

NATURALISM TWO WAYS

Bones, Hair, and Jaws in Paint

Mary Kay / Rebecca Morales

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by Steve Walker



Left to right: Mary Kay, *Maw*, 2002-2008, oil on canvas, 36" x 42"; Mary Kay, *Nature Remains Series: Specimen Painting #259 Thirteen Vertebrae*, 2005, oil on paper, 24" x 18"; Rebecca Morales, *Cestodes*, 2008, gouache, watercolor, and pastel on calf vellum, 18" x 18". Courtesy of BravinLee programs, New York and Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles; Rebecca Morales, *Platodes*, 2007, gouache, watercolor, and pastel on calf vellum, 45" x 44". Collection of Lois Plehn. Courtesy of BravinLee programs, New York and Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

Though the painters Mary Kay and Rebecca Morales have never met, they democratically shared the walls of Grand Arts this spring. And though few would confuse their work, the artists were revealed to be connected spiritually in ways that both embraced and shunned expectations. If symbiosis can be tangential, the resulting state of flux would have found solace in the company of Kay's and Morales's work.

The recurring symbols in Kay's paintings include teeth, bones, and cicada wings; Morales's deceptively brittle-looking canvases of cow vellum feature images of wispy hair and the kind of greenery that thrives in dark places. As unabashed fans of the indefatigable spectrum of organic matter, the artists' works flirted at each other across the space with a knowing wink that a lover of interspecies possibilities like Charles Darwin would have found intoxicating and, well, sexy. Of the artists' inevitable pairing, essayist for the exhibition, Abington Art Center Curator Sue Spaid, referenced a population "trapped on a chaotic, violent course set in motion by human ignorance and ecological chance" and determined, "They've brought you up to date."¹

At first glance, Kay's paintings are the more jarring. The veiny cicada wing at the top of *False Hope*, though depicted against a buttery yellow background, hovers

like a helicopter over what could be a freshly extracted molar floating in a cloud of blood. Next to it was *Maw*, where the similarly sunny pallor skews a bit deeper and contained not a single tooth but two rows of them: the top tier sharpened to fang-like points and the bottom group naked to their roots. Caught between the open bite are a leg bone, a wishbone, and a dusty rose-colored bovine clavicle that could have escaped from a more benevolent Georgia O'Keeffe work.

The hard bones and imperfect teeth in many of Kay's paintings seem on the whole to be more scattered than logically spaced, yet a strict order asserts itself in two pieces from her *Nature Remains Series: Specimen Painting #259 Thirteen Vertebrae* and *Specimen Painting #4 Bone Alphabet*; the latter work, comprised of several bones found inside most land-based creatures, would make for a fun assignment for a class of graduate students of anthropology or linguistics. (Or art, but that seems less to the point.) From the same series, *Specimen Painting # 256 Small rodent skeleton* has the audacity to approximate a photograph taken at an archeological dig due to the way Kay applied dark paint with a thickness that took on the qualities of pebbly earth.

Upon encountering Morales' painting, many Grand Arts visitors might have suspected their eyes were in need

of an updated optometry exam. Thanks to the triple threat of energies at play — brush strokes as thin as hairline fractures, diaphanous cow skin canvases, and realistic subjects like a pair of severed braids and knit stocking caps — the pieces demand the kind of nose-to-nose inspection that drives museum guards crazy. Besides deceiving viewers into believing that the works were trompe l'oeil mixed-media pieces of hair and moss pressed between thin panes of glass, Morales had more up her sleeve than funny games. While pretty, the paintings indirectly recall photos from antique textbooks of medical anomalies and appear as bridges between the modern human and its adaptable genetic ancestors. Unlike those old images that seem frozen in a time warp, though, Morales' work resonates with an infectious liveliness. With Kay drawing from a well-documented past and Morales speculating on a future undefined by rigid boundaries, the two artists meet in the nebulous, respectful present. •

NOTE:

1 – Sue Spaid, Grand Arts exhibition brochure, March 2008.

Steve Walker is a regular contributor to *Review*, and his work has appeared in *The Pitch*, *Kansas City Magazine*, and *The Advocate*. Currently an arts reporter for KCUR 89.3 FM in Kansas City, Missouri, Walker also teaches creative writing at the Kansas City Art Institute.