

From the exhibition, *Mary Kay & Rebecca Morales*, 2008
 Remembering Today, Longing for Long Ago, Protecting Tomorrow
 By Sue Spaid

Popular pastimes such as shadow boxes, encased keepsakes, picture lockets, pressed flowers, buried treasures, time capsules, photo albums, scrap books, bulletin boards, and memento mori demonstrate some need to capture yesterday, extend today, freeze moments, or thwart entropy. Why do human beings tend to delay change, resist decay, and defer aging by preserving the now, rather than letting go? This essay can't answer this question, but I do hope to show that Mary Kay's new paintings double as mementoes, fields of soaring relics permanently pasted into our memories. Soon after viewing her paintings, I asked whether she was also a naturalist, since the figures in her paintings seemed too detailed to be rendered from memory. She immediately suggested we visit her studio, where we studied her collection, casually culled while on walks with her dog. Like most artist-naturalists, she arranges her specimens categorically (similar insects, pods, vertebrae, fibulas, clavicles, skulls, seashells, carapaces, dried flowers). When these pieces appear in her paintings, they're not always identifiable. Rendered in ways that veil their reference, they're rotated at oblique angles as if tossed in the air, obliterated from sight by being buried under other objects, or distorted as aspects undergoing disintegration are selected. Even figures you feel comfortable identifying loom otherwise. The seashell-like form in *To Grow* is actually the tightly closed bud of a moonflower, while Maw's cow vertebra evokes a fuchsia orchid.

Rather than ponder the question of what is being looked at, which would require one to identify each object hanging on the canvas' surface, one should wonder about what is happening inside the painting, especially since these bottomless paintings look more like archaeological sites than illustrated plates from naturalists' travels. However, Kay's drawings, wherein she first paints a luscious ground, then selects the appropriate character(s) to float atop, and paints each as vividly as possible, do resemble such plates. Some of her paper works, especially her bone study, whereby dozens of bones hover over a black field, recall illustrations found in Cassiano's Paper Museum.¹ In 1762, King George III purchased this collection, whose 7,000 watercolors, drawings, and prints mostly document natural history, which was once considered one of the most significant efforts to "embrace human knowledge in visual form."² Twenty-two years later, Sir James Edward Smith purchased the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus' personal collection of books, letters, and specimens (minerals, insects, shells, fish, and plants), which along with Smith's collection formed the core of London's Linnean Society.³ While I have no proof that Kay ever visited such collections, this British-born artist shares their anxiety about forgetting. This fascination with visual knowledge and desire to amass the past pervades her first culture. One only has to visit the Victoria and Albert or John Soane's London home to taste this distinctly British pursuit.

So, let's see what's happening in Kay's paintings. One feature that her paintings share is some orifice, whether a nest's center, a radiant sunflower-like mandala or a vertebra's hollow center, each proposing pursed, pinkish lips mouthing "whooh" or "oohh." This sounds very weird, but they're everywhere here. With *Spirit*, two veiny leaves hover over a pinky-grey fluffy nest, comprised of straw, grasses, and thorns. Laced in red, the veins suggest an active circulatory system pumping blood, oxygen, and/or nutrients. Meanwhile, an animal has constructed a stunning, though pointless nest, one that's ultimately too painful to perch upon. In *Maw*, the dramatic orchid-like vertebra, occupying an enormous boneyard suddenly swept up in a gust of wind, summons the spectator's attention. Simultaneously grasped from various vantages, ranging from close-up to far away, this scene generates substantial depth. *False Hope*, the series' most animated work, consists of a single cicada wing wisping blissfully through a pasture dotted with colossal toothy creatures. If you're beginning to sense the onset of some ominous tempest, you might be comforted to learn that the first artwork she remembers appreciating was Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500), hanging as a poster in a friend's bedroom. With *Rush*, one senses the ruffled plumage of a puffed-up bird crowning a cross-section of a fleshy bone. The most mysterious painting is *Uproot*, whose detailed fleshy root drifts in the dark, parallel two ruddy cicada wings, while delicate roots toss about. Reiterating nature's transiency, this theme recalls the extreme lifecycle of cicada nymphs munching roots and thriving beneath the earth's surface, only to emerge as adults every thirteen or seventeen years. *Parts* consists of three turtle vertebrae,

dislodged from their carapace, straddling a red puddle. The disconnected cicada wing, moonflower, and thorny vine standing upright in *To Grow* most resemble specimen plates. Like the fuchsia vertebra in *Maw*, the red soaring seed sprouting milkweed in *To Earth* signals new life in the midst of death, as a vast gust scatters hundreds of bones hither and thither. A tale of celebration and joy, *Generation* is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Kay recalls searching for quartz on the beach with her dad, who also took her on nature walks, so I joked that *Generation* simulates the memory process. All that was buried, whether sunny or thorny, has been “hoovered” out and tossed about this canvas for all to see.

At first glance, it seems that Rebecca Morales presses pieces of precious natural history between waxed paper, so as to preserve them forever. One might accidentally categorize her “sacs” as exemplary of the kind of rituals discussed in this essay’s opening sentence, since they appear to carry rare genetic material, unidentified flora, lost and found items, or even foreign forms. But saving items from the past is hardly her mission. These objects are more like forensic specimens found at a future crime, or at least one that’s already under way; notably a crime where the spectator doubles as victim and prime suspect. She considers our era post-catastrophic. Various catastrophes are underway, rattling our days with unpredictable aftershocks. We must therefore react and respond to past events, already in play, further complicating our already chaotic existence. Morales’ apparent keepsakes have morphed into new life forms, just as earnest science projects mutate into science fiction scenarios, creating new realities, hybrids of living and inanimate things. Like Kay’s paintings, Morales’ works on vellum are only painted to look sealed. Unlike Kay, Morales cares little for a lost past. She rather frames nature’s capacity to react and adapt to change, thus orienting her vision around our future.

What is Morales’s obsession with wigs, braids, hair extensions, or knit hats? Many of her paintings entail flora or fauna taking root in head ornaments. Philosophers envision “brains in vats,” bodiless brains hooked up to computers capable of experiencing every possible human thought. Morales’s headless headgear morphed into living objects suggest alien beings, plugged in via their connection to microscopic DNA samples left behind by prior owners. Perhaps the flora itself has gained brain-like powers capable of sustaining the headgear. Given that these plants are thriving, one imagines these animate squatters’ mutually interdependent relationship with their inanimate substrates. Of course, this is not unlike lichens living on rocks and tree trunks or mosses making the inhabitable home. To demonstrate plants’ capacity to take root anywhere, even in the street, Hans Haacke carved out a circular patch of soil, where randomly trapped airborne seeds took root.

Morales selects saprophytes, plants which don’t require soil, since they’re nourished by dead or decaying organic matter. A burgeoning art historical field entails using historical paintings for species records. For example, forty different plant species have been identified in Jan Van Eyck’s *The Lamb of God* altarpiece alone. Someday Morales’ paintings will similarly serve as the plant specimens of a lost era. One imagines future bio-historians identifying Morales’ life forms, cataloged long ago by whatever systems eventually eclipsed Linnaeus’ 18th Century methodology.

It goes without saying that Morales has a knack for trompe l’oeil painting that can fool even the most sophisticated viewers. With *Tamara’s Cues*, one is struck by the dangling braids’ believability, especially the frizzy fuzz, or the lifelike grace of the sprouting grasses, mosses, and red fungi. But what really blows my mind is the fragility of the rubber bands fastening (or not) the braids together. Cues, as in curly cues, are synonymous with braids. What is anybody’s guess is how Tamara became separated from her cues. Perhaps she cut them for a cancer patient whose hair had fallen out, making her cues truly life supporting. For *Black and Moss*, several moss patches sprout atop this mysterious moptop, apparently dropped in the street. Just as the *Planet of the Apes* characters sported human hairdos, one could imagine this as the scalped hair of some plantimal sprung to life. Morales recently became interested in zoonotic pathogens and parasites that infect humans via animal contact. The slightly bluish flecks that dot the hair make me wonder whether some emergent life form hasn’t crept into this scene, though she sees them as water droplets. *Yellow Cells*, whereby plant matter and a mossy wreath encircle a string of spheres encased in yellow crocheted covers, demonstrates her

shift in focus from a visible futuristic terrain to microscopic matter, where alien agents wreak havoc with immune systems as they infest susceptible territories.

The paintings *Platodes* and *Cestodes* illustrate her newest interest. The former title is the scientific name for flatworms, while the latter is the name for tapeworms, like those found in pork or beef. With these newest works, plants accommodate, rather than thwart their minute zoonotic hosts' efforts to traverse foreign boundaries. Bent on paths of destruction, they enter bodies unprepared to resist their deadly advances. With *Cestodes*, moss growing on a soiled pink hair extension serves as the model for this enemy flatworm, coated in black gook and oozing a butterscotch slime. While plants thrived in earlier works, decay, decomposition, and disintegration are currently de rigueur. These minute mutant monsters, such as *Platodes*, are visually fascinating, yet their antics appear lethal, as compared to those serene mutually-interdependent hybrids characterized in earlier works.

Whether Kay peers into our past or Morales forecasts our future, the message is pretty much the same. An unavoidable and unpredictable change is underfoot. If we can barely figure out how we got from there to here, how can we plan what to do next, so that we'll be ensured what Morales terms "a soft landing"? These artists recommend cognizance. Each of us is trapped on a chaotic, violent course set in motion by human ignorance and ecological chance. They've brought you up to date. Now it's your turn to remain vigilant and act thoughtfully.

1 Cassiano's Paper Museum is dispersed between the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, the British Library, the British Museum, the Institut de France, and other collections. *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo : A Catalogue Raisonné* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007)

2 Ibid.

3 <http://www.linnean.org/index.php?id=50>

Curator at the Abington Art Center, Sue Spaid writes regularly about experiential art for *artUS*. The author of *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, she's currently preparing that exhibition's follow-up, "Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots," an exhibition concerning twenty-two artist-farmers.

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