



Sea of Vulnerability

Brandon Ballengée

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ROWAN
ART
UNIVERSITY
GALLERY

‘TRANSDISCIPLINARY’ IS HOW BEST TO DESCRIBE BRANDON BALLENGÉE’S PRACTICE.

He is an artist, biologist and environmental educator who creates artworks inspired from his ecological fieldwork and laboratory research. His scientific research informs his artistic inquiry resulting in works that are balanced in its artistic and scientific statements. In *Sea of Vulnerability* we presented a series of his artworks in the form of installations, assemblages, and mixed media that offer dramatic visual representations of species that are in decline, threatened, or already lost to extinction. The results are beautifully composed artistic expressions that are also informative of some of our most pressing environmental issues.

In his work *Collapse* for example we encounter a monumental pyramid of preserved aquatic specimens from the Gulf of Mexico meant to reference the fragile inter-relationship between gulf species and the food chain post the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the largest oil spill in human history. The narrative expressed in the work is dire, but visually the installation is a stunning example of formal visual aesthetics. The 455 jars (containing 370+ different species) are meticulously spaced into evenly measured rows punctuated by various shades of amber placed in purposeful sequences. The precision of the placement invites the viewer in where they encounter the meaning in the work. As you follow the rows towards the top many of the glass jars are





Collapse: 2012, preserved specimens, glass and Carosafe preservative solutions, 9 x 12.8 x 12.8 feet, in scientific collaboration with Todd Gardner, Jack Rudloe, Brian Schiering and Peter Wary courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



Frameworks of Absence: Artist cut and burnt chromolithograph, etched glass urn, and ashes, variable sizes.

empty, representing the species already lost to extinction. It is difficult to see the specimens as you gaze further into the center of the pyramid, which literally suggests that these hidden species are as important in supporting the pyramidal structure from collapsing as the exposed ones. The stacked glass jars reinforce the fragility of both the structure and the ecosystem it represents.

The bottom row of the pyramid includes jars that contain samples of the oil and the liquid disbursements used in an attempt to rid the oil. This is where these contaminants ended up, with as



Frameworks of Absence: Etched glass urn, and ashes.







Malamp: Reliquaries: 2001- Ongoing, unique iris print on Arches watercolor paper. 46.625 x 34.0625 inches each.

much of half of the 200+ million gallons still remaining in the Gulf. The accompanying video *Committed* helps viewers understand both the devastating ecological and economic impacts of the spill on the region and the attempts of BP to propagandize the cleanup.

Similarly, the works included in the installation *Frameworks of Absence* are placed with intention on a deep red wall and framed in moldings reminiscent of the era in which the species was last seen in nature. Similarly, the historic artifacts cut to create the Frameworks come from the time the species disappeared. Arranged in the “salon style” the elegance of the presentation is visually seductive and once pulled in we encounter a message that is both an historical record and a prophecy for the future as we are pushed further into the current mass extinction event called the Holocene or Sixth Extinction.

With this work Brandon introduces a performative segment in which he photo documents the process of cutting out the printed image of the extinct species, burning that section of paper over an open flame, and then placing the ashes into a funerary urn. Through this ritualized performative action the viewer becomes witness to the demise of the extinct animal de-

(Left) DFB 39: Priapus, 2013
Unique Iris print on Arches watercolor paper. Cleared and stained Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. (46 x 34") Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

picted in the print. We again bare witness if we become owner of any of these prints and urn. The artist invites us to take the urn to where the animal was last seen and scatter the ashes as an act of memorializing them.

The insertion of a spiritual mythology in his work can also be seen in the *Malamp: Reliquaries* series. In these Iris prints of larger than life scaled deformed frogs, Brandon has elevated the status of these specimens into god like beings. Floating against a black background with areas of clouding and speckles made from air bubbles we view the frogs as celestial beings in space. Each piece is titled with a name taken from Greco-Roman mythology. The frog is placed on its back, but viewed straight on they appear as formal portraits at a human scale rendering the frog as neither menacing, or diminutive and therefore accessible and even lovable.

Tropical Cloud Forest Displacement is the final piece in the exhibition. It is an assemblage of faux tropical flora and tree branch that would be found in a rainforest habitat and winter home for many migratory birds including the Kentucky warbler. A video is viewed on a device that is precariously placed in the branches of the tree showing a Warbler just waking up from unconsciousness after slamming into a high rise building window. The narrative in the video is ambiguous and raises questions about the bird and its environment. The device adds function and statement that birds are being displaced due to the destruction of habitat and migratory pathways.

In his work, Brandon skillfully makes significant environmental statements by emphasizing what is absent rather than present and in keeping with his transdisciplinary practice balancing art and science, he finds just the right balance with beauty and volatility to evoke the type of tension needed to garner attention and empathy.

Mary Salvante

Curator

Gallery and Exhibition Programs Director



Tropical Cloud Forest Displacement

2006 - 2007, mixed media, video by Valerie Durguet and David Rosane (74 x 93 x 39"), courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

EXHIBITION LIST

COLLAPSE

A response to the global crisis for the world's fisheries and the threat of unraveling the Gulf of Mexico's food-chain following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon (DWH) oil spill. The pyramid of 26,162 preserved specimens represents 370+ species of fish and other aquatic organisms collected from the Gulf Coast, a region of diverse marine species and of socio-economic importance.

COMMITTED

2012, Video: 16 minutes and 13 seconds. BP advertisements with running texts in rebuttal. In collaboration with Aurore Ballengée, Phillip Henken, Mike Madden and Gillian Wilson.

Committed offers rebuttals to claims made in BP advertisements following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon (DWH) oil spill. Here, scientific studies, government documents and other published materials factually contradict what BP has said in their commercials and other public relation attempts. Through the piece you see a complete collision of "realities": On one hand you have the reassuring words of the caring and apologetic former CEO Tony Hayward promising to "make this right" followed by visions of white sands with vibrant blue water, thrilled sunbathing tourists, thriving revitalized gulf communities and wildlife, even a recipe for succulent shrimp gumbo. On the other- the world of scientists, analysts and Gulf residents- you see a different picture reported, with damaged beaches with sands used to cover oil, delays in clean-up and restoration efforts, loss of wildlife, DWH effluents bio-accumulating into different trophic layers of the gulf food chain, health threats from consuming contaminated seafood, and an ongoing environmental catastrophe that has lacked systemic large-scale remediation.

TROPICAL CLOUD FOREST DISPLACEMENT

2006 – 2007, mixed media, video by Valerie Durguet and David Rosane (74 x 93 x 39 “), courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

MALAMP: RELIQUARIES

Created by chemically “clearing and staining” terminally deformed frogs that the artist found in nature. This process is followed by high-resolution scanner photography of each specimen to create individual portraits. These portraits are printed as unique watercolor ink prints (never made into editions) The title codes DFA and DFB are meant to recall the binomial naming system in science introduced by Carl Linnaeus. All of the Malamp Reliquaries have this two-part naming system inspired by the Linnaeus System. The first half of the title recalls the specimen series followed by identification number, such as DFA83 (DF=Deformed Frog series A, number 83, in the series). The second part of the title is named after Greco-Roman mythological characters.

DFB 39: Priapus, (2013). Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. (Priapus was a minor rustic fertility god, protector of livestock, fruit plants, gardens and male genitalia.)

DFA 186, Hades, (2012). Unique digital-C print on watercolor paper. Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Collection of Suzaan Boettger and David Dorfman (Hades was the ancient Greek chthonic god of the underworld, which eventually took his name.)

DFA 203: Skeiron, (2013). Squirrel tree frog collected in Devil’s Garden, Florida in scientific collaboration with Peter Henry Warny. (Skeiron was the Greek god of the northwest wind. He is depicted as a bearded man tilting a cauldron, representing the onset of winter.)

DFA 175: Ikaros, (2013). Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (from the Greek, Icarus is the son of the master craftsman Daedalus, the creator of the Labyrinth. Icarus and his father attempt to escape from Crete by means of wings that his father constructed from feathers and wax.)

DFA 125: Glaucus, (2013). Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. (Glaucus was a Greek prophetic sea-god, born mortal and turned immortal upon eating a magical herb. It was believed that he commonly came to the rescue of sailors and fishermen in storms, having once been one himself.)

DFA 155: Morpheus, (2013). Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Collection of Victor Ballengée. (Morpheus was the leader of the Oneiroi, the personified spirits (daimones) of dreams. He was a messenger of the gods who appeared in the dreams of kings in human guise.)

FRAMEWORKS OF ABSENCE

Acquired over several years, these prints, dating from 1585 to 2014, reflect the long term and continued decline of biodiversity.

RIP Jamaican Poorwill: After John Latham, 1795/2014
Artist cut and burnt hand-colored copper plate engraving, etched glass urn, and ashes. (13 ¾ x 12 ¾")

RIP Long-tailed Scarlet Lory: After George Edwards, 1750/2015.
Artist cut and burnt hand colored copper etching by Sir George Edwards published in 1750, etched glass funerary urn and ashes. Print: (11 ½ x 9 ⅛"), Frame: (17 ½ x 15 ¾")

RIP Spectacled Cormorant: After Joseph Wolf, 1869/2014
Artist cut and burnt hand colored stone lithograph, etched glass urn, and ashes. (30 ⅝ x 24 ⅝") Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

RIP Glaucous Macaw: After Gustav Mützel, 1878/2014
Artist cut and burnt hand-highlighted chromolithograph, etched glass urn, and ashes. (18 5/8 x 14 ⅝"). Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

RIP Labrador Duck: After John William Hill, 1844/2015
Artist cut and burnt hand-colored stone lithograph, etched glass urn and ashes. Print: (9 x 11 ½"), Frame: (13 ¾ x 18")

RIP Turquoise-throated Puffleg Hummingbird: After John Gould, 1861/2015
Artist cut and burnt hand-colored stone lithograph finished with gold leaf and gum arabic by John Gould published in 1861, etched glass funerary urn and ashes. Print: (21 ¼ x 14 ⅜"), Frame: (30 x 23 ⅛")

RIP San Clemente Wren and Guadalupe Wren: After Rex Brasher, 1932/2015
Artist cut and burnt photogravures, etched glass funerary urn and ashes. Print: (12 x 16"), Frame: (18 ¾ x 25 ⅛ x 1 ¼")

RIP Audubon's Bighorn Sheep: After John James Audubon, 1845/2016
Artist cut and burnt hand-colored stone lithograph, etched glass funerary urn and ashes. Print: (21 x 22 ¼"), Frame: (29 ⅞ x 36 ⅛ x 1 ⅝")

RIP Antillean Giant Rice Rat: After F. Petter, 1999/2015
Artist cut and burnt photolithographic bookplate, etched glass urn, and ashes. (12 ⅞ x 9 ¾")

RIP Carolina Parakeet: After Theodore Jasper, 1881/2015
Artist cut and burnt chromolithographic print, etched glass urn, and ashes. (27 x 22 ¾") Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

RIP California Grizzly Bear: After Thomas Hill, 1888/2015
Artist cut and burnt photogravure from a painting by Thomas Hill published in 1888, etched glass funerary urn and ashes. Print: (15 ½ x 11 ½"), Frame: (29 ½ x 18 ¾")

RIP Ash Meadows Killifish: After David Starr Jordan, 1908/2014
Artist cut and burnt lithograph, etched glass urn, and ashes. (12 ⅞ x 10 ¼")

RIP Southern Florida Rainbow Snake: After John Edwards Holbrook, 1976/2015
Artist cut and burnt lithographic bookplate, etched glass urn, and ashes, (18 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15")

RIP Great Lake Ciscos: After Frank N. Blanchard, 1964/2014
Artist cut and burnt photographic book plates, etched glass urn, and ashes. (11 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ ")

RIP Scioto Madtom: After Duane Raver, 1884/2014
Artist cut and burnt xerographic print, etched glass urn, and ashes. (13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ ")

RIP Clear Lake Splittail, Rio Grande Bluntnose Shiner and Stumptooth Minnow: After Sarah Fink, 1985/2015
Artist cut and burnt signed artist proofs, etched glass urn, and ashes. (29 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ ")

RIP Anthony's Woodrat: After Eric Yensen, 2001/2015
Artist cut and burnt photolithographic bookplate, etched glass urn, and ashes. (13 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ ")

RIP Oaxacan Fringe-Limbed Treefrog: After David M. Dennis, 1970/2015
Artist cut and burnt lithographic book plate, etched glass urn, and ashes. (16 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ ")

RIP Ainsworth's Salamander: After James Lazello, 1998/2015
Artist cut and burnt chromolithograph, etched glass urn, and ashes. (12 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ ")

RIP Phantom Shiner: After Edward C. Theriot, 1982/2014
Artist cut and burnt photolithographic plate, etched glass urn, and ashes. Print: (5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9"), Frame: (9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ ")

RIP Endemic Harlequin or Stubfoot Toads of the Americas: After César Landazabal Mendoza, Marco Rada, Santiago Sánchez, and Ted R. Kahn, 2005/2015
Artist cut and burnt chromolithographic book plates, etched glass urn, and ashes. (20 x 32")

RIP Golden Toad: After Norman J. Scott Jr, 1967/2015
Artist cut and burnt chromolithograph, etched glass urn, and ashes. (10 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")
Collection of Victor Ballengée

RIP Green-Blossom Pearly Mussel: After A.E. Spreitzer, 1982/2014
Artist cut and burnt photographic book plate, etched glass urn, and ashes. (7 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ ")

RIP Eastern Cougar: After Randy Fehr, 1993/2015
Artist cut and burnt chromolithographic magazine cover "Keeper of the Creek" by Randy Fehr from Fur-Fish- Game (Volume 90, Number 12) published in Columbus, Ohio in December 1993. Private collection courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Brandon Ballengée (American, born 1974) is a visual artist, biologist and environmental educator based in Arnaudville, Louisiana. Since 1996, a central investigation focus has been the occurrence of developmental deformities and population declines among amphibians. In 2001, he was nominated for membership into Sigma XI, the Scientific Research Society. In 2009, Ballengée and SK Sessions published *Explanation for Missing Limbs in Deformed Amphibians* in the Journal of Experimental Zoology and received international media attention from the BBC and others. This scientific study was the inspiration for the book *Malamp: The Occurrence of Deformities in Amphibians* (published by Arts Catalyst & Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK) and a solo exhibition at the Royal Institution of Great Britain (London, England: 2010).

In 2011 he was awarded a Conservation Leadership Fellowship from the National Audubon Society's TogetherGreen Program (USA). In 2014 he received his Ph.D. in Transdisciplinary Art and Biology from Plymouth University (UK) in association with Zürich University of the Arts (Switzerland). He continued his amphibian research as a Visiting Scientist at McGill University (Montréal, Canada) from 2009 through 2015. Currently, he is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Museum of Natural Science at Louisiana State University ((Baton Rouge, LA), studying the impact on fish species from the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. This past summer he was a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) in Washington DC.

In the summer of 2013 the first career survey of Ballengée's work debuted at the Château de Chamarrande in Essonne (France), and travelled to the Museum Het Domein in Sittard (Netherlands) in 2014. Also in 2014 his monumental installation *Collapse* and the print series *Ghosts of the Gulf* were exhibited at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC. In 2016 a 20-year retrospective of his work was held at University of Wyoming Art Museum in Laramie, Wyoming. His work has previously been exhibited throughout the USA and internationally in 17 countries, including Canada, Argentina, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Russia, India, China, South Korea and Australia.

His art has been featured in several major US publications, including ARTnews, Art in America, The New York Times, New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine, Orion, Audubon Magazine, and Sculpture Magazine. Internationally, it was also featured in *Beaux Arts* (France), *Liberation* (France), *L'Œil* (France), *The Observer* (England), *The Guardian* (England), *Financial Times* (England), *BBC News* (England), *D'Ars* (Italy), *Domenica* (Italy), *Il Venerdì* (Italy), *The Sunday Guardian: New Dehli* (India) and others.



Artist and biologist Brandon Ballengée with his art piece *Collapse*.
Photo Editor/Amanda Palma

PRESENTED BY



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