

Outside In

Andrea Lilienthal



Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York



Andrea Lilienthal in her studio, 2008. Photo by Nancy Nicholson

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front cover: detail of *Reunion*, 2006

back cover: *Untitled*. Collage, handmade paper, sumi ink, and charcoal 36" X 36", 2007

Outside In

Andrea Lilienthal

October 29 – November 26, 2008

Art Gallery
Kingsborough Community College
City University of New York



Reunion. Oak branches and acrylic paint; branches approximately 2' X 6", dimensions variable, 2006



Forest Floor. White birch logs and acrylic paint. Logs approximately 6" X 6", dimensions variable, 2008

Introduction

Andrea Lilienthal's wilderness is both a personal sanctuary and a laboratory. She takes trees and branches from Northeastern forests to her Brooklyn studio where she cuts, paints and positions them. She electrifies the bark's quiet patterns with alarming, sometimes clashing, colors. Does this intrusion on the purity of the forest make her a mischief-maker, like Duchamp painting the mustache on the Mona Lisa, or a worshipper decorating an icon? Has she trespassed on sacred ground or honored it by continuing a private process? Certainly Lilienthal jiggles the system.

When the work is brought into the art gallery the forest's displacement induces an uneasy feeling of alienation. The sky is gone. Outside In is a magical realist ecosystem, a world at once human-touched, untamed, bucolic and toxic. There is a dynamic correspondence between the discreet pieces in the installation as they vivify one another. We watch the forty trees of Standing Light dissolve into a Color Field space of flickering hues and look down at Grove, an imaginary garden of polychromed surfaces, and then over at Circle Slice whose shifting scale approaches a Pop version of a sectioned orange. Meanwhile Swarm, the delicately wired profusion of pussy willow buds conjuring a swarm of wasps, and the vitrine encased Roots, add slower tempos which deepen the installation's atmosphere. Who owns this forest?

There is quiet in this series of frozen moments. After all, these objects signify growth suspended. Life is caught in the middle of a breath.

Rick Klauber



Swarm. Pussy willows, catkins and wire. Dimensions variable, 2006 - 2008

Andrea Lilienthal: Paradox and Synthesis

Marissa R. Schlesinger
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To this extent I'm a stalk.
How free; how all alone.
Out of these nothings
all beginnings come.

(from Roethke, "The Longing", 1975: 182)

Using the unique patterns and forms of organic media and adroit juxtapositions, Andrea Lilienthal's work highlights the contemporary viewer's conflicted relationship with nature. Lilienthal views her works as having an affinity with Ellsworth Kelly's efforts "to force from [his forms] a convincing dialogue between the demands of nature and those of art" (Waldman 16). Her influences include the aerial grace of Alexander Calder, the earthbound sculptures of Richard Long, the rich, textural arrangements of Eva Hesse, and Andy Goldsworthy's ephemera, but these are merely points of departure. While Goldsworthy commonly explores the progression of natural forms in their native environment, Lilienthal's work relocates those forms indoors, and demonstrates that even such radical human intervention cannot stop time-wrought degradation. Her intention is not to merely evoke nature, as Calder's mobiles do, but to use actual forms of nature and to take her cue from those forms.

While a number of minimalist influences (Jackie Winsor, Carl Andre) can be seen in much of the work, it is Lilienthal's kinship with the work of Eva Hesse that is most obvious in these grounded installations. These "arrangements of like materials, with each part varying, focuses attention on the particularities of each element; the height, the shape, the contrast of the inside and the outside." (Lilienthal, personal communication) The gestural oak branches of *Reunion*, rescued from storm-

damaged trees in Croton-on-Hudson, invite the viewer to participate in their silent communication. The birch saplings of *Standing Light* are, in the artist's words, "suggestive of interruption of growth, the stopping of time." While polychrome brilliance is typically associated with springtime renewal and summer's fecundity, riotous colors fading to brown evoke autumnal melancholy, and colorless gloom calls to mind winter's nightmarish dormancy, this exhibition challenges the viewer by inverting these links. *Outside In* asks us to question our assumptions about environment by turning them inside out.

An indoors installation of landscape elements creates an inherently synthetic "natural" environment. There are numerous ancient antecedents for such an effort. Ancient Egyptians feared the chaos of untamed wilderness but clove to the promise of its miraculous regeneration. Dreading an unbalanced life bereft of nature's pleasures and potential, New Kingdom Pharaohs decorated their palace floors with life-sized recreations of their beloved fertile marshes.¹ In much the same way, ancient Romans embellished oppressive concrete walls with elaborate trompe l'oeil frescoes² that ensured every room came with a view and each urban prisoner had access to a bucolic escape. Painted Baroque ceilings attempted, yet again, to deny the solidity of wood, lath, plaster and stone, and to create soaring expanses of heavenly skies in the otherwise claustrophobic environs of Rome.³ With paintbrush, then, artists attempted to do what the gods had not: they domesticated the wilderness itself; they brought the outside in.

Surveying a history of nature in art, one can follow a trajectory from the caricatures of Paleolithic cave art through the illusionism of Baroque still-life to Impressionist reinterpretations of landscape. Such a review will highlight a grand para-

1. Amenhotep III's palace at Malkata or Akhenaten's palace at Amarna, e.g.

2. At Pompeii or Boscoreale, e.g.

3. Giovanni Battista Gaulli's work in the Church of Il Gesù, or Annibale Carracci's in the Palazzo Farnese, e.g.



Standing Light. White birch saplings and acrylic paint. 24' X 9' ,2008

dox: concurrent with artists' exploration of nature as subject matter is their exploitation of nature as medium. Naturally-derived media were transformed into uncanny reflections of our world. Cold stones were carved into life-like men fixed on their pedestals. Minerals were pulverized only to be reconstituted as flesh and blood on canvas (itself the result of the decomposition and manipulation of flax fibers). Trees were chopped, their limbs amputated and their fluids dried, their surfaces obscured under gesso and shellac, only to be repurposed as the foundations of nature's simulacra.

The modern age brought the blessed curse of mechanization and synthetics. Inevitably, a distancing from nature followed. Iron and steel replaced timber and stone, and naturally occurring mineral pigments were abandoned for colors "of pure joy and pleasure... the cobalt, chromium, and cadmium hues of nineteenth-century chemistry" (Ball 302). It was not until the 1960s that, with the emergence of Earthworks as a new avant-garde, the perceived value of the natural world to artists rose once more. The development of this art form was marked by a move "away from the romantic and rejectionist postures of Thoreau toward the more pragmatic, socially engaged attitudes of Jefferson" who, in the nineteenth century, was an early pro-

ponent of landscape protection and restoration (Beardsley 11). The Earthworks of the 1960s and '70s elevated nature from hackneyed Academy-approved subject matter and anonymous or unfashionable medium to be-all and end-all—a radical, political genre of art in which elements of the landscape itself are manipulated. No gallery could contain the resulting massive sculptures⁴, as the very volatility of the outdoors that makes it so unsafe for traditional works of art was essential to their completion.

Late twentieth-century postmodernist environmental installations differ from those of the new millennium in that the former eschews the imposition of manual gestures on natural materials while the latter embraces it; where they meet we find Lilienthal's present installation. Here "we feel an identity both with the objects as well as with their environment... We perceive their fragility and transience. We feel humility, which makes us introspective."

(Mańczak 133) Indeed, much of the power of these works derives from their ability to tap into our own wells of experience and the personal, emotional, responses stored therein.

In *Standing Light* color and pattern call attention to "nature's unpredictable but inescapable order."

⁴ Perhaps most well known of these is Robert Smithson's 1970 Spiral Jetty, Great Salt Lake, Utah.



Grove. White birch tree trunk, paint. Astroturf. 12' X 12' X 32", 2008

(Waldman 15) This neat row of young trees suggests that the viewer has encountered it along a trail, and invites exploration. The bold patterns of stripes and chevrons on these kinked, tentatively balanced verticals bring to mind those reassuring trail blazes that a hiker relies upon while following an unfamiliar route. "Walking along paths through dense forests as a child, I was relieved and overjoyed when I happened on a brilliant colored marker confirming that I was not lost." (Lilienthal, personal communication) A line of trees staged in the artificial context of a white-walled gallery captures the incongruity of a marked path encountered in natural wilderness.

Reminiscent of a campfire circle, *Circle Slice* invites the viewer to kneel down and join in. While the geometry is most obvious from the high-angle perspective of a standing viewer, it is the intimacy of the low angle that affords the greatest sense of the piece's complexity. A once exalted birch tree lies low to the ground like pieces of a toppled column shaft bearing mute testimony to a dead religion. A thin coat of white paint on the interior faces mimics the color of the exterior bark and the mechanical saw marks on those surfaces stand in stark contrast to the natural, rough, exterior. Though the bark is oriented out towards the viewer, the vertical planes of *Circle Slice* constitute

the greatest surface area and draw the eye. The precisely painted bands that highlight the boundary between the heartwood and bark heighten this attraction. Just as the warm glow of a campfire turns sinister when the ghost tales begin, so too the openness of *Circle Slice* turns repellent when one recalls that heartwood is dead wood, bark is armor, and the transitional layers—now desiccated and gone—were the living tree. With each passing day the chasms encircling the cores widen and we witness the sloughing off of now superfluous protection.

The painted stripes of *Circle Slice* emphasize the changes that occur over time but, more often, painting initially obliterates such markers. The growth rings of *Grove* are unified under a solid layer of pigment that momentarily lends a lighthearted air to these stumps. They remind one of unsharpened colored pencils, full of potential. They could be comforting markers along the path, able to guide the viewer in and out of the surrounding wilderness. However, with the passage of time the rings and cracks of the tree reassert themselves. These are markers of growth and decay and they overcome the surface decoration that calls attention to life's cycle.

In a similar vein to *Grove*, *Forest Floor* subverts expectations with its painted surfaces deliberately evoking the *Amanita mus-*



Swarm. Pussy willows, catkins and wire (dimensions variable) 2006 - 2008

caria. This white-spotted, red-capped mushroom is ubiquitous in popular culture where its fame derives as much from its cartoonish appearance as its poisonous and hallucinogenic qualities. In nature, where bright colors broadcast warnings, the fly agaric mushroom is the quintessential hazard sign, all the more effective because it is most often found near the muted palette of birch trees. In the urban landscape bright colors play the same role. One is taught to cautiously approach yellow police tape, orange safety cones and red lights, in spite of our seemingly instinctive juvenile attraction to bold colors. This paradoxical magnetism/repulsion that brilliant hues incite lends to the unsettling affect of Lilienthal's work. While "the sun-faded whites, the [beige] colors of fading away and withering" (Mańczak 133) are most common in eco-installations, this neutral natural color scheme is as out of place in a vibrant, man-made, urban environment as a red mushroom is in the earth-toned world of the forest. It requires a remapping of our chromatic signifiers to safely navigate this new terrain.

Swarm is sprung from the artist's memory of her mother,

attacked by wasps after inadvertently disturbing their hive. Equally charged in connotation and contradictory in denotation as *Forest Floor*, it draws the eye and mesmerizes. Parallels can be drawn between the foreboding of Lilienthal's *Swarm* and Louise Bourgeois' *Maman*,⁵ which is a metaphor for her own mother. In each instance the horrific is bound to the beautiful and the end result is an uncomfortable melding of fear and love. Similar, too, is the essential knowledge that autobiographical statements, whether made by Bourgeois or Lilienthal, "cannot, must not, stand in for a critical engagement with her work. They are just additional narratives, which change as they travel through time" (Bal 123).

This sculpture is in some way a salve on an old wound. The softness of the pussy willow stands in direct opposition to the wasp stings it calls to mind. The strands float and vibrate with a balletic grace so far from the furious cyclone of disturbed wasps. Each *salix* bud is tenderly bound to the next. Lilienthal, inspired by Calder's "internal rhythm of lines and shapes in his mobiles and their actual movement in air" (Lilienthal, personal

5. 1999, from her series of monumental spider sculptures.

communication), replaces the terrifying recollection with a benign specter loop by loop.

The conflict between humankind and nature is primordial. We are unable to survive without nature's gifts, but, paradoxically, we are threatened by its irrational temper. Our truce with the wilderness is an uneasy one at best: we celebrate the wild by taming it. More than a century ago Vaux and Olmstead invented a pastoral parkland for New Yorkers where once had been less family-friendly swampland. Today, their Central Park is sacrosanct but community gardens are cleared to make room for luxury development. (Barbanel 2) Armies of landscape architects (a profession seen as originating with Vaux and Olmstead themselves) create urban oases whose neatly trimmed and precisely arranged artifice is sought after by the city dweller in need of a breath of fresh air. Far from Thoreau's lofty desire to preserve a pristine wilderness away from the destructive reach of cities, these are earnest attempts to keep nature close – but on our own terms. This is, perhaps, an unattainable goal.



Conclave. White birch tree trunks and acrylic paint 2' X 2', 2008

During the artist's preparatory stages for this current body of work, in her heartfelt desire to refigure nature in her urban studio, Lilienthal brought an intact, three-foot diameter tree trunk indoors. More than the great possibilities the tree offered her, more than the labor required to move such an awesome thing, what Lilienthal recalls most vividly of this endeavor is the unexpected "gift" of nature the great oak brought with it: an insect infestation. Her enthusiasm soured as she struggled to contain the pests and evict them, and the tree, with greater effort than it took to welcome them in the first place. The event was traumatic, and an affirmation that nothing is as it seems, that death harbors life, and that it requires fortitude (physical and psychological) to bring the outside in.

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Exhibition Checklist

Standing Light.

White birch saplings and acrylic paint
24' X 9', 2008

Conclave.

White birch tree trunks and acrylic paint
2' X 2', 2008

Circle Slice.

White birch tree trunks and acrylic paint
48" X 48", 2008

Roots.

Tree branch roots and wire in vitrine
57" X 24" X 34", 2006-2008

Forest Floor.

White birch logs and acrylic paint
Logs approx. 6" X 6", dimensions variable, 2008

Reunion.

Oak branches and acrylic paint
Branches approx. 2' X 6", dimensions variable, 2006,

Untitled.

Collage, handmade paper, sumi ink, and charcoal
36" X 36", 2007

Untitled.

Collage, handmade paper and charcoal
36" X 36", 2007

Untitled.

Collage, handmade paper and charcoal
36" X 36", 2007

Line-up.

Paint on photographs
40" X 8" (horizontal), 2007

Grove.

White birch tree trunk, paint, AstroTurf
12' X 12' X 32", 2008

Swarm.

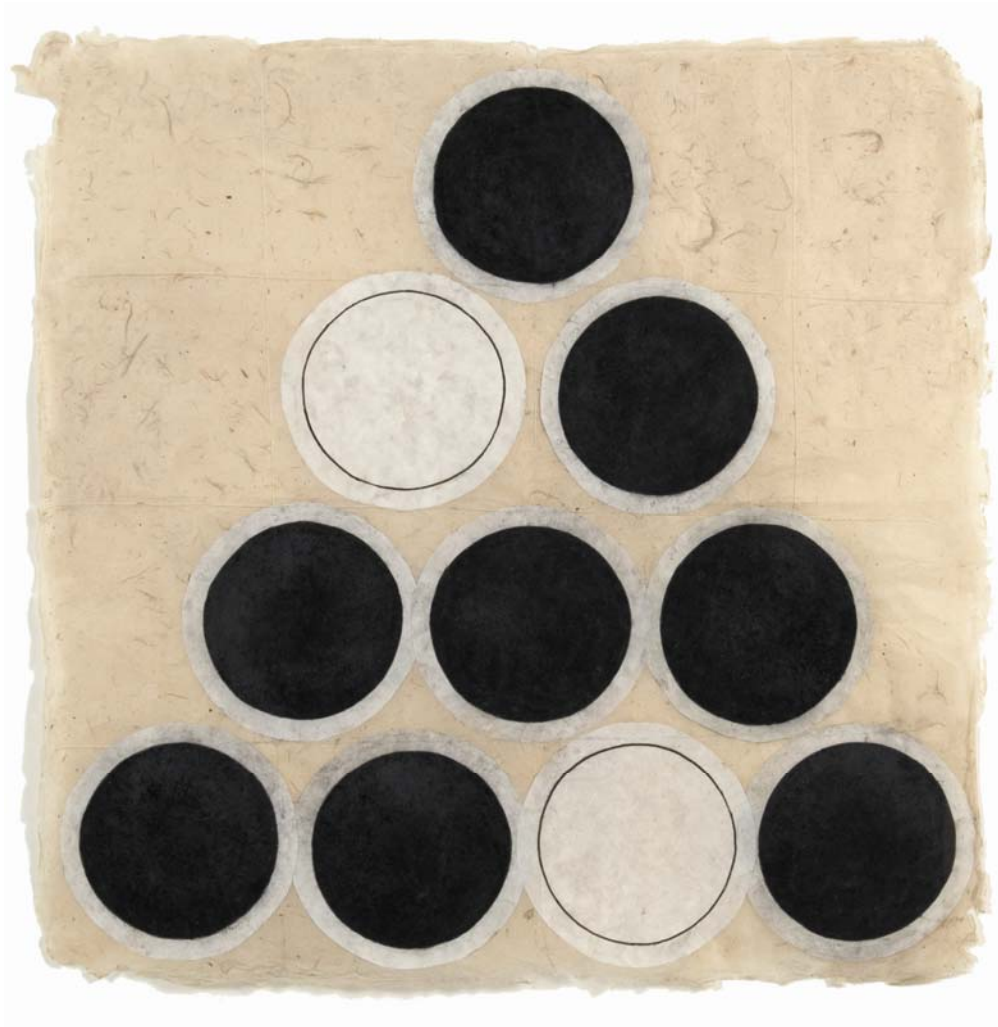
Pussy willows, catkins and wire
Dimensions variable, 2006 - 2008

Dancer.

Wire, rose branches with thorns, acrylic paint
82" X 45" X 12", 2006 - 2008



Circle Slice. White birch tree trunks and acrylic paint. 48" X 48", 2008



Art Gallery

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