

Two Characters in Search of a Title, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, TN

September 2nd – 30th, 2011

Collaborations between artists have been a part of the process of making art since art first started being made. Whether at a lower level of the conceptual and creative process, when many of the contributing artists should more rightly be described as assistants rather than real participants, or at a higher level, when a balance of the work and creativity is evident, there have been many examples of art produced by two or more people that have benefited from multiple insights and inputs. For whatever reasons, however, with the transition into a modern and postmodern zeitgeist, collaborative art has increasingly become an exception rather than a commonplace event, and its presentation often sets up a rivalry of competing senses of inventiveness rather than a true balance of artists giving and taking from each other in equal parts in the joint hope of producing works of art that reflect a duality of sensibilities. Emphasizing individuality has become the bane of community formation, with repeated assertions that the singular voice is inherently valuable precisely because it is unique. The illusion of community has become even more insidiously corruptive in the age of social networking to the point that the very idea of being social has been irrevocably altered. Amidst all of this, is collaboration still viable? That seems like an absurd question, of course, since we haven't become so isolated from each just yet that the possibility of real, meaningful artistic communications built on collaboration have disappeared entirely, but it is striking that the question itself is viable. That we can start to worry that the answer might become an affirmative one at some point in the future, and that we may have no recourse but to doubt whether two people could share the same artistic vision equally, is a frightening prospect. There has been, in recent years, a move towards relational art that is affected by the community, and many examples have been done as collaborations between two artists, but the reification of the relational has often been just as much of a hindrance as validation.

If all of that sounds apocalyptic -- as if there's something wrong with a little bit of scare-mongering and hysteria every once in awhile -- a recent exhibition of work by Suzanne Stryk and Ann Ropp seems like a perfect panacea. Presented along the walls of the Tipton Gallery in a structured but dynamic fashion, images of plants, ants and other insects, and suggestively organic abstract shapes created almost a narrative structure that was equally beguiling and resonant. Spaced linearly in the case of larger formats, with the smaller work grouped together in ways that invited speculation about a story line, the work appeared both whimsical and deeply personal, amusing but also intensely serious, beautiful and, even, a little bit harrowing. In many instances there was clearly a story being told -- often ants would be interacting with each, nibbling away at splotches of color, following one another in a determined fashion as if seeking meaning to their lives in ways that seemed almost philosophical -- while in other instances the emphasis would fall more on formal arrangements with patterns of almost

geometric regularity, but each painting deserved more than a passing glance. No obvious efforts were made to anthropomorphize the insects, thankfully, but instead there was an openness about each painting that invited a personal response.

Stryk's and Ropp's work clearly exhibits a partnership between each artist that began in the Spring, 2011, with markedly identifiable signature styles laid over and mingled amongst each other. In speaking to both artists, it became clear that they had started to work together almost by chance, but they quickly realized there was a great deal of potential in bringing together their very different styles. Ropp notes: "it started with Suzanne offering to work on one of my pieces. I was telling her I did not know how to finish. I thought it was a good idea and gave her some more unfinished work." From that, both artists developed a very specific strategy, giving unfinished pieces to each other to be completed separately, never painting together in person but responding to what they had in hand. Both Stryk and Ropp are very clear that this method was initially accidental, but developed spontaneously as a dialogue between Ropp's animated abstract shapes and Stryk's figurative additions, evolving naturally. Indeed, the collaborative process that both artists went through echoes analogously the co-evolutionary pathways in the development of ant species, who are themselves intriguing creatures because of their eusocial nature that appears to be counter-intuitive to Darwinian processes.

If raising evolutionary biological issues in an art review seems strange, looking at the work invites this type of discussion, initiated by the content of the work but also by the nature of their collaboration. Each image is analogously related to those produced by naturalists and taxonomers (Auguste-Henri Forel and Jean Henri Fabre come to mind) almost as if the artists wanted to create images of idealized creatures in their artistic habitat. Equally so, the drawing of a stag beetle by Dürer and the paintings by Jan van Kessel or even Audubon seem appropriate comparisons, given a stretch of one's art historical background. Yet, thinking critically back again to the evolutionary model, the related concepts of inclusive fitness and kin selection seem more relevant and important to understanding this work as the product of a cooperative process. Inclusive fitness is a term used to describe not only how many of one's own offspring can be supported, but also how many additional offspring of others as well, while kin selection refers to productive strategies aiding related individuals in a way similar to ant colonies when all of the females except the queen are sterile and assist in her survival. It's not too much of an interpretative strategy to see that the exhibition seems to parallel these natural processes artistically. Stryk notes: "When we began I worked on Ann's shapes, but after about 6 of those I felt I should do some for her to respond to. So I painted ants or cicadas, or perhaps a big tilting bird's nest, on a sheet of paper. When I had 10 or more, and she had some more for me, we'd meet at one or the other's studio and make an exchange. I always really looked forward to seeing what she'd come up with." Here, the final outcome -- the body of work and the exhibition itself -- can be

metaphorically conceived as the “queen” or as the primary organism, and both Stryk’s and Ropp’s processes as organisms that act selflessly to forward the quality of the overall exhibition. This selflessness is reflected in conversations with both artists, and Stryk also notes: “I hoped—but didn’t know for sure until the show opened—that the pieces might surprise and engage viewers as they had Ann and me. People responded first by expressing surprise that two artists so different could create something that worked so well. Then they got more into the individual pieces, seeing them from all different angles, ranging from enigmatically narrative to abstract.” While every piece is obviously done from a personal perspective, there was also an element of surprise, of valuable discoveries and chance triumphs, that drove the productive process further along, and the audience gains just as much -- if not more -- from the artists’ labors in the end as the artists themselves.

The title of the exhibition is telling, in that the artists presented themselves as characters rather than as themselves, actors within the process rather than as driving forces with unmovable egos, individuals looking forward and looking out for what the other would do, searching for a label that best suits the integration of each other’s personalities and artistic impulses. Analogies are always imperfect vehicles, and collaboration is a process of art making that is inherently fraught with peril, but this exhibition served as an excellent example of what can be accomplished at the highest level between two highly talented artists.

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