

TopSpin
Artists of Western New York and Beyond

Betsy Potter: *Breaking Nature*

February 5 - July 1, 2012

Opening reception with artist talk at 3:00 p.m. Sunday, February 5, 2:00-4:00 p.m.



betsypotter

Polar Bear and Man (detail), 2009, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in.



Looking for Niagara, 2001, oil on hardboard, 15 x 29 in.

For Betsy Potter, a native Western New Yorker, the survival of the natural world is paramount. The works featured in *Breaking Nature* illustrate the complex relationship between humankind and the environment. Viewers sense an intensity of vision within Potter's works, through the use of symbolic imagery organized into complex narratives. "These paintings are about the fight between mankind and nature... a war is going on," Potter explains. Her paintings are staging grounds for tales that express nature's vulnerability, fragility and battle for survival in the face of industrialization.

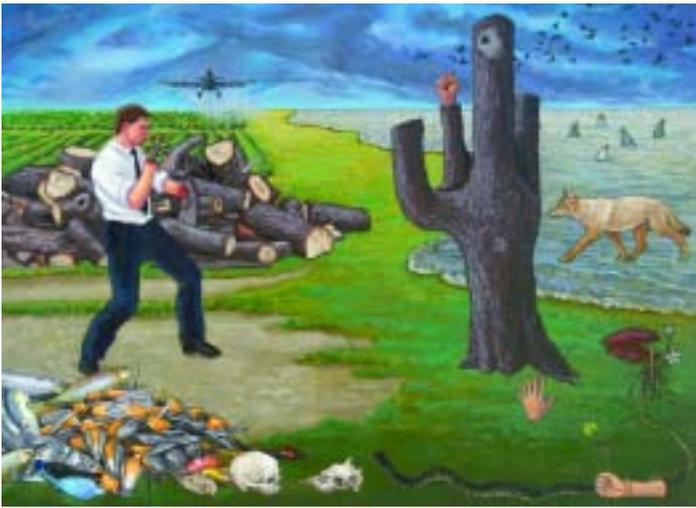
Potter includes intricate details in her works that viewers must look for carefully in order to decipher clues to a specific narrative or dialogue. Potter explains, "I make free associations with a concept of emotion, ritual or natural force that each element represents." Her free-associations combine animals and symbols to embody associations such as: Coyote=trickster; shark=menace or endangered species; crows=spiritual forces; cut down trees=habitat loss. Other elements, including oil derricks, polar ice melt and piles of dead fish are more self explanatory. Ultimately, Potter prefers viewers to work out what things mean for themselves.

In *Polar Bear and Man* (2009) and *Round 7* (2003), a male figure violently confronts elements of nature. For Potter, "The man symbolically represents humankind and civilization." In *Round 7* (2003), the hurried viewer might overlook the fact that the man's severed hand, located at the base of the tree, has six fingers which, for Potter, represents the act of mutation. The tree, cut back to the trunk, has been mutilated. Here, the battle between man and nature is, perhaps, a draw.

Looking for Niagara (2001) was inspired by a poem of the same title by Bob Baxter. This painting speaks to the beauty and fragility of the Niagara River. Potter splits the canvas vertically to offer viewers a before-and-after depiction of the river. The river, post-humankind's impact, is on the left and the right side represents pre-industrialization. We cannot help but take note of the lack of waterfowl on the left side, the bridge unfinished (or half-collapsed) and the impending storm approaching—again symbolizing nature's unbridled fury. Potter gestured past this work saying, "There used to be Bald Eagles nesting throughout this area... perhaps there will be some day again."

Her most recent work, and perhaps the most macabre, is *Schooner Michigan* (2011). This painting depicts a real-life event of unimaginable horror. In 1827, hotel proprietors of the Pavilion Hotel, Ontario House and the Eagle Hotel in Niagara Falls, NY staged a gruesome tourist stunt with the Schooner Michigan at Niagara Falls. The advertisement stated, "The Pirate Michigan with a cargo of ferocious wild animals (panthers, wild cats and wolves) will pass the great rapids and falls of Niagara on the 8th September 1827!" The schooner was decorated to look like a pirate ship with human-shaped mannequins tied to the deck.

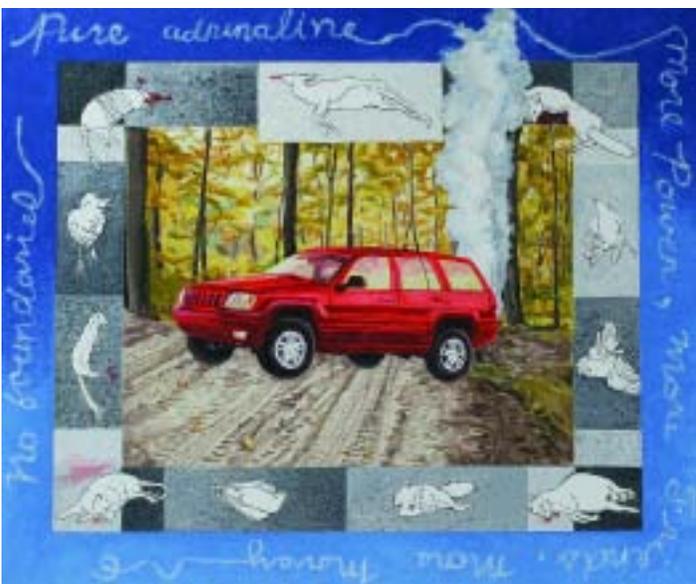
Contrary to the "ferocious wild animals" that were purportedly caged or chained to the deck; the animals actually aboard were a buffalo, two bears, two raccoons, a dog, a goose, two fox, fifteen geese and an eagle. At 6:00 p.m. on September 8, 1827, with a crowd of 10,000 spectators, the Michigan was released into the current and drifted towards the falls. As it reached the rapids, its hull was torn open and



Round 7, 2003, oil on hardboard, 18 x 24 in.



Yards, 2004, oil on hardboard, 24 x 33 in.



On/Off Road, 2006, oil on hardboard, 24 x 28 in.



Wolf and Hare, 2008, gouache on paper, 16 x 21 in.

began filling with water. The two bears jumped free into the rapids and swam to safety on Goat Island. When the schooner re-surfaced at the base of the falls, only a goose had survived and was caught by a Mr. Duggan.

Schooner Michigan (2011) highlights an aspect of humankind's attitude towards nature—that it is here for our entertainment, an endless supply of animals for our amusement. Although Potter has little interest in making historical paintings, particularly documenting an event this atrocious, after reading the story of the Schooner Michigan, "The tragic image of this event was burned into my mind, and I had to put it on canvas."

Potter utilizes her compositions to speak to the conflict between nature and humankind. *Polar Bear and Man* (2009) presents viewers with a suited man, complete with red power-tie, kick-boxing with a polar bear. Behind this battle, Potter splits the canvas in equal halves. The left side features symbols and elements of unmolested nature; while the right contains examples of humankind's negative impact on nature. Lastly, just above the arms of the fighters, with hands and

paws transplanted to each other, is an oceanic oil derrick. Crude oil's impact on nature and its necessity to civilization is not lost on any of us. An adolescent girl is also a reoccurring symbolic image. In *Polar Bear and Man* (2009), she is placed in an inflatable pool toy...floating unaware in the open sea, and in *Yards* (2004) she appears to engage the viewer with direct eye contact. For Potter, "She represents the innocence of the future."

In the late 1980s, Potter spent summers volunteering with on the New York Natural Heritage Program. The program's purpose was to find and catalog rare and endangered plant species across New York State. These experiences were the impetus for her poem *Wilderness* as well as many of the works featured in *Betsy Potter: Breaking Nature*. Her work is a synthesis of location, industrial invasion, corporate waste and the apparent submission of nature. Potter's paintings communicate both the fragility and resilience of nature, and its uncertain future.

Michael Beam, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions

Wilderness

by Betsy Potter

for Kathleen Raine and all who love the earth

Our land isn't totally swept of song
but I can see that it will be, Kathleen.
Daily it is sheared and scraped so
increasingly bare that soon
there will be nothing for us here
but to don binoculars and boots
and escape to lowland or ravine
too wet or steep to go to,
too wet or steep to be yet destroyed
where the earth could slide or swallow
but to go anyway lured and enchanted by
what might be there:
Once common, mysterious things

fragile survivors that cling to shear rock
or hide in deep shadow
shapes and patterns so varied they amaze.
No, we have not yet razed everything!
Beyond vast suburban runways,
past garden, park, and farm field, there lie
tiny earth pockets, remnants of what was
whose inhabitants dance and sing
of former more intricate worlds,
living testimony to nature's richness,
shining reminders of what we will not keep
in forgetfulness and sleep.

Betsy Potter

www.betsypottersart.com

Betsy Potter is an artist, poet and naturalist. She has been painting and drawing for over thirty years. Growing up in a small housing development that was built on and around farmland; her first experiences of nature came from wandering through old hedgerows, fallow and plowed fields. Though not as rich with diversity as places Potter has come to know over the years, it still provided enough to give her a strong love of the land.

While in her twenties, she discovered that she wanted to be an artist. Potter's education in art was somewhat unconventional. She has studied drawing, painting and printmaking at New York State University at Buffalo; Niagara County Community College, Sanborn, NY; and New York State University at Empire State College, Buffalo, NY. Expanding her art knowledge from books at the local library and trips to museums, there were also art lessons from her older sister.

Together with her partner Willie D'Anna, she has traveled to many regions of the United States and Canada to witness birds and the environments they occupy. Potter's professional experience includes teaching seminars in landscape painting and drawing for the Niagara Society of Artists. She has also demonstrated various media techniques such as cast plaster printmaking, egg tempera painting and textured acrylic painting for diverse artists groups and at regional arts education events.

EXHIBITIONS Solo exhibitions are indicated with an asterisk.

2011

Group of Twelve, Niagara Artists and Craftsmen Association Exhibition, Kenan Center, Lockport, NY

2010

Annual Members Exhibition, Carnegie Art Center, North Tonawanda, NY

2009

Not Forgotten, The Gallery of the Arts and Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, NY*

Annual Members Exhibition, Carnegie Art Center, North Tonawanda, NY

1996

Dream Tree, Williams Gallery, Rochester, NY*

1987

Niagara Society of Artists, Niagara Falls, NY

1986

Festival of Lights, Occidental Chemical Corporation Gallery, Niagara Falls, NY

A Sangster Celebration, Buscaglia-Castellani Art Gallery, Niagara University, NY

1984

Festival of Lights, Occidental Chemical Corporation Gallery, Niagara Falls, NY

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST All works are collection of the artist.

Betsy and Frida at Buckhorn, 2002, oil on hardboard, 20 x 16 in.

Critters, 2008, gouache on paper, 15 x 21 in.

Digger, 1999, oil on hardboard, 21 x 16 in.

Fire on Ice, 2008, gouache on paper, 18 x 18½ in.

Last Man, 2007, oil on hardboard, 24 x 19 in.

Looking for Niagara, 2001, oil on hardboard, 15 x 29 in.

On/Off Road, 2006, oil on hardboard, 24 x 28 in.

Polar Bear and Man, 2009, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in.

Polar Bear and Man Study 2, 2008, gouache on paper, 15 x 20 in.

Ribbon Seal, 2008, gouache on paper, 14 x 21 in.

Round 7, 2003, oil on hardboard, 18 x 24 in.

Schooner Michigan, 2011, oil on canvas, 40 x 52 in.

Schooner Michigan Study 1, 2007, gouache on paper, 12 x 22 in.

Schooner Michigan Study 2, 2010, gouache on paper, 22 x 29 in.

Tree, 2008, gouache on paper, 14 x 21 in.

Wolf and Hare, 2008, gouache on paper, 16 x 21 in.

Yards, 2004, oil on hardboard, 24 x 33 in.

TopSpin

Artists of the Buffalo/Niagara Region

The museum's Tops Gallery—dedicated to the exhibition of work by local and regional artists—presents the **TopSpin** series. **TopSpin** features a broad range of visual expressions, varied in media as well as message, and focuses mainly on new and emerging artists.

TopSpin is made possible through the generous Support of Tops Friendly Markets, LLC.

TOPS



This exhibit is made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, Celebrating 50 years of building strong, creative communities in New York State's 62 counties.

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