

CEREBRALLY-CHARGED

Viola Award Winner in the category of Excellence in Visual Arts, Shawn Skabelund, is a highly conceptual artist/activist whose meticulously wrought, provocative installations explore humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Sarah Gianelli

Intense and uncompromising, **Shawn Skabelund** is a highly cerebral artist of the most serious kind. He articulates his highly charged feelings about the impact of mankind on the natural world as precisely through words as he does through his artwork.

Mr. Skabelund's roots and forte are in figure drawing, a skill he believes to be fundamental to all mediums and whose importance he cannot stress enough. He traces his departure from traditional figure drawing to charged eco-political pieces to his first show after graduate school.

Instead of human figures, Mr. Skabelund showed drawings of deer, a response to the plight of mule deer in Northern and Central Utah as a result of encroaching development. The image of the female deer, having evolved into a symbol of Mother Nature, has figured in his work ever since.

Mr. Skabelund's father was in the Forest Service, which exposed him to the outdoors, but "My dad has more of the Tea Party mentality," he says. "in a way, I'm very much against big government, but when it comes to protecting National Parks and wilderness areas, and managing forests, I'm all for it. It hasn't been a pretty picture."

Mr. Skabelund is not afraid to stare unblinkingly into the not-so-pretty picture, nor create works that are confrontational and controversial. He was surprised the installation that developed out of his time as an artist in residence at Grand Canyon in 2011 was actually exhibited in the Park Headquarters the following summer.

The Price of Entrance was the outcome of many years of research into the history of Uranium mining in and around the park. In 1998, while hiking the West Rim Trail with his family, they came across a chain link fence with signs reading "Caution: Radioactive Area." Behind the fence stood the remnants of a rusty head frame. Bewildered and appalled as to why this was allowed to happen, *The Price of Entrance* is the creative culmination of what he found out: that uranium mining had been allowed to happen, not because of national security and the cold war as he suspected, but because the federal government and the public had simply allowed it.

Like many of his pieces, *The Price of Entrance* is site specific, and once dismantled, their components will often be recycled into other artwork. In this case, he created an abstract map on a ponderosa pine platform and placed it over the literal map inlaid in the Park headquarters floor. A routed-out line filled with pine sap traces the Colorado River; concrete tiles conceal images of potentially polluted watersheds; and antique Grand Canyon sewer pipes stand like smokestacks

where uranium mining did and could take place. “These are areas that ask the question, ‘What if we allowed mining exploration to happen?’” He explains, “If we’re not careful as the public – because we own the park, not the government – if we’re not alert and attentive to what’s going on, mining could happen anywhere.”

For Mr. Skabelund, just as disturbing as the mining is the government’s attempt to erase that not-so-pretty- piece of the park’s history by removing any trace of it.

“That’s why ten years later I did this installation,” he says. “Now you go into that same spot, and they’re wiping clean that anything existed there. History is disappearing, and many of us feel it is important to leave it there – as a reminder.”

Although Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar put a moratorium on uranium mining in 2011, Mr. Skabelund found another ax to grind during his stay at Grand Canyon – helicopter over flights – and you can expect an equally visceral installation piece on this heated issue from Mr. Skabelund in the coming years.

In 2013, Mr. Skabelund had his first show in Flagstaff, at Coconino Center for the Arts. “Virga: In Search of Water” consisted of drawings and installations reflecting Mr. Skabelund’s intimate connection with specific landscapes in Northern Arizona, through his creation of new “landscapes,” many incorporating materials gathered in nature. The powerful *Standing at the Fire’s Edge*, consists of densely-packed, charred ponderosa pine, sewer pipes, and a lone aspen rising out of the center; a commentary on the increase in wildfires due to years of fire suppression. In *Corvus*, a crow specimen is suspended inside a cone of filaments shining out from a disc of bright yellow pine pollen. Referencing the Greek myth in which an angry Apollo turns the white raven’s feathers black, it implies the necessity of finding a way to coexist harmoniously with our fellow man and the larger world we live in.

Mr. Skabelund is currently at work on three installations – the designs for one, a work of art in and of itself, is laid out on the drawing table in his studio, and will incorporate a performance by a concert pianist in the center of the installation. The same room contains a variety of his most personal – and sexual – work, like the abstract diptych *Fertility Hole*, made out of his wife’s hair and yellow pine pollen.

Downstairs is a recent piece Mr. Skabelund considers his most beautiful and simple work of art. *Mercy Seat*, which he donated to the Flagstaff Arts & Leadership Academy’s “Chairs for Change” auction (and ended up purchasing himself), is a scorched wooden chair. He replaced one of the legs with the bones of a deer leg, and affixed it with a 1962 deer hunting tag from his native Idaho. “Well, I thought, a chair is a person,” he says. “It has four legs, just like a deer has four legs. I’ve been using the female deer to symbolize mother earth, manifest destiny and destruction ... and now with global warming and burning – what I’m exploring today is the same as what I was exploring 20 years ago.”

Years after Mr. Skabelund began using art to express critical views about mankind's impact on the natural world, he learned his surname breaks down into two Danish words: *skabe*, meaning a small grove of trees or enclosure; and *lund*, meaning creator, etymological roots that prove ever more fitting as he continues to surge forward on his creative trajectory.