

Kim Karow

Thesis Research
CIGENRL 799-01
Professor William Chandler, Advisor
December 2006

Art and Science: An Interdisciplinary Approach
Art Exhibit
Crossman Gallery December 11 - 16, 2006

The work in this show is focused on interpretations of nature and natural processes in two realms: the natural environment and biology. It is a body of work that comments on the artist's personal discovery in these realms in an attempt to understand a subject as completely as possible. Though themes are related to autobiographical events, they are meant to have appeal to a broader audience. A portion of the images in the show stem from the imaginative personal image bank of the artist, while others are painstakingly accurate renderings that sometimes contain inclusions of actual objects.

There are also two distinct styles in this show. Drawings and silverpoints are handled with representational realism, most notably in the silverpoint drawings. Perhaps it is fitting to combine the realism of these botanical and anatomical images with silverpoint given the historical perspective of the medium, which lost its favor with artists after the invention of the pencil in the 1800's. Some of the most beautiful historical examples of the silverpoint medium are found in the drawings and sketches of the Renaissance masters such as Leonardo DaVinci, Raphael, and Jan van Eyck. Metalpoint requires preparation of the paper with many layers of a ground to accept the metal, in this case silver and gold, and is time consuming. The graphic work in the relief prints (linocuts and woodcut) is looser, more interpretive.

Throughout the work is the common thread of a woman's perspective. Often physically present in the work is the beautiful, soft sheen of silk stitches, pre-measured and pre-punched, and then slowly sewn by hand. It is the slow, tedious work of the woman artist/caretaker simultaneously tending both the image and the subject within.

The earliest works are the biological themes represented in pieces such as *The Beauty Within*, *Mother of a Sick Child*, *A Mother's Vigil*, *Hard Labor* and *The Greatest Joy*. These medical images are related to the death of my father and my son's chronic illness. They were created during, or in response to, crisis situations and the artist's attempt to make meaning from emotional chaos.

My father had been ill for a long period of time with heart disease, but his death from a heart attack was sudden. In appreciation for the physicians who cared for him in the last several years of his life, and not wanting to put the financial burden of a burial on his family, he donated his body to a medical school. The combination of his death, and then my vivid mental picture of a cadaver were very unsettling.

At the same time, my son, who was almost two, was being treated for severe asthma. It was a difficult period of time as frequently reoccurring illness sent the family into a crisis mode exacerbated by lack of sleep. This artist's response was to make order of chaos by becoming more informed of the disease process. At the same time, I began developing a personal friendship with my son's pediatrician, Dr. Paul Neary. He was interested in the artwork I was developing and assisted me with reference materials and feedback on both the content and understanding of the emotional issues in the work. Developing this body of work was a cathartic experience.

The Greatest Joy and *Hard Labor* emanated from discussions with Dr. Neary about his own work as a medical practitioner. Pediatricians are present during caesarian births and those in which there are anticipated complications for the newborn. He described attending births as one of his favorite parts of the job, which was the inspiration for *The Greatest Joy*. *Hard Labor* combined images of new medical techniques (the grid at the bottom shows the graphic made from an external fetal monitor) with historical medical techniques. The woman in the picture inverted on a chair was a technique used by physicians making house calls for a birth using equipment with would typically be found in a house in the 1940's. This was a treatment for placenta previa, a condition occasionally occurring during pregnancy in which the placenta drops from the uterus before the child is born and can be life-threatening.

A Mother's Vigil was a result of the sleepless hours spent during my son's episodic illnesses; watching and listening to him breathe when he slept. Even when he was well, I was habitually watching his breathing patterns. There is a duality in this image of a child sleeping peacefully, but there is a deliberate use of space to emphasize

the smallness of this child, rendered at actual size, that shows vulnerability at the same time. The large-scale graphite drawing was a challenge due to its size and working with a child model instead of a photo or sketches for reference.

Cleared Specimen, Hog-Nosed Snake and Egret followed a fascinating opportunity I had to visit the UW-Madison Veterinary School. I was particularly interested in the processes of rendering, or clearing the specimens, and reassembling the skeletons of animals. I had been using radiographic images in the previous medical images, and I found this is an effective visual device for showing a subject from a new point of view. The Veterinary School library was a great source for images.

The book Crows and the linocut *Cockerel* developed from my experience living on a rural property. The summer tasks of tending the garden, including sunflowers, feeding the chickens, and awareness of the birds in the neighborhood were celebrated in these two works. It was enjoyable to make something more spontaneous using a graphic, interpretive style. Crows are unusual birds due to their social behaviors in family groups. The daily chore of tending the chickens was also a time to observe bird behavior and personalities. This chicken, in particular, would try to bully me, which was amusing since I knew his ultimate destiny.

Also on the home front, in 2002 my husband and I learned that we had a unique wetland type located on our sixty-acre property. We were having frequent visits by many professionals from the Wisconsin DNR Bureau of Endangered Resources in the area of ecology, botany, entomology and conservation biology. Having no prior knowledge or background in natural resources, we became primarily responsible for the management of one of the finest calcareous fens in Wisconsin. This discovery inspired a rigorous quest for information to prepare us for this task.

Bringing this experience to the artist's page was a challenge. The wetland is almost unbearable in midspring and much of the summer without special outerwear to keep the mosquitoes off and knee high boots. The landscape is not a scenic vista nor is it

picturesque. It is exceedingly complex, full of difficult to differentiate sedges, rushes and grasses. I was spending a great deal of time in the field adding to the plant species list that was being compiled. Slowly, I began learning the ecosystem in its changing seasons of bloom in the spring, summer and fall as well as the busy brush and tree clearing season of winter. Cataloging, categorizing, monitoring, collecting seed and spring burning added to my intimate relationship with this special plant community I had previously been unaware of.

As an artist, I felt frozen, unable to let this experience take artistic form. How would I do it? To focus on blooming forbs, to make pretty pictures, would be unethical if my intention was to use my art to enhance accurate understanding. So I have focused on plants from a botanical perspective in the mounted specimens within the book, Remnant, and purposefully selecting difficult to discern rushes for the silverpoint drawings: *Juncus Nodosus With Aerial Sprouts* and *Fire in the Rushes* depicting *Scirpus atrovirens*.

Burdock shows the non-native plant brought to the Wisconsin landscape by Europeans for food, and is a species we are working to eradicate in the fen. Before burdock sets seed it is a very attractive, large-leaved plant that was pleasant to linger over as I made this pencil drawing. It is interesting to understand how migrating people often bring plant species from their homelands. In the new environment some of the species lack competitors that keep their populations balanced and they become invasive species ultimately displacing native ones.

The silverpoint drawings of *Allen Creek Fen; Mesic Area* and *Prairie Dock* are visual descriptions of plant communities, both of them being mesic prairie. Handling of this subject in this image shows how plant communities are comprised of species that are usually found in association with each other. The medium of silverpoint allowed me to play with value and texture creating a seemingly infinite variety of grays, and ultimate details like the lateral striations of a rush and each node on a blade of grass.

Controlled Burn and *Fire in the Rushes* show the use of fire as a management tool in native landscapes. Fire can be used to keep woody species populations down in number and in size creating a preference for the grasses, sedges, and forbs minimizing the need for mechanical cutting or herbicides in the landscape. Without active management this plant community would eventually transition to a shrub-carr, dominated by woody species. Ironically, the 50-foot building shown in the linocut *Controlled Burn* was consumed by a grass fire that got out of control when the wind direction suddenly shifted.

Decision in Context is a unique drawing that may appear to be out of place in this show, but encompasses a part of everything I have done. Decisions are often not a clear cut right or wrong answer, but when we make a choice we must consider the impacting factors, represented here by the blue force winding randomly through the picture, seemingly without a predestined path. The silver painted patterns represent factors that are more predictable and orderly. To make a choice means reject other choices, and we can't often go back to consider what we did not chose before.

To be an artist is to live purposefully with a certain awareness of the world around us, but our awareness is mediated by our knowledge of the world. I lived for almost 20 years 200 feet from an extremely rare, remnant wet prairie that was buzzing with mosquitoes, abundant with huge spiders and difficult to traverse. It wasn't until I was trained to see and understand what I was looking at that I could appreciate its beauty. In "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature" Yuriko Saito wrote,

"The picturesque...approach to nature has...encouraged us to look for and appreciate primarily the *scenically* interesting and beautiful parts of our environment. As a result those environments devoid of effective pictorial composition, excitement, or amusement (that is, those not worthy of being represented in a picture) are considered lacking in aesthetic values."

Wetlands, cadavers, radiographic images are not typical of what we would think of as aesthetically beautiful, yet in this show these images have a certain elegance and

beauty in their soft handling and careful rendering that take them to a new domain that may be emotionally safer for us to explore than the real thing. There is no attempt to heighten emotion for dramatic effect or become confrontational with a moral message, yet they are capable of bringing out empathy and curiosity in the viewer. The stylistic handling may make the images safer to explore, but they are either emotionally challenging or intellectually so by their very nature. It is this artist's hope that these images will stir a shared sense of wonder about the world around us and perhaps a chance to linger over what is inherently *not* picturesque.

Kim Karow - Artist's Statement

Science and Art: An Interdisciplinary Approach

The work represented in this show was created over an eleven-year time span. The content within the pieces reflect upon three unrelated autobiographical events or themes but there are two points of view, sometimes happening simultaneously: the point of view of the scientist shown in image selection, and the feminine point of view seen in image execution. The hand of the woman artist is seen tending both the image and the subject within, metaphorically evident in the soft sheen of silk, hand sewn stitches.

On the surface, disengagement (the perspective of the scientist) seems at odds with the role of the artist. Taking a deeper look at the pieces here, I think the audience will find that these works go beyond illustration to make connections about processes: biological, ecological and sometimes even emotional ones. However, I must admit I am not formally trained in the sciences, merely an observant artist who took the time to research a subject before commenting on it visually.

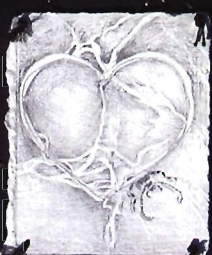
For the viewer trained in aesthetics, you will find silverpoint and graphite drawings that attempt exactly accurate representations of their subjects, rich with soft value gradations, texture, and implied motion. Graphic relief prints are filled with rhythmic patterns and bold linear qualities always mindful of fields of value breaking up the space.

For the viewer trained in the biological sciences, you will find an artist who took the time to get it right. It encompasses the point of view of the physician using radiographic images, dissections and sutures. The point of view of the ecologist is seen in representations of interrelationships of an ecosystem dependent on soil, hydrology, host plants and companion plants. Surely the botanist will appreciate the lateral striations in the leaf of a rush usually only noticed under a microscope. However, if representational accuracy were the singular goal of this work, they would be high quality illustrations.

My desire is that these images go beyond documenting the subject and show an interpretation by the artist to describe unseen processes: the process of illness, injury, birth, fire, relationships in nature and the struggle to understand it all at a deeper level.

Perhaps Allen Carlson describes the duality of this show best:

“If to appropriately aesthetically appreciate art we must have knowledge of art forms, classifications of works, and artistic traditions, then to appropriately aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of different natural environments and of the different systems and elements within those environments. As the knowledge provided by art critics and art historians equips us to aesthetically appreciate art, that provided by naturalists, ecologist, geologists, and natural historians equip us to aesthetically appreciate nature.” --“Aesthetic Appreciation and the Natural Environment” (1988)



Kim Karow, Graduate Show
Drawings, Prints and Books

Dec. 11 – 16, 2006

Opening Monday, Dec. 11
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Gallery hours:

Mon. through Fri. 10 – 5, M-Th 6 - 8
Saturday 1-4

Gallery phone: (262) 472-1207

Email: dkarow@gdinet.com

Front: Arterial Connections, silverpoint, watercolor, silk thread

University of Wisconsin, Whitewater
Crossman Gallery
Greenhill Center for the Arts
950 West Main Street
Whitewater, WI 53190



The Greatest Joy



A Mother's Vigil



Hard Labor



Cleared Specimen



Mother of a Sick Child



The Beauty Within



Beauty detail 1



Beauty detail 2



Beauty detail 3



Remnant Scutellaria g.



Remnant Panicum



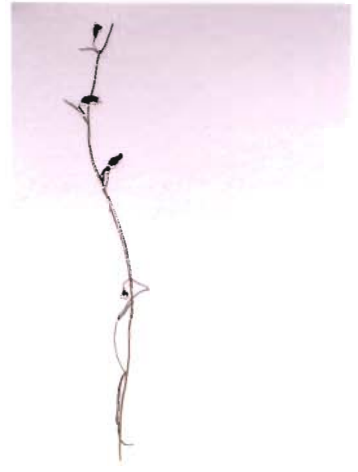
Remnant Scutellaria p.



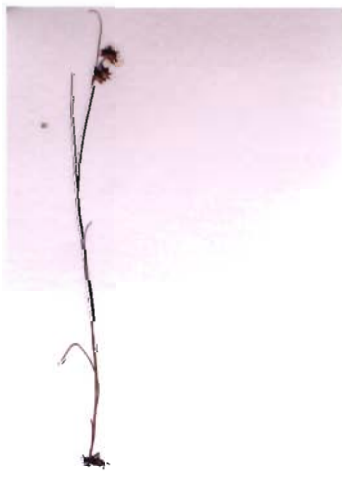
Remnant Oroclea



Remnant Callium



Remnant Campanula



Remnant Juncus



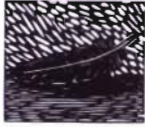
Remnant Viola

Colophon

The exterior of the book was printed using Fabriano Ultra paper which was prepared with a ground to accept the ultraviolet and goldpoint drawings. The drawings on the interior plates were executed with graphite pencil. The wood trimmed frame is made of cherry with a walnut clasp and was made by Dale Karrow of Allen Creek Furniture.

Plant specimens were collected and dried with a plant press borrowed from Carl Zentgraf, a former advocate for native species in the forest of Koshlanong. I would like to thank my graduate advisor, Dr. Darryl Fick, for his support and Ted Cochran who has spent a great deal of time on education, guidance and species identification for the Allen Creek Forest.

Remnant Colophon



Crow Book title page



Crow Book Sentinel



Crow Book One



Crow Book Two



Crow Book Three



Crow Book Four



Crow Book Five



A murder of crows.



Crow Book Six

Colophon

This book was created during the summer book club class, instructed by Professor Lisa Messer at the main water tower. I acquired a great appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the book form. Crow features luxurious relief printing on Arche paper. The book is bound with a stitched egglic binding and covered with crumpled paper and steamed Texas Black Clouds.

Kevin P. ... 1999

Crow Book colophon



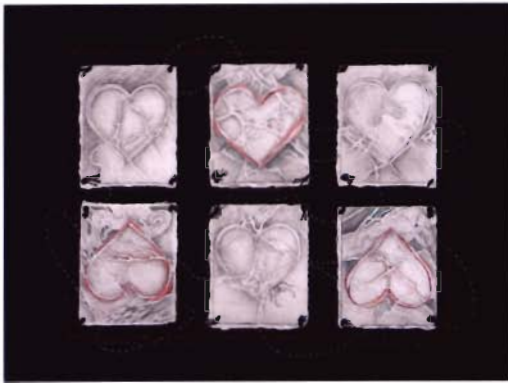
Cockerel



Controlled Burn



Egret



Arterial Connections



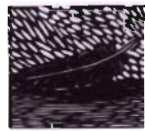
Decision in Context



Crow Book cover



Crow Book inside cover



Crow Book Feather



Allen Creek Fen, Mesic Area



Fire in the Bushes



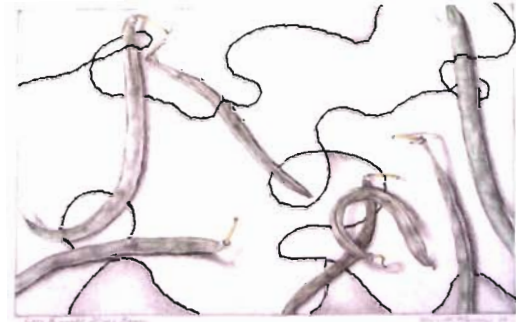
Juniperus Nodosus With Aerial Sprouts



Prairie Dock



Hog-Nosed Snake



Lars Brought Green Beans



Burdock