Somewhere in Between

[Exhibition essay: *Somewhere In Between: John Henry Fine Day and Sean Woodruff Whalley.* Art Gallery of Regina, 2006.]

A few years ago, Sean Woodruff Whalley and John Henry Fine Day noticed that their preferred sculpture mediums complemented each other. Sean works with softwoods and John Henry with raw hide. Both materials have a mellow blond colour. The artists also discovered a temperamental and philosophical resonance. They are interested in the complex interplay between people and nature. Sean, born and raised in Southern Ontario—once home of the largest broad leaf forest in the world, now a heavily populated, industrialized, and polluted area—is concerned with environmental sustainability, and John Henry—a member of the Sweetgrass First Nation—shares his Cree heritage's belief in the interrelatedness of people, animals, spirits, and environments.

As an ethical embodiment of their environmental concerns, both artists build their sculptures from cast offs. Sean hunts back lanes and construction sites for abandoned lumber that he can recycle. John Henry uses raw hide, moose skins that are scraped clean of fat and fur but have not been processed into leather. Because tanning requires a great deal of labour, it has become uneconomic in rich nations. Domestic tanning has been displaced by industrial methods. Therefore, many individuals, including whole Aboriginal communities, have lost not only the inclination but also the craft, so contemporary hunters often keep the meat but throw away the hides of their prey. Both artists rehabilitate discarded materials and engender them with new life that recalls their old lives. These transfigurations are both literal and metaphoric.

These formal and ethical affinities drew John Henry and Sean to collaborate. The resulting exhibition, "Somewhere in Between," is a strange installation: an almost forest—or are they hoodoos—a not quite housing complex, a maybe sculpture garden whose forms threaten to overwhelm their pedestals or run or fly away, a somewhat enchanted nocturnal realm haunted by shape shifters. We are uncertain in this space located "somewhere in between": the garden and the wild; culture and nature; the material and metaphysical; the past and the future?

Dramatically lit from above, the five large, organic forms glow bleached gold, ocher and sienna. Each gently striated form is raised from the floor by three- or four-footed cedar pedestals. A curving boardwalk snakes through the bulky yet rhythmic shapes, and eight hexagonal wood stools ring the whole. The boardwalk encourages viewers to become participants, while the stools invite visual contemplation. As a participant, the urge not only to stroll through the forms but also to run your hands over their surfaces is overwhelming (the wood is rough/smooth, the hide is greasy). This place not only attracts tactile engagement but also stimulates the visual imagination.

Sean coaxes his structures into being by painstakingly fitting, laminating, and stacking rings of scrap wood together. The rectilinear building blocks are reshaped into undulant forms through great effort. The layers 'grow' upward and sometimes outward, like the

trees they once were. But this organic motion occasionally acts like a fungus. In one form, the wood droops downward, consuming the cedar pedestal. In another, the upward motion overwhelms storm windows. The effect echoes a recent large-scale photograph by Sean showing an iron fence running right through a tree, or rather, a tree growing through a fence. Nature resistant and enduring human engineering and excess is a theme in much of his work.

Sean's collaboration with John Henry has added magic and lyricism to his sculptures. Sean's previous work was blocky, architectural. Only one geometric piece looks like a human habitation, the rest are more plant-like and animate. John Henry's contributions are integral not ornamental to Sean's forms. The two elements have transformed each other in the process of making. Sean's once almost didactic essays about the creative recycling of abandoned lumber back into trees now seem less resolved, more mysterious, and more like nature. John Henry's once fugitive animals now have homes, environments that complicate their being and create relationships.

John Henry stitches pieces of rawhide together with sinew then stretches the dampened skins over metal rod armatures. When dry, the hide is taut, stiff and semi-translucent. His sculptures are abstracted animals, shape shifters: coyote, raven, and hare. The symmetrical and totemic simplification emphasizes the idea of the animal and spirit, rather than evoking only the literal creature. It also allows the hide forms to blend in with the wood shapes. One sculpture is of two coyotes; their panting and baying heads are hide, their fused and racing bodies are wood. Another sculpture might reference a traditional powwow floor drum. Spiraling from the rim are hoodoo-like wood protuberances that morph into curved hide shapes reminiscent of claws, antlers, bison horns, or beaks.

These are not just John Henry's animals perched in Sean's trees. The collaboration bridges realms. The animal, vegetative, spiritual, and environmental are one. This benevolent collusion creates puzzles that allow viewers to create complex meanings that exceed the individual artist's intentions. For example, it seems to me that this installation does not narrate transformation, a passage from one state to another; these shapes are not shifted but are caught shifting. Bodies, thoughts, and Being are not settled but unsettled and unsettling. Depending on your cast of mind—and perhaps on whether you are more comfortable walking into the forest along the boardwalk, or contemplating it from the stools—this space may seem either melancholic or ecstatic.

On one hand, I find the forms very pleasing. They have a solid yet buoyant charm. I am attracted to the raw yet worked feel of the materials and their rough but skilled transformation. The craft and labour that went into their construction is displayed rather than hidden by veneer and colour. These are marvels of playful skill. On the other hand, there is something ominous. It is as if we have stumbled upon something in the forest or our imagination that we are not meant to see—a transitional moment, something between culture and nature. Are the animals struggling to free themselves from the grip of a manufactured world; are they overtaken or escaping; are they becoming a new hybrid form? Are they metaphors of us? Everything is ambiguous and nothing decidable here.

And because of the collaborative nature of the installation, we cannot convincingly call upon the intent or biography of either artist to anchor our thoughts and feelings. Perhaps they are figuring the unknowable present—the most important act artists can perform.

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