a respect for predators such as the coyote. For Skabelund, the coyote symbolizes the disintegration of native cultures in a land increasingly dependent on exploitative agricultural methods and intent on pushing predators back.

It's interesting to note that the concept of respect for nature has already been integrated into fashion. Certain shops now offer "predatory-friendly clothing." The textiles come from wool producers who don't shoot coyotes or other predators, but use fences or similar means to protect the sheep. Of course, one suspects that this kind of "predator-friendly" ranching will exist only as long as clothing bearing the label continues to sell. Being "friendly to nature" often has more to do with economic concerns than with a sense of true environmentalism.

In Skabelund's view, true respect toward nature is shown in the coyote's grave—the "new world burial," evoking a Native American ritual. The coyote lies still, comforted within a black circle: a void or abyss, but also an opening. Circularity brings to mind the continuity

of all life-cycles and forms. Black, charred, recalling the regenerative effect of brushfires, the circle does not conjure up finality as much as hope for renewal.

Seven years ago I attended an animal-rights benefit exhibit in Berkeley. The gallery was filled with images of animals being mistreated by humans. Most of it was too simplistic, trite and obvious. But one particular drawing, in charcoal and conte crayon, powerfully emphasized for me the fragility of animals when faced with the constrictions of human technology. Titled *Roadkill #1*, the drawing depicted the innocent glance of a doe before the fatal impact of a car. The viewer was put in the position of the driver, literally in the driver's seat. The doe's vulnerability – the tragedy and loss of its natural space and habitat – were conveyed not by a graphic image of the accident, but by the abstract element of a frame "cutting" the doe, fragmenting it. I purchased the work, the only piece of art I've ever bought.

Five years later, I applied to the University of Iowa. It was only at this point that I examined the back of *Roadkill #1* and saw the inscription "Shawn Skabelund, Iowa City." And it wasn't until February of this year, while visiting the Cornell campus, that I coincidentally met the artist while he was setting up *A New World Burial*.

Throughout, I've been impressed by the way Skabelund combines "abstraction" and "realism," avoiding the pitfalls an excessive reliance on either would cause. In his work one perceives both an adherence to representation and an exploration of formal abstraction. The geometric rigidity of the broccoli stalks in *A New World Burial* serves to ground the work in a visual order, much as the framing of *Roadkill #1* emphasized the doe's vulnerability.

As a result, instead of a soap-box, Skabelund gives us a powerful visual statement whose impact takes place on the aesthetic level, making it irrelevant whether or not the viewer grasps the symbolism of each element in the work.

I was glad to have had the opportunity to help in the disassembling of *A New World Burial* at Cornell, for it completed a kind of circle. An important aspect of Skabelund's site-specific work is that it's made out of recyclable material. The piece that was shown at Armstrong Gallery no longer exists. The cornmeal was sold to a farmer with hungry pigs, as were the boards. Ironically, the buyer of the black circle said he would use it for target practice.

Should Skabelund decide to exhibit it elsewhere, *A New World Burial* will likely look very different, for he will use materials appropriate to the new location. Thus *A New World Burial* is basically a continuation of the theme that inhabited the drawing—the frightened doe with high-beam lights reflecting in her eyes—that I first saw in Berkeley seven years ago. The artist advocates a respect for the native soils and its creatures, a concern that extends to his use of materials.