

Structural Adaptation: A Fairy Tale

A Senior Thesis

Samantha A. Coffey

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In calling my thesis “*Structural Adaptation: A Fairy Tale*” I’m not insinuating that I believe the biological need for creatures to adapt is a myth. My project takes an imaginative hand at explaining biological strife through an animal’s ability to mutate. A species will, over the course of thousands of years, alter its physical make up if doing so will benefit its rate of survival. The Hawks Moth caterpillar in Costa Rica has adapted to look like a venomous pit viper snake in order to keep predators away. Animals do amazing things in order to live long enough to keep their lineage running. With the planet in such disarray, one can only imagine what the animals will need to do to live through it - if they don’t all die out before they have the chance. In my “fairy tale” I explore the adaptations, mutations, and abnormalities that could develop if threatened animals of the world would have to modify their chemical makeup much faster than they ever have before.



The fascination with animals and my connection with art-making lead to my college



career being focused on how we affix things in life with art. I begin senior project with the conversation about how poorly our planet is doing because of our actions as a species, and I end it by giving an imagined tour of the future. Through my artwork I’m trying to open up the line of discussion about the negative effects we have on our only home and our fellow inhabitants.

The way I came up with the main scheme for my senior project started with being stuck on what exactly I wanted to spend a year working on, until a friend of mine suggested I simply think about what I’m truly passionate about. I thought hard about that; and a week later an article emerged about the possibility that President Trump would legalize elephant trophy-hunting. Also

happening, Discovery magazine and The Scientific American published data showing that the temperature of the atmosphere is warming faster than ever and coastal flooding was in our near future. I was so upset with all this, I knew my next move. My affection for animals, my drive to recycle and my love for gardening drove me to make art about our disregard for the fate of our planet.

I have created a number of pieces before my exploration of senior project that correlate to my current work. Some smaller pieces I made in my second year of art school, I carved exaggerated insects forms into linoleum in printmaking. This speaking to my curiosity of biology

by playfully exploring their form. As well, in my first year at SUNY Purchase, I sculpted a flower from tracing paper and used a lighter to singe the edges; this piece has a more obvious message about the



damage done to that which is beautiful and innocent. “Wasp Your Mouth”, a drawing done completely in pastel pencils, depicts a lone, nude figure that appears as male yet non-specific in



that way. They sit with an arm draped across their torso and stare out of eyes that are devoid of pupil or iris. This figure is no one and anyone.

What is most striking and important about the image, is the fact that the figure’s face from below the nose has become engulfed in a mask of

honeycomb. Bees swarm around as the figure sits motionless. The hive

covers only the mouth because there is nothing left to be said; only actions could fix what’s been done. The bees build their home on the human body, almost parasitically, to take back something in place of what they’ve lost. This piece was my way of representing the fight between nature

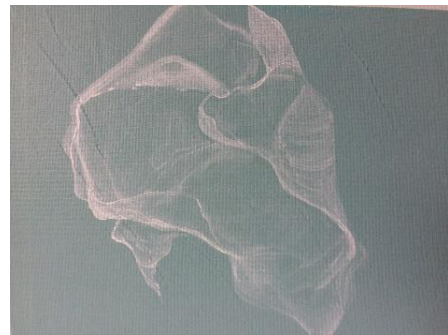
and humans. The person sitting exposed, with an arm across them almost shamefully, I make a comment about how we as a species should feel contemptible and be more aware of the actions we take in ecosystems.

As a member of a small group majoring in BSVA, I am able to afford some wiggle room when it comes to my artwork. Originally a biology major, then returned to my love of art as a Fine Arts major, then realized I didn't have to choose one love over the other; I wanted to explore how science and art could meld and thus changed my major to BSVA. A Bachelor's of Science in the Visual Arts grants me access to work beyond the restraints of a BFA. I am able to create both aesthetic paintings and eye-catching sculptures; I can use a multitude of mediums that reach all platforms of creation. In Senior Project I, I spent most of my time working on a large painting along with some small sculptures. I even created something that was, in a way, both a painting and sculptural piece. Beyond my studio capabilities, I can explore the sciences. I can traverse topics like art therapy, creating paint or paper from scratch, or study the environmental effects of art process byproducts. The BSVA allots students the platform for knowledge that correlates the arts and the sciences.



When I began my work for Senior Project I thought I would make all, if not mostly, paintings. I made the biggest painting I've ever done on a 48''x 48'' panel of Masonite. It depicts a split-lens view of both below and under water. Below the water line is a cradle of various coral and aquatic plant life. Amongst the reef body there lay debris and

litter, remnants from human activity. A massive black tire anchors the central bottom of the frame. Cans, bottles, and plastic bags throw this beautiful habitat into disorder. The garbage in the water is hard to see at first, you find more as you keep looking. I did this purposefully to show how sea creatures probably see these things, they don't notice them as being bad, but new parts of their home and like animals do - they try to see if they can eat these new things. Above sea level there is a landscape of a city skyline. In the background, the sculpture of Christ the Redeemer gives indication that this fictional location is hinting at Brazil. Chosen because, in 2016 there was a lot of discussion surrounding the Olympics that were to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil that year. The water quality was extremely bad, with sewage runoff and garbage turning the beaches into thick wastelands where fish couldn't even thrive. This large scale painting served as the focal point of the display. It was to represent what people are already aware of, the pollution and the harmful decisions we make; to put that in your face. Two small paintings also on display were of two amorphous shapes floating on pale blue backgrounds. Meant to look like plastic bags in water, but done in such a way that they look almost beautiful.



I made five other pieces; though even as 2D paintings they could be seen as sculptural, especially as they were combined with 3D elements. The quintet of paintings were done on



plastic placemats, each paired with a glass bottle of liquid and a utensil made of modeling clay. They depict some of the most monumental and pressing kinds of environmental distresses we face.



There is the Global Warming assemblage; the image is of a large iceberg in dark, deep water with broken-off pieces of it floating around. On a large piece of shelf ice sits a polar bear, stranded. In the paired bottle is water and cut up pieces of glue sticks to resemble pieces of ice floating, the

paired utensil is a thermometer. Another one in the series shows a forest and lake landscape in which the water is littered with refuse, and the glass I paired with it was water with various garbage items floating in it, the utensil fittingly being an actual



plastic fork. The other three sets depict air pollution, bat and bee decline, and an oil spill. When displayed for viewing, I placed under each utensil a neatly folded dryer sheet; a one-time-use



item we discard all the time. The reason I chose to develop this series like a dinner place-setting was to think about how when you sit down to eat at the end of

the day, you unwind and do your best to detach from your troubles and enjoy your meal relaxed. But you come home



and those troubles are still right there in front of you; you can't get away from it. These things are serious and dire and in need of our attention.

The few paintings I made in the second half of Senior Project was a six-panel set of black and white animal portraits. They each depict an animal in my imaginative future world. There is



a Tree Frog with more than two eyes and an extra limb, a two-headed pig, a male lion with a cleft-palate and patchy fur, a rhino with shiny hide and no horns, a lemur who has grown vegetation from its follicles and a penguin that grew an abnormally long, sharp beak and a claw-like appendage under its flippers. These paintings are meant to elaborate on how these hyper-evolutions of the future would not always be beneficial to the animal's survival rate, but could cause deformities. The majority of

the drawings that I completed for Senior Project, were used primarily as studies for further developed pieces. I drew a collage of various animal eyes in colored chalk pastels, as well as sketches of animal skeletal structures in charcoal.

Towards the end of the Senior Project I, I realized that sculpture would be the best mode of medium to really enforce my objective. I made three sculptural pieces for SPJI, they are animals made entirely of garbage. Consisting of one land animal, one sea, and one air; and all once living and now extinct. The sea creature is a Baiji, much like a dolphin with a very long snout. They went extinct due to boat traffic and being hunted for meat. The land animal I chose



was a Long-Eared Hopping Mouse; which looks exactly how you think it would - a garden variety mouse with huge ears and long legs. They

went extinct due to an abundance of feral cats and their pasture-like habitats being used for sheep herding. The air animal I went



with is a Macaw. Most species of these birds are extinct or critically endangered because of deforestation as well as people trapping them to sell as “exotic” pets.

Senior Project II is made up of primarily sculptures with just a few paintings; the opposite of my first half. In this family of works I have created a number of animals made of no specific kinds of materials other than found and collected. The premise is that they are animals that needed to evolve much faster than they have in the past in order to adapt to the fast-changing environment. In reality it takes much longer for a creature to develop just the slightest physical alterations. In this new science-fiction world I have created, these animals that have no choice but to speed up that process, and in doing so the results could be a bit alarming. The biggest motivation throughout the process was to make animals that were not just about looking recognizable, but being playful in materiality. I chose to rename these species,



as the discoverers throughout history always have; giving them names that mean “future” in different languages. The largest piece in the collection is the Baadaye Rhino that stands about 3’ x 2’ x 1.5’. This future rhino has evolved with a very hard, metallic hide that mocks modern day sheet metal. Therefore I have covered the form in aluminum foil. It’s most noticeable trait is that signifying asset that identifies a rhino is missing from this new species; horns. With all the trophy hunting leading to the rhino’s decline, this new species develops harder skin and no need for a horn. Another animal in the collection is a non-specific avian creature. Resembling something between a penguin chick and a kiwi, I call it a Ka Mua Wren. Standing about $\frac{3}{4}$ ’ tall and covered in brownish feathers, toting a white beak of bare bone. The spotty, odd-colored

feathers show the birds inability to develop a final coat; it has a raw bone beak because the bird's food choices have dwindled down so much that it has to become a facultative scavenger; the dead meat causing the birds skin to rot off. Also in the collection is a crab. The Framtida Hermit Crab has developed with a translucent bodily shell due to oceanic reef bleaching, and an exterior "home" shell that has



become metallic in color to ward off predators. The last creatures on display are the arrangement of insects. All of which made entirely out of

hot glue in order to make it appear that the bugs are along the lines of being albino. The animals that have changed most throughout the



course of time is bugs. In my dystopia they need to change so rapidly, but they don't exactly understand what they're meant to avoid, so they malfunction and develop with no specific trait at all.

My non-specimen sculptures in the collection include a three-piece display of miniature habitats examples where you might find some of my wildly fantasized creatures. There is also a



globe on display, in which I painted large portions of the land to look black and dead, and dabbed brown into much of the neighboring waterways to depict sewage and debris that soiled the seas. All of these works were put on display in a manner in which they would mimic the Museum of Natural

History in New York City. As my project is meant to be educational and inspiring as well as spark curiosity, a museum setting would speak to that quite clearly.

Choice of medium has been a large focus of my project. I wanted to utilize something that would capture attention right away; because this topic is something that demands our attention immediately. Through painting, I am able to show much more information in a two dimensional plane with foreground and background, create an atmosphere. But I felt sculptures of these creatures had more of an effect on the viewer in



constitution of my message. The point is that these crazy looking animals could live among us, walk beside us. They would be physical and real, corporeal reminders of our wrongdoing.

The biggest artistic influence I looked to for my project, is Christy Rupp. She's an American artist and activist, working mainly in the field of sculpture. She began her "eco-



awareness" work in the 80's and on the topic of various environmental issues such as water contamination, the ivory trade, and big oil. She claims that her work is not exactly about the animals, but about human activity and their "attitude towards natural habitats". Her sculptures of Dodo birds made entirely out of chicken bones collected from KFC meals was the first

piece of hers I saw, and I thought that was a neat way to talk about poor farming practice. She has also done a sculpture of a sea turtle made entirely out of Tide detergent bottles, a flamingo made of pink mesh and shower loofas, and nesting dolls that say the names of the chemical components of pesticides on them. Like my work, her medium is mainly found materials and waste products; an important choice in delivering the theme of the work. I'd like to think that I too count myself among the "eco-artists", those whose art reflects the ecological concerns.

The biggest non-fine art influence on my work is the documentary written by Mark Monroe and directed by Louie Psihoyos called “Racing Extinction” (2015). The film takes the viewer all over the world to hear from scientists and get an inside look at black market trading that is aiding earthly decline. Photojournalists that take pictures of critically endangered species, archaeologists, Elon Musk and his Tesla cars. They also take viewers into the ocean to see the devastated coral reefs. According to scientists in the film, “each year about one in a million species should expire naturally... but in the next few decades we’ll be driving species to extinction one thousand times faster.” The things talked about in this movie are the basis of what my entire senior project is about. The earth is in danger and we need to wake up and do something about it. Through these artworks, I want people to open up their eyes. The most impactful quote from the film in my own opinion was from the producer, he said, “The changes are going to be dramatic... and they’re going to be in our lifetime.” That is a huge bomb to the social view of these environmental issues. So many people believe that these problems don’t matter because they themselves will be long gone... when in fact animals are going extinct from right under our noses.



Habitat Destruction, overfishing, boating traffic, trophy hunting, littering, deforestation, oil drilling, sewer emission, carbon and methane pollution, coal and gold mining, global climate change... all of these things together are snowballing into the end of the world. Eric Goode, the Founder of The Turtle Conservancy, says that “The only way to save animals from extinction is to keep them captive.” So to protect the wildlife we must clear the wild. He compares wild nature to “...the finest works of art on the planet... more than the finest Picasso or Matisse.” We

are nearing the point of only being able to save the planet if we put the pieces of it in temperature controlled boxes.

I believe my artwork could stand beside that of Rupp, Monroe and the like. With the data from scientists in the field, artists are able to bring this to a more readily available medium. The average person will not grab a scholarly magazine from the stand where they get their coffee or pause in typing the website they want to read an environmental article that shuffles by on their MSN home screen. Artwork has always been seen as a successful influence in opening people's eyes about crisis. David Wojnarowicz and Keith Haring raised awareness about AIDS in the 80's and "The Dinner Party" was a huge female artist collaboration that opened the discussion about a woman's role in society. These are topics that at that time people preferred not to talk about. When times are tough, it's easier to block out the turmoil than confront it head on.



Animals are struggling, and humans will soon pay the price for their wrongdoings. Natural habitats are being destroyed, endangered animals are hunted, the earth's temperature is rising dramatically, and plastic garbage is taking over everything... this has to stop. Everyone needs to get on the same page and start working towards the same goal. No one wants to live among filth and suffer poor air quality; with empty zoos and grey coral reefs. This is happening now, this is not the distant future. Life will get much worse before it gets any better. Unfortunately animals cannot evolve quickly enough, so many will die out. But this is the world we live in; a place where too many people believe that all of this is either a conspiracy or worse; they're fully aware of the situation and they simply don't care because they don't think it will affect them.

The future of my work would be taking this notion I have already developed and elevating it to being deeper involved. Given the whole point of my project, awareness and help is what this world needs. Through my art I want to help people get more involved, get out there and help the planet. I would love to organize events that would incorporate artwork like what I made that would help fundraise for all the great organizations that are fighting to clean up this planet. I



recently spent a day with a non-profit organization called “Live Swell” run by a fellow college student. Together we walked Robert Moses State Park beach and collected garbage. I found multiple balloons, straws, black garbage bags and Styrofoam. I felt great about the work I was doing, but it was bitter sweet thinking that there was still so much more to be done.

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