Multiculturalism: The Search of Home Through Roots and Tentacles

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Multiculturalism: The Search of Home Through Roots and Tentacles

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Daniela Ferreira and Brian Christensen, Art

Introduction

When this project was conceived, my idea was to exhibit how juxtaposition of marine creatures and perennial plants would help further the discussion of multiculturalism and the idea of home. The project consisted of traveling to the Audubon Park in New Orleans to observe century old oaks known for their majestic roots, extensive size and elongated branches. Following this, I would travel to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, in California, to focus on their cephalopods in the Tentacles exhibition. In better understanding these forms I would draw from nature to better explain multiculturalism via paintings and/or ceramic works.

Methodology

At the Audubon park, I spent several hours observing and photographing the “Tree of Life,” a three-hundred-year-old oak. I also consulted with a mechanical engineer to better understand the torsion found in the tree’s trunk and its contorting limbs. Hours were spent touching, observing, photographing and annotating the natural phenomena found in this one and other century old oaks in the area. During my time there, I also looked among the roots and soil to discover how the earth had been affected by Hurricane Katrina. In the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the research was more factual than tactile; I studied every exhibition as well as the public’s reaction to certain creatures and the way they expected them to behave. The Tentacles exhibition provided not only behavioral patterns but also a history of how cephalopods have been perceived and utilized in media and art. To push the idea of displacement, I also sought opportunities to remove myself from land and experience marine life at a closer distance.

Results

As established in my proposal, this research was also planned to help facilitate an exhibition at the Utah Cultural Celebration Center in West Valley. Before the research took place, I approached the director of the center, Michael Christiansen, and prepared with my concept, explained what my work is about. After showing him images of previous works portraying multicultural duality, I was able to gain an exhibition from June to August 2018. The research trip however wasn’t completed until the third week of August and so, all the material and knowledge gained from the experience will be put to future exhibitions and art projects.

An immediate result of the trip was an enrichment of my understanding of how these creatures’ bodies behave and therefore truly look. Before I had the chance to travel, all my sketches and paintings were taken from photo references from the perspective of other artists; this research therefore will allow me to draw from my own experience touching and observing the subjects. In New Orleans, the best finding concerned the adaptation in the heavy branches when they were forced back to the ground. These extended limbs had formed their own roots while still being connected to the main tree; they had then grown seedling branches of their own, reaching out into the sky above. Essentially, when gravity had pushed the branches downwards, these limbs had taken strength once more from the earth. Along with this, I also found within the trunk and the soil around it pieces of shells brought inland from when
Hurricane Katrina flooded the park. This displacement of water had affected the area drastically and yet the trees had survived the high salinity and were now surrounded by marine material.

In California, the research unfolded a very humanistic facet to cephalopods in terms of their biology and their behavior towards their progeny and humans. A strong parental bond has been found in certain species known for protecting and carrying, much like a human, their developing offspring for months or years at a time. Along with this, the giant pacific Octopus has been discovered to be a feeling creature capable of recognizing and distinguishing humans through touch and smell. Many species have also been found to demonstrate emotions and match their camouflage to their feelings. The tentacle exhibition also shed light on the monstrous persona awarded to these creatures via television and prints.

Discussion

What was most surprising of this research is how objective observation yielded humanistic patterns. I prepared myself to observe without jumping to conclusions and found that many artistic connections were already present in nature. My job, after thoroughly observing, was to connect the patterns. In other words, my concept is not new. Nature yields many answers and patterns, but if we are not willing to quietly observe and truly look for what biology tells us, we may miss it.

Conclusion

I was aware that I needed research and time with my subjects to better understand what I’m trying to do through my concept, but this trip helped me better understand how I must approach my own artistic career. Patterns in nature exist for a reason, and like my artwork, I must spend hours observing how the concept truly manifests itself. Adaptation, transformation and combination exist aplenty in the natural world; my role as an artist is to connect the patterns of nature with our human understanding of multiculturalism. I must conclude therefore, that the research trip was a total success and has given me ample material with which to work

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