

Reviews – Detroit

Shawn Skabelund

Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, Wayne State University

Martha Rock Keller

Shawn Skabelund's work arrests our attention with powerful natural symbols: corn, bison skulls, pine needles, the disc of the sun, and the pupil of the eye. His ethic is inseparably embedded in an aesthetic. And "the aesthetic always comes first; that's why I'm an artist," he says.

Skabelund uses cornmeal to set the national context of his installation, *A Toll on Earth*. Four bison skulls, hanging from the arms of a motor-driven carousel, draw a circle in the cornmeal scattered on the floor and produce that ancient design of great formal beauty: the circle within a square.

The skulls (two are upside down) draw a scalloped river; all four wobble and lurch through the "sand" on their horns and snouts like monstrous surreal crabs careening out of a distant past. They produce an unforgettable image, one that demands some explanation. The legend on the wall for *A Toll on Earth* explains one connotation: "We seem to [be] going around the same old circle...over and over, never learning where we have been and thus never knowing where we are going..."

Further, the circle suggests the cycle of life and death. The skulls represent the death referred to later in the legend: "A few years ago I saw a photograph that inspired *A Toll on Earth*." The photograph was on the announcement mailer of the exhibition; it shows bison bones piled thirty feet high that were "shipped to Detroit for processing into fertilizer for farming. This wholesale slaughter of the bison was warranted by the federal government in its hope to [get] rid [of] the Native Peoples who inhabited the land. What happened at Wounded Knee was to play out again and again from Auschwitz-Birkenau to the Balkans." Skabelund reminds us here that what we see comes with cultural blinders that obscure what we actually get.

A Toll on Earth and *Burial Boxes*, four Judd-like boxes that add a formal pristine orderliness and rhythm as they pace out the space, may appear morbid. Morbid, yes; moribund, no. Skabelund, rather than letting us bury these events and thoughts to have done with the butchery of the earth and its animal inhabitants, uses his art to resurrect and rejuvenate them. On the one hand, he reminds us of atrocities in our American history lest we forget them; on the other hand, the sheer visual power and formal beauty of his work sound a note of hope and suggest that art builds survival value.

The strands of heritage in Skabelund's work range from Giovanni Bellini to Bruce Nauman. Skabelund's use of the carousel in *A Toll on Earth* was inspired by Nauman's *Carousel* (1988), which he saw in the Netherlands. Skabelund also looks to Renaissance artists like Bellini and Fra Filippo Lippi for inspiration, and visual nuance and vitality of their work does filter through

Skabelund's exquisite drawings of worn workmen's gloves. The gloves suggest an interface between their human wearers and their work with nature and on the land.

Exhibited next to *A Toll on Earth* is *Plumb Line*, another huge floor circle. Its reddish brown circle of Michigan White Pine (the state tree) needles signifies the destruction of pine forests here in the last century. The two huge floor discs seem like powerful replicas or shadows of the sun streaming through the windows. They recall Thoreau's comment that "There has been nothing but the sun and the eye from the beginning."