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The Hive Culture Exhibit: An Excursion into the Bronx for Modern Bee Art

Apiphobia #1, 2011 by Anonda Bell

by WILLIAM BLOMSTEDT

Honey bees are fascinating. It's likely that you are already hooked. It might have happened when you first watched a foraging bee tumble over blossoms, or when you finally saw a wagging scout advertise her sweet discovery. Or maybe it wasn't an individual that captivated you, but an entire brood chamber in action and the understanding that a colony functions together as a super-organism. Perhaps it was just eating a large scoop of fresh honey, followed by the wonder of its creation. Even when I have a million things to do with the hives, I like to take a few moments to watch the bees passively, without an evaluative eye, just to bask in the joy of their existence and mine. This is one of the gifts of being a beekeeper.

What do we do with this fascination? Some are drawn to the world of science, transforming detailed observations into data in order to understand and explain the honey bee. Others keep bees to make a living, or just as pets and harvest whatever extra honey they can. A third group takes the fascination and interprets it through their personal filter, creating a totem to the honey bee with words, colors, shapes or actions. They make art.

It seems that honey bees have inspired us for millennia, with the work adapting to different mediums as style, culture and technology changed. Ancient rock paintings of honey hunting have been found in Africa, India, Australia and Spain. The Egyptians depicted various beekeeping scenes on the walls of their tombs. The Slovenes painted the frontboards of their hives with apotropaic signs and humorous scenarios. We Americans made what I believe to be the pinnacle of honey bee art with the 1978 horror movie *The Swarm*, starring Michael Caine as a voracious *Apis* expert, and I am willing to debate this issue vigorously with anyone who cares to take an opposing stance.

Pinnacle or no, art inspired by honey bees has continued. Perusing through my normal

Apis-related web viewing last summer something caught my eye: an art exhibit named *Hive Culture* at a place called Wave Hill in the Bronx. As luck would have it, I was going to be in New York City on the exhibit's opening day in September and when that morning came, I hopped on the A-train for the long journey uptown.

The Bronx has always had some rough connotations in my mind, but this trip showed me a different side of the borough. Instead of being a neighborhood of rundown brownstones, a free shuttle carried me past joggers and manicured lawns to get to the entrance of the park. Wave Hill is a 28 acre public garden that sits on a hill overlooking the Hudson River and Palisades, and the surrounding greenery made it easy to forget that I was merely on the outskirts of New York City. I wandered past the botanical gar-

den, greenhouse, cafe to find the two-story brick manor which hosted the art exhibit.

As I walked through the front door, I was greeted by a beautiful painting of honey bees foraging on linden blossoms, a piece made directly on the wall of the foyer by Anda Dubinskis. Red, purple and blue blossoms climbed upwards in a repeating pattern and intricate green foliage filled the surrounding white space. The flowers were spangled with honey bees and their irregularity on the floral pattern gave the scene the authentic feel of a busy spring day. The colors were brilliant against the white background and the oddly-shaped foyer was used well as the transition from the outside to the inside, from nature to art. I paused for a while to take in the details, noticing the elaborate leaf-shadows in the foyer's indentations; touches that the eye doesn't initially



Wave Hill Gallery



Les, Honeybees, New Mexico, 2008 by Holly Lynton

rest upon, but add a wonderful depth to the work. With another two steps and I was through to the front desk and faced the introductory text written on the opposing wall.

Hive Culture: Captivated by the Honeybee presented works from 18 contemporary artists “who are preoccupied with the pivotal role that bees play in pollination, environmental health and our changing relationship to nature.” These artists “appreciate the complex world of the honey bee and share an urgency to convey the vital role these insect pollinators play in the diversity of food sources and the health of the earth.” An “intensified concern” has been evident in the work from the past decade due to Colony Collapse Disorder and “their works are a plea to take notice.” The curators, Jennifer McGregor, Gabriel de Guzman and Stephanie Lindquist, went through a large body of work to “present a dynamic range of mediums and approaches.” Some of the artists are beekeepers, but “while the artists are immersed in science, the outcome is very much art.”

This last sentence perked me up, for the

line between art and science is one of my favorite concepts. Both worlds can be wonderfully interesting, yet oftentimes they maintain irreconcilable differences. It takes a talented individual to tastefully bridge this gap, to please both sides, and to me this is some of the most interesting content available.

When diving too quickly into the depths of the art world, one can quickly find themselves over their head. It can be a strange, uninviting place for the non-artist. Seeing various modern pieces of art can make one, especially a hard-working farmer, wonder how these people can make a living. Throw a bunch of junk together, describe it with a couple of highfalutin words and you have art? You get paid to do this? Only if you use the right junk and the right highfalutin words with the right people. The science world has similar depths and can elicit a similar reaction. You study the Malpighian tubules of honey bees? You get paid to do this? Only if you use the right terminology to the right grant-giving organization. With science, the follow-up question is “How is

this research applicable?” and for art, it might be “How does this piece make you feel?”

Sometimes a piece of art doesn’t make me feel anything. Sometimes it seems like the artists wasted their time to waste my time, and I continue on unaffected. Other times, when I see a painting or a sculpture, something clicks and I stand transfixed, thoughts and feelings racing, in awe at how someone could have had the vision and talent to create this interaction. It doesn’t happen too often, and obviously what could awe me could bore the pants off of someone else, but to me these moments are inspiring and make it all worthwhile. Upon entering the Wave Hill manor, I wondered what, if anything, would click.

It was the opening day of the exhibit, but there didn’t appear to be any fanfare. Instead of handing me finger-foods and a glass of champagne, the people working at the front desk seemed surprised that I even knew about the exhibit and I had the rooms to myself. I assumed the typical museum-goer pose (hands held pensively behind the back) and began my slow wander through the rooms.

The first work I came across, and probably my favorite of the whole exhibit, was the photography of Rose-Lynn Fisher. Using a scanning electron microscope (SEM) at magnifications ranging from 10x to 3,300x, she captured über-close images of bees and their appendages. The head of a bee, that normally seems so tiny and delicate, was transformed at 43x into a big, shaggy beast with fearsome jaws. The eye of a bee at 190x took on a hexagonal pattern, amazingly like the honeycomb the bees build. As the magnification grew, the stranger things appeared. The surface of a wing at 600x looked like a photo from an airplane flying over a desert alien world. An image of the antenna at 1700x gave a similar feeling, showing the flagellum’s sensory receptors as a series of craters and spires. The detail was really incredible, and when confronted with the scale of these images, like thinking about evolutionary time or interstellar distance, it undercut my whole concept of perception. There is so much beyond what we see and think about in our daily routine and it is these eye-opening moments that make any superficial troubles I currently feel fade away, often to be replaced with an enigmatic peaceful feeling. Ms. Fisher’s collection of photographs is available in a hard or soft-cover book, simply titled *BEE*, and for anyone in the northeast this summer, she has a solo exhibition at the Everhart Museum in Scranton, PA from May 4-Sept 3 and a selection of the *BEE* series will be on exhibit at the Piermont Straus Gallery in Piermont, NY from May 5-July 7.

In the same room was a shadow puppet video by Deborah Davidovits entitled “When Winter Comes.” The piece was projected on a white wall above a fireplace and played in a 4 ½ minute loop. According to the given description, the video “connects the yearly cycle of the honeybee’s life to our



Bee Lining Box, 2011 by Deborah Davidovits



(l) *Bees and lamp*, photo courtesy of Rob Keller (r) *Bees in kitchen*, photo courtesy of Rob Keller

own through the material language of our world.” I sat down and watched the entire video, and can admit her skill in making shadow puppets, but the work seemed only tangentially bee-related. As a sort of addendum, perhaps to tie it a bit more in with the bee theme, she had a Bee Lining Box displayed next to the fireplace. This was a refurbished cigar box with a chunk of comb honey under an observation window and sliding doors to trap the scout bee. This piece “investigates the questionable relationship between beekeeper and bee as the person manipulates the insect to follow its beeline and take its honey.” Next to the cigar box was a simplified Bee Lining Kit: a small envelope containing a piece of sponge, a baggy of sugar and step by step instructions on how to line a bee. Interactive art, I thought to myself, and moved on.

The next work that caught my attention were three free-standing structures made by Hope Ginsburg. They looked like regular, white Langstroth hives, a one deep, two deep and three deep, complete with handholds and colorful tops, but upon closer inspection I saw they were made of felt. The descrip-

tion of the work dives deep, comparing the intertwining of the wool fibers to the cooperative effort of bees, citing French philosophers and describing the material of felt as the “desired ‘smooth space’ where systems are infinite, open and unlimited in every direction.” I didn’t want to spend much brain power trying to understand that description and thought more about tearing off the tops to see what was inside the felt hives. I refrained, however, for the museum-goer pose also promotes the proper look-but-don’t-touch museum behavior.

On the wall next to these felt hives were a series of ten ‘pigment prints’ by Talia Green; 12½” x 9” images of dead honey bees in various positions against a pure white background. They had the detail of a photograph, but the colors of the pigment made them shine a little differently. The enlarged size of the dead bees gave me a feeling of intimacy and seeing them alone and set against an empty white vacuum gave them an aspect of vulnerability. It was a powerful use of image. I could read a blurb in the paper stating that empty-ump colonies had died from CCD/pesticides/take-your-

pick, but Ms. Green’s image of that single dead bee is likely to stick in my head longer.

Another series of captivating photographs were by Rob Keller of the Napa Valley Bee Company. He created a sculpture/observation hive out of an old dollhouse and documented the bees filling the spaces with their comb, transforming the child’s toy into their hive. These photographs dealt with scale, albeit a slightly different level than Ms. Fisher’s, and had a more humorous side to them. On the left side of one photograph was, at first glance, a normal kitchen with a stove, pots and open cupboards, but when my eyes traveled across the scene I was confronted by comb jutting through the wall and gigantic honey bees crawling on it. Can you imagine flipping on the light of your kitchen in the morning and coming upon a scene like that? Another great photograph of his was a close shot of a lamp juxtaposed against cluster of bees, with about two bees equal to the size of the lamp. While I would have liked to look at the actual dollhouse, seeing the photos alone and being forced into that perspective was quite interesting. I appreciated Mr. Keller’s work because it



(l) *Pollinating the Field*, 2011 by Cara Enteles (above) *Buzz*, 2011 by Anda Dubinskis



**Honey Bee Family,
2011
by Judi Harvest**

was based on the ecology and biology of the honey bee, and the way he used the bees showed that he has dug into many hives in his lifetime.

I followed the walls and moved through the doorway to the next room. My reactions to each work ranged from "Wow, pretty" to "Huh." A hanging sculpture of a swarm by Andrea Lilienthal made out of pussy willow catkins attached to wire. Intricate drawings of mutant bees by Michelle Rozic. A sculpture of dandelions growing out of wood by Jeanne Silverthorne. A honeycomb-inspired glass piece by Draga Šušanj. An oil painted scene of flowers and bees on an aluminum sheet by Cara Enteles. A family of honey bees made out of hand-blown glass by Judi Harvest. A wall piece by Anonda Bell entitled *Apiphobia #1*, where the black outline of a woman was standing in a "traditional bee-beard pose," with her head as the focal point of swarming black and yellow paper bees.

Holly Lynton had two photographs on display which caught my attention, though each for a different reason. One was a beautiful photograph entitled *Les, Honeybees, New Mexico*. It is a head-shot of an old beekeeper, Les, I assume, who has his eyes closed and both of his hands covered in bees held up next to his face. The bees are spilling down onto his shoulders, tangled into his beard, and crawling on his face and eyes, but he has a calm, almost sleepy expression on his face. It is a great moment captured; an intimate portrait between a man and his bees. The other photo is an example, to me, of the odd use of context in the art world. Entitled *Honeybees, Shopping Cart*, it is simply a photo of a top bar hive balanced in the mouth of an overturned shopping cart. It's not a beautiful image, but it gives an insight on a beekeeper who is scraping by and using the materials at hand, like most every small beekeeper I have met. Next time you jerry-rig a hive, honey pump or truck, perhaps you can take a picture, describe it as "the spiritual conviction (you) have for this way of life" and you too can be in an art gallery.

Two of the pieces at this exhibit were treading out in strange waters. One was a video installation by Lenore Malen called *I Am The Animal*. A wooden bench sat in a dark room and three videos were beamed

onto two of the walls. These projected interviews of beekeepers, historical footage, a soup of colors and shapes and boxes of scrolling text. I sat down and began watching an interview of a beekeeper on one side of the screen, but then a text box with bee facts appeared on the other side with a shaking colorful background, followed by another text that scrolled down with some sort of lengthy description. I missed the end of the first text box and another video appeared, then disappeared, overlapped, text, video, here, there, etc. My attention kept getting torn from item to item and I felt confused during the 13 ½ minute show, which was perhaps the intention of the artist. I didn't feel the need to stick around through a second viewing to try to piece any more together.

The other strange one was a series of three one-minute videos by Julia Oldham, looping on a small television in the corner of the next room. In these videos "using her body as her medium, (she) attempts to transform into a honeybee by imitating the insect's behavior in the hive, pollination of flowers and waggle dance." Ms. Oldham, wearing a plain white dress and set against a bright yellow backdrop, was shown at fast-forward speed performing the aforementioned activities. For one minute we just see her feet and legs tiptoeing around six flowers represented by piles of powder on the floor. The next minute we see her standing up and performing a figure-eight waggle dance, her arms out to the side as she shakes back and forth. The third and final minute shows her kneeling in the middle of a collection of jars, twisting around, feeding, cleaning and imitating the other activities in the hive. Then back to the first minute. Huh.

After a little over an hour I had exhausted the exhibit and I was still the only visitor in the building. I discovered later that they had fanfare scheduled for two different weekends in the fall, full of tours, talks by the artists and a discussion on sustainable beekeeping. After seeing the exhibit in its entirety, I would agree that these artists, the curators and Wave Hill accomplished their goal of presenting a diverse collection of bee art and raising awareness on honey bees and related issues. I even fear that it offers some strong

support against my *The Swarm*-pinnacle-of-honey-bee-art argument, but I'll still stand my ground. All of these artists have further work which can be viewed on their web pages easily found through Google.

As I was on my way out of the gallery, I paused to look through the pamphlets and fliers available at the front desk. Next to these I spied a little box which held a collection of envelopes for the taking, and when I picked one up, I realized it was one of Ms. Davidovits simplified Bee Lining Kits (without the chunk of comb honey, sadly). I put one in my pocket, thanked the receptionist and walked out the door. It was a sunny September noon and Wave Hill's gardens were still in a healthy bloom. I found a nearby bench, opened the envelope and followed the instructions (add a little water to the baggy of sugar, shake, put sponge in). Interactive art, I thought again to myself as I put the sugared sponge on the railing of the bench, I wonder how long it will take until a bee finds this. Maybe I should time it, I thought, and see how long it takes various scout bees to find it. Someone has probably created a model based on the time it takes a scout bee to find a food source and can estimate the distance to their hive with the return of recruits. I took out my cellphone and was looking for the stopwatch tool when I thought, well, maybe I should just focus on "investigating this questionable relationship" between man and bee and look within to see how this activity makes me, the exploiting human, feel. As these two thoughts were jockeying for position in my head, I noticed an old man seated alone a few benches away. He had the classic 'retired' look: wearing a sweater in the full sun with both of his hands resting on a cane in front of him. Across from him was a bed of flowers that I could see was buzzing with activity. His attention seemed to drift from the flowers to his surroundings to nothing at all, just savoring the day. I looked at my cell-phone, then at the little sponge on the bench, then at the old man. There are many ways to appreciate honey bees. Take your pick.

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