

LAURA PARSONS

Supra-natural: Imposing Ourselves on Art and the Natural World

Written in response to Kimberly Witham's exhibition, *Transcendence*, and Keith Lemley's exhibition, *Something and Nothing*, on view at 1708 Gallery February 18 to April 16, 2011.



What a difference a few days can make. I originally planned to take in Kimberly Witham's photographic series, *Transcendence*, and Keith Lemley's installation, *Something and Nothing*, at 1708 Gallery on March 10, 2011, but I had to defer my visit to March 14. On March 11, one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded jolted northern Japan, initiating a cataclysmic tsunami and setting in motion a nuclear disaster that left vast tracts of land irradiated and uninhabitable. The context for my encounter with Witham's and Lemley's work shifted; my response to their projects on March 14 was not what it would have been on March 10, a fact that threw a glaring spotlight on the inherent subjectivity of viewing art.



Whether or not acknowledged, artists count on viewers' arriving at their work with a shared set of experiences and a common visual vocabulary, which enables the artist to rework the familiar and open it to fresh thought. Such a collective understanding, bound to the present but entwined with a shared cultural legacy, is one reason why art from a different historic period and country—say, miniature painting from 16th century India—often seems strange and inaccessible (or even dull). The truth is even when we find art from another era meaningful, what it means to us is not what it meant at the time of its production. On a micro level, we impose our individual likes, dislikes, and associations, but on a macro level, we bring to viewing the social-cultural-political-economic circumstances of the moment in which we live, factors that inevitably shape our perspective.



Both Kimberly Witham and Keith Lemley rely on contemporary viewers' emotional responses to nature for their works' success. Witham's close-ups of dead animals, shot in natural light against context-free black backgrounds, call attention to tender aspects of her subject's corporeality, a pink tongue glimpsed through the teeth of a soft-furred fox or the exquisitely fanned feathers on the chest of a bird. Witham finds inspiration in Victorian post-mortem portraiture and classical Dutch still lifes, but her animals are specific to our era both in their suburban commonness—raccoons, squirrels, possums, etc.—and in the way they died; all are victims of road kill, mowed down by machines that didn't exist prior to the 20th century.



IMAGE CREDITS: PAGE 1 (top to bottom): Kimberly Witham, *Dreaming Fox*, 2008; Kimberly Witham, *Bluebird*, 2008; Kimberly Witham, *Leaping Raccoon*, 2008; PAGE 2 (top to bottom): details from Keith Lemley's installation, *Something and Nothing*, 2011, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA, photography by Annapurna Kumar

Witham elevates their carcasses, which we blindly overlook when they lie crumpled by the side of the highway, framing her compositions to highlight graceful contours and details, and creating the impression that their bodies are floating in space. The animals seem both of and not of this world, perhaps only sleeping, but then again not.

I came to Witham's photographs, which tap into a shared sentimentality for woodland creatures, with death already on the brain. Although media outlets focused on the human impact of the Japanese crisis, I was preoccupied with thinking about the loss of wildlife and the effects of radiation on animal habitats, a state of mind that irretrievably colored my response to the mourning and wonder underlying Witham's work. The lens through which I looked had changed over the course of four days.

The unfolding Japanese nuclear nightmare also imbued Keith Lemley's installation with new relevance. In *Something and Nothing*, tree trunks, almost denuded of limbs and twigs, hang vertically from the ceiling, their bases surrounded on the floor by undulating, concentric circles of white neon light. Lemley makes no attempt to hide the manufactured origin of the light, leaving cords and circuit breakers in plain view. In his artist's statement, he writes he wants to play off people's memory of "everyday visual ephemera" by using materials to change that perception and create "a heightened sense of the present."

Interestingly, Lemley's artificial illumination has the opposite effect of Witham's use of natural light in her photographs. Whereas Witham's lighting elucidates minute details of each animal's body, Lemley's neon lights insistently pull the eye away from looking too closely at the lichen-speckled tree trunks rising at their center. In both cases, though, the artists intervene in nature to expose the way humans impose themselves on the natural world in an era of speed and industrial production.

My immediate and involuntary reaction to Lemley's installation, however, was to interpret his circles of neon light as poisonous pools of irradiated water glowing in a barren, post-apocalyptic landscape. The week before the piece might have seemed benign and beautiful, but my altered context for encountering Lemley's work produced a different meaning. Subjectivity in viewing art is inevitable. Every viewer projects a personal perspective onto what they see (even if it is generally subtler than my imposing the crisis in Japan onto Witham's and Lemley's work). Where there is an eye, there is always an "I." Recognizing our subjectivity does not rob art of its power; at best, it enriches the encounter, allowing new relationships and ideas to emerge. In light of Japan's disaster, Witham's and Lemley's work became a call and response in my eyes, with Witham's *Transcendence* speaking to what is lost in nature when humans' demand for energy goes awry, and Lemley's *Something and Nothing* answering with a visual comment on what remains.

Laura Parsons is an award-winning Charlottesville, Va.-based freelance writer, who serves as art editor for The Hook and is a former contributing editor to Virginia Living magazine. She completed her undergraduate studies at Carleton College, followed by graduate work at the University of Virginia and the University of Chicago. Her professional background includes university teaching, working as an acquisitions editor for Westview Press, and serving as editor of Blue Ridge Outdoors magazine. In addition, she is an artist whose mixed-media works combine digital imagery with sculptural assemblage.

The Warhol Project is an on-line journal funded through a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which also supports 1708 Gallery's exhibitions. 1708 Gallery's mission is to promote new art, a mission achieved via a rotating schedule of exhibitions that presents a diverse range of projects. In relation, 1708 Gallery strives to educate the public about Contemporary art and employs artist talks and didactic text panels to illustrate the exhibiting artist's issues, themes, and modes of working. In an effort to further expand opportunities for education, this journal features essays, interviews and other writings that provide context for 1708 Gallery's exhibitions and promote further dialogue about contemporary art. 1708 Gallery works with a range of writers, from graduate students to professional writers, to allow for multiple voices and experiences to contribute to this project.