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MEDITATIVE AND POETIC ENCOUNTERS AT THE TRITON MUSEUM OF ART

By Erin Goodwin-Guerrero



Stan Welsh, *Yonder*, 2010, at the Triton Museum of Art

In a major body of work that changes the tone of his observations of the world, Stan Welsh recasts his old actors in new roles. His birds and figures as well as backgrounds — the water, the wood — play out their most demanding performances in this exhibition, *On Land-On Water*. If Welsh has been the cynical artist, and his characters were once the buffoons representing all our follies, this artist is more contemplative. The artist admits to being a political junkie who is greatly unsettled by the state of our fragile world. He still gets pretty angry describing the ecological disasters that presaged each one of these works. He says, “We’ve really screwed this up. Nature is coming to get us. Water is a big part of it.” Yet here, he makes the decision to mostly sublimate his critique of the human animal and create a series of mixed media events that focus primarily on the frightening instability of our environment, and a critical balance that could be tipped at any moment. “We are at the edge of the known and the unknown,” he states.



Stan Welsh's *Untitled* witnesses are vulnerable, in denial and shame.

Entering the exhibition and moving to the right, one of the first works encountered is, in some way, an anomaly. It is a small isolated female ceramic figure, glazed white, draped and like an ostrich, blinded to what is occurring around her, experiencing both denial and shame. Welsh poses this solitary figure as embodying our doubts, our sense of powerlessness to change the future, the vulnerability and isolation we all feel in the face of major uncertainties. She is *all at sea*.

By far the most memorable and overall impression of the works in this show is, as the title *On Land-On Water* suggests, the relationship of the sea to the land. Welsh has used plywood and photographic images of the surface of the ocean as a context for earlier work, but for the first time they come together in a tragically beautiful and delicate relationship. The grain and pattern of the plywood contrasts with and/or relates to the patterns of waves on the surface of the ocean. The range of observations of the waves on water, juxtaposed against well-chosen wood grain suggests innumerable moods, sometimes only scarcely discerned beneath the surface. Welsh's photographs are masterful in their direct simplicity. They belie the enormous amount of time and planning invested in travel, site selection and manipulation to achieve the end effects. He describes the range of meaning water has for him: "Water is peaceful, serenity, surrender, transcendence." The plywood surfaces that converse with each image of the water sometimes mimic the pattern of the water, but may represent something quite contrary in terms of peace, violence, contemplation, rage, distance or proximity. Treatments such as rubbing with terra-cotta earth or lightly staining the wood are done deliberately to enhance the dialogue between the two parts of our environment.



Stan Welsh's *Witness*: wood, photograph and enamel panel, with terra cotta bird, glass eye and silver tea pot handle

In *Witness*, the relatively calm sworls in the plywood rest uneasily above the raging waves on a rocky shoreline. What is the portent? In a Duchampian pun, a silver teapot handle projecting from the water makes a futile attempt to grasp meaning. Witnesses, in the form of an eye in the wood (a pun which humanizes the earth), and a terra-cotta dove watch helplessly. Many of Welsh's scenes incorporate another duality, an island of

land and an island of water (the iceberg). The islands serve to remind us how few and small are the areas of earth undamaged by human action. Welsh asks, “Are there any that are untouched, possible safe havens?” The iceberg is an island that is melting, bearing the effects of global warming. And what island anchored to the earth does not experience, at the very least, the crime of human trash washing ashore on its coast? Along with the birds, Stan Welsh has a history with some of the human figures that stand in front of his land/seascapes. Certain of them continue to play the antihero. Whether turned away and ignoring their environments or facing reality, his dunces, clowns and Mickey Mouse guy look down to avoid seeing anything. There is an indictment of human folly here, but the artist still has compassion for his animal characters. In *Tilt*, Welsh positions the patterned plywood above the image of the water in a way that allows the waves to flow one into the other. Suspended in front of the wood is a form made of two white ceramic snow-covered evergreen trees, one upside down, attached to the base of the other, right side up. We may think of Alaska, roots in permafrost. I can imagine an obsessive pinball machine player, jarring the device excessively, the bells ringing and the tree tilting, shifting top to bottom. It does not make any difference, though, as nothing can really save the game. The witness at the base of this work is a white ceramic lamb, an ambassador from heaven, tentatively stepping out into our world. In other works, Welsh uses a seated cow to suggest innocence or perhaps, a benign acquiescence to fate.





Tilt, Stan Welsh, 2010

Welsh throws us a curve in *Mustang*. In the context of vegetarian mammals, the wild horse seems like a natural for casting as the victim of lost habitat. But his mustang is a speeding muscle car that represents an unrepentant appetite for oil. In the left panel, he flies to the left across the ocean, a macho ambassador from Detroit, leaving our draped feminine witness to contemplate a flood of solid glossy black (read oil, of course) in the right hand panel. The movement from right to left in *Mustang* is just a bit unsettling for the Western “reader”, and could suggest a race backward in time.



Mustang: A black slick races across the sea, behind the automotive industry’s manifestations of consumption. In other works in this show, Welsh explores the notion of being “lost at sea” in a primitive dugout canoe with a simple tattered sail. He references our history of capitalism run-amok with gold glazes. Another compelling image is the immigrant, looking for literal and metaphorical sustenance. Never to enjoy the bounty of those born to eat from a silver spoon, or in this case, drink water from a silver cup (suspended in front of the sea below the immigrant figure), he or she is forever trapped in the barbed wire that represents both real borders and a fate that preordains separation, difference and obstacles. Every construction in *On Land – On Water*, represents its own series of relationships and attendant questions. The artist manages to leave enough unexplained in this show for our minds to create any number of voyages that probably lead to the same destination in the end. We leave feeling uneasy that so much of the wonder of our world is at risk, and saddened that our failure to preserve it and that late efforts have been so ineffective, indecisive and primitive. This exhibition is up until November 28, 2010. The Triton Museum is open Saturdays and Sundays! Posted by erin on Tuesday, October 19th, 2010 at 8:18 pm.

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