



COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE, KIMURA GALLERY, 1999



## Excavating Destiny

### A Conversation with Shawn Skabelund

BY GREGORY BYARD

Since his first installation, *A Line, Issued Out of the Ground* (1994), which traced the ties connecting dam construction and Chinook salmon deaths in the Columbia River Basin, Flagstaff-based Shawn Skabelund has been creating large-scale, site-specific, socio-political works that explore what Wendell Berry calls the “unsettling of America,” namely, the effects, marks, and changes that humans make on the land and cultures of a specific locale. Skabelund’s installations give viewers the time and space to think about the local communities, economies, and ecosystems that they inhabit and to initiate questions about their responsibilities and their place on earth and in the order of things. An essential component in all of his work is a collaboration with place: as Skabelund prepares each installation, he researches local history to learn how interactions between the wild and the human have determined the direction and cultural make-up of a community.

For example, *A Toll on Earth* (1998) explored the slaughter of bison on the great plains, while *Land of Exploitation* (1999) presented ideas about the purchase of Alaska, or Seward’s Folly, as a way to siphon natural resources, specifically oil, for the lower 48 states. *Pioneer Spirit* (2004), which was exhibited in Mankato, questioned the largest mass execution in U.S. history—the hanging of 38 Dakota Indians convicted of terrorist activities in Minnesota—and tied it to events in Iraq. When *Burrowing into the Earth* (2007) was exhibited at the Central School Project, Inc., in Bisbee, Arizona, the nearly contemporaneous coal mining tragedy at Crandall Canyon Mine in Huntington, Utah, offered a disconcerting echo of its central themes.

**Opposite:** *Land of Exploitation*, 1999. Sitka spruce timbers, oil and pump, pine sap, gall bladders, steel pans, river gravel, and beluga whale, polar bear, wolf, sea lion, seal, sea otter, and salmon skulls, 6 x 35 x 12 ft.

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*Burrowing into the Earth*, 2007. Douglas fir timbers, copper leaf, cottonwood leaves, copper plates, mule skulls, leather harness, brass tags, slag rock, pine sap, and candles, 8 x 57 x 13 ft.

**GB:** *Do you sketch the ideas when you wake up?*

**SS:** Yes, because my designs happen this way so often. But they quickly start to change as I put pencil to paper and then as I face reality and compare my chosen materials to my budget. The original design for *Burrowing into the Earth* was inspired by the Stations of the Cross. There were to be 12 pairs of beams, each holding an etched copper plate.

**GB:** *There are cottonwood leaves on each of the copper plates?*

**SS:** Yes. I had chosen the cottonwood leaf because of the many cottonwoods growing in the canyon where Bisbee is located, as well as along the San Pedro River, which was the main source of water for the local mining community. I have been using the cottonwood leaf for years in my work, from drawings and paintings to smaller sculptures. The 13th station was originally going to be a large altar-like table

that the gallery uses for receptions.

**GB:** *You were going to use the table itself?*

**SS:** Yes. I wanted to use it after a few of my helpers called it the “altar table.” There were to be two rows of beams, and the top of each beam was going to be cut on the diagonal and capped with an etched copper plate. The beams would lead the viewer to the 13th stage, which was going to have a crucifix-like timber behind it. I wanted to lay a highly reflective sheet of copper—the size of an average man’s body—on top of the table, along with miners’ implements, such as a lantern, a hard hat, a pick ax, and their classical circular lunch boxes. I needed to borrow the lunch boxes from a local antique shop, but when the owners were not willing to loan them, I deleted both the table and the objects from the design.

**GB:** *Were these original materials supposed to be relics to mystify and spiritualize the common miner?*

**SS:** Exactly. But when I couldn’t use them, I had to go back to my research notes, which was when I came up with the brass tags.

**GB:** *Why tags?*

**SS:** “Brassing in” was a common phrase in the mining industry. Before heading down the shafts and into the stopes, the Bisbee miners—mostly poor laborers from Europe and Mexico—were given numbered brass tags. When their shift was over, they would return their tags to the brassing-in board, signifying that they had made it out of the ground for another day. One of the interesting things that happened during the opening reception was that the son of a Hispanic miner came up to talk to me. I could

COURTESY CENTRAL SCHOOL PROJECT, BISBEE, AZ

see that he was visibly moved by the installation. He asked if he could have one of the tags as a memento of his father who had lost his life to mining. He took tag 523, in honor of the month and day of his father’s death. Over the course of the exhibition, other tags also came to signify the dates of miners’ deaths, and vacant spaces appeared on the “tag board” surrounding the crucifix timber.

**GB:** *So these tags signified something tragic?*

**SS:** Correct. I used 1,200 tags in the installation for a symbolic reason. In 1917, 1,200 miners were swept up when the corporate bosses thought that there might be a strike. The miners were forced into boxcars and deported across the Arizona border and let out in the New Mexico desert and told never to come back. So the 13th station became 1,200 tags surrounding a crucifix-like timber. At the top is a mule skull. Mules were part of the underground culture within the mines. They worked in darkness until they went blind. The callous treatment of these animals became, for me, an analogy for the callous treatment of immigrant laborers, both historically and today. So, I attached a harness with blinders to the mule skull. Once I set up the installation and saw how beautiful it was, it became imbued with a deeper meaning, one with religious undertones. I now had the Stations of the Cross, with the last station containing a mule skull wearing blinders. This not only symbolized corporate greed, but also God’s blindness to the oppression.

**GB:** *Was your idea to show how this omnipotent being is fallible?*

**SS:** Not so much fallible, as blind—an omnipotent, all-powerful being who maybe is or isn’t what we imagine. What I was really trying to say suddenly hit me when the installation was finished. I looked at it and realized, “Wow, this is what it really means.”

**GB:** *How much time did you allow yourself for local research?*

**SS:** I spent a day and a half touring the mine, the museum, and walking the town to get a sense of the place. I also spent time reading about the history of Bisbee and the Copper Queen Mine and visiting with local inhabitants. Traveling to the area is always a catalyst for the work.

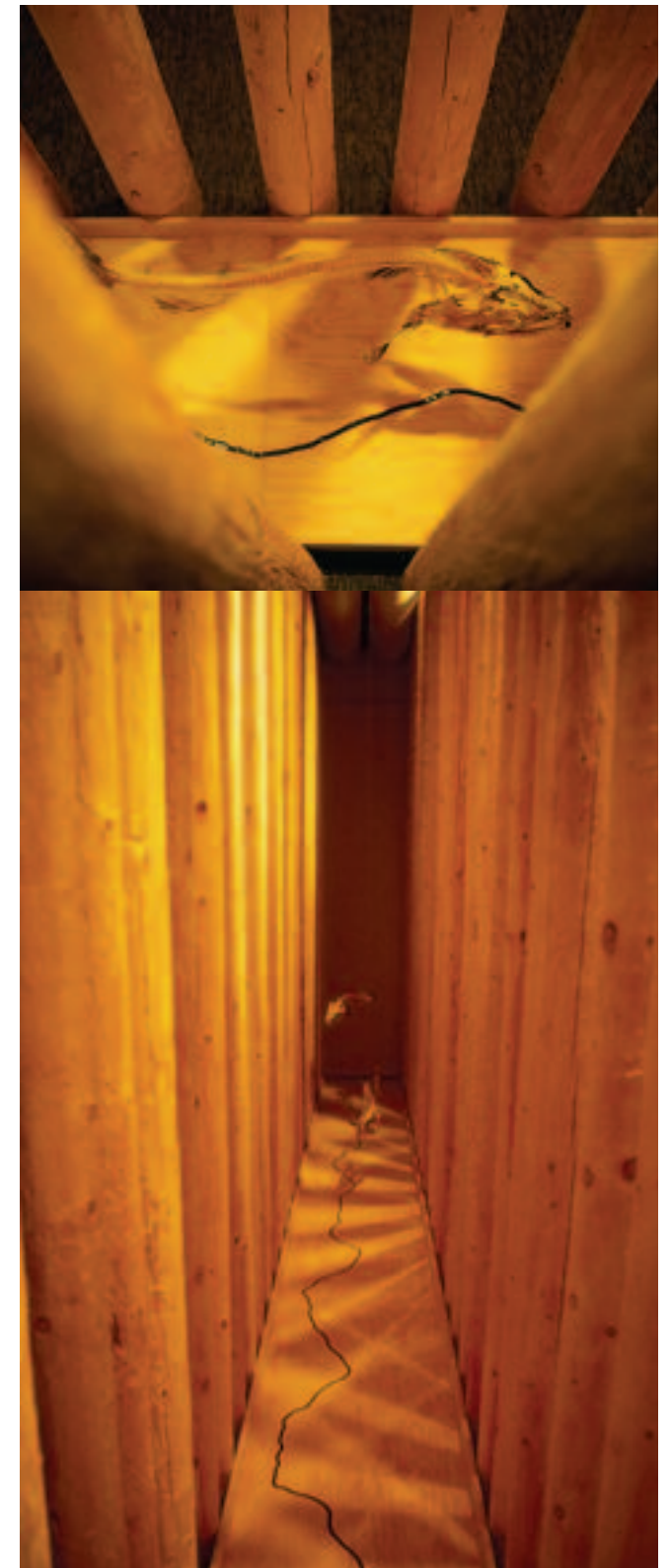
**GB:** *The forms are very beautiful. Your message, especially the socio-political meanings, can get lost in the aesthetics. Is this why one should read your artist statement?*

**SS:** My desire is to give my audience something aesthetically pleasing to look at. If the work is beautiful, viewers will walk through it and find beauty in the overall composition as well as in its individual components. But I always have an artist statement as part of my installations, and it carefully and succinctly outlines the social, political, and ecological concerns communicated by my work.

**GB:** *Is the motion toward the crucifix supposed to represent the mining cavern?*

**SS:** Yes. This is why I decided that the posts needed to be different heights—they get progressively taller as the viewer approaches the crucifix. The first set of timbers is three inches tall, and each set gets three inches taller until they reach 33 inches. Between the first and second group of timbers, there is a circle of limestone. Another mule skull hangs above this circle. The circle allows viewers

COURTESY KOEHLER GALLERY, WHITWORTH COLLEGE, SPOKANE, WA



Above and detail: *A Line, Issued Out of the Ground*, 1994. Douglas fir and Lodgepole pine logs, plywood, pine sap, and Chinook salmon skeletons, 20 x 3 x 10 ft.



Top and detail: *Picnic at the Footstool*, 1996. Cibachrome prints of winter-killed deer, deer skeleton, quaking aspen pole, red dirt, and picnic table, 13 x 24 ft. diameter.

to rest before they continue on through the symbolic shaft to the focal point of the installation—the mule skull with its harness and blinders surrounded by the brass tags. The second group of beams are 18 inches to 33 inches. I originally wanted the circle in the center to be much larger, but, because of traffic flow problems, there wasn't enough space to enter the installation and I had to make it smaller. Nevertheless, the progressive staggering of beam heights resulted in a more directional force to the brass tags and the harnessed mule skull.

**GB:** What is the reason for the copper plates etched with the cottonwood leaf and placed on top of each beam?

**SS:** The cottonwood leaf is a common motif in my work. It is a

metaphor for the blood of Christ—just like the line of pine sap that runs down the crucifix timber. But I also wanted the audience to move progressively through the piece by peering into the copper and seeing themselves through the image of the cottonwood leaf.

**GB:** I noticed that the first 12 beams have an actual leaf, while the latter 12 have a plate with an etching. Why?

**SS:** This was a formal decision: I thought that I could create a nice transition between the two sets of beams by placing solo leaves gilded with copper on one set and etched ones on the others.

**GB:** What about the candles coming down from the ceiling?

**SS:** The candles were a last addition. I needed to fill the space vertically. Miners used candles before the introduction of lanterns. Every day, each miner was given three candles before entering the mine.

**GB:** I've noticed that the candles move toward the blinded mule skull, or God. Does this symbolize the movement to blindness?

**SS:** Exactly.

**GB:** Where do human beings fit into natural selection, considering our decimation of the earth?

**SS:** Most of my installations have dealt with the idea of natural selection in some way, but even more importantly, they have explored historical and contemporary destiny with reference to the specific locales where they have been exhibited. By not living in harmony with

the earth, we decrease our chances to survive as a species. George W. Bush used the word “destiny” to justify U.S. actions in Iraq. The use of that word in combination with the war leaves me uncomfortable.

**GB:** *Burrowing into the Earth uses local symbols and objects that relate to socio-political themes. Do similar items appear in the collaborations Wandering Headless Through Eternity in Douglas, Arizona and Brassing Out in Boone, North Carolina?*

**SS:** As much as possible, I try to use indigenous materials, not only for the symbolism, but also for the reality. In Douglas, we used a cow hide and branded it with my symbol of manifest destiny—the shape of the United States with a heart-line arrow run-

TOP: COURTESY CONKLIN ART GALLERY AT MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO / BOTTOM: COURTESY BUNNELL STREET GALLERY, HOMER, AK

ning through it. It was important to use a cow hide, because cattle replaced buffalo and ranching was such a big part of the Euro-American settlement in the Southwest. It was important that we use not just any head to make a wax cast for the head in the specimen jar—it had to be a Native American's head, and not just any Native American, but someone indigenous to central, southern Arizona.

Most materials produced and manufactured today are not made locally, so one must use things found elsewhere that still have the needed symbolism. The timber at Boone was cut and sawn locally. Needless to say, I try as much as possible to use local materials and economies to help construct the pieces.

**GB:** Many of the materials from *Burrowing into the Earth* re-appear in *Brassing Out*. Why did you re-use them?

**SS:** I used the brass tags again because I wanted to recycle them. Also, brass tags were used in the North Carolina coal mines much as they were used in the copper mines. In both places, they kept track of the miners, but they have a slightly different meaning. In the Boone piece, they represented the fragility of human life, thus *Brassing Out* and not “brassing in.” These miners had given up their lives and thus had “brassed out.” This same piece is going to appear at NAU this spring, and it will have nothing to do with mining. The brass tags will become a formal element symbolizing the movement of the quaking aspen that grow on the slopes of the San Francisco Peaks.

**GB:** Will you continue to create beautiful forms that take on social and environmental strife?

**SS:** I am still interested in bringing art, permanent artwork, into natural history museums. I am likely to pursue the same themes that I have been interested in for the past 20 years—meaning that wherever my work is exhibited, it will play into local themes and explore how historical and contemporary manifest destiny is affecting those areas. Because of how much I learn in my research about each locale, the marks we have made on the landscapes of these places, and the disruption and disintegration of the peoples that once lived in these places, I am far from being tired of this work.

There is a blind faith that technology will pull us through, or a faith in a God who will take care of us. If there is a God, I don't believe that he or she wants us to worship him or her and then go about screwing others or this planet. Having a dogmatic and blind faith in God is not the answer, and neither is technology. When Marx called religion an opiate, he was right. Religion can lead us to apathy because we tend to trust and have faith in leaders, who are themselves blind and uncaring about this place that we inhabit.

*Gregory Byard's non-objective, mixed-media sculptures use innovative clay methods such as foamed clay, combining HCL acid with clay, and enameling cast iron and steel. He is an adjunct professor of ceramics at Mendocino College in Ukiah, California.*



Above: *Pioneer Spirit*, 2004. 38 deer hides, ceramic bowls, flour, English and Arabic text on canvas with quotes from *Little House on the Prairie*, 49 x 46 x 10 ft. Below: *Infestation*, 2001. Sitka spruce chips and logs, pine sap, light tables, display case, insects, and sound component of insects eating, 30 x 27 x 12 ft.

