

Carrie Marill, *Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible*, 2009, gouache on paper, 22 x 30". Photo courtesy of the artist

## An Eye on Arizona

### A Survey of Museum and Gallery Exhibitions in Phoenix, Scottsdale and Tempe

by D. Dominck Lombardi

The last time I set foot in Arizona was in 1977, when I traveled from New York to California in a green and white VW bus. In those days, I was interested in camping out under the 'Big Sky,' seeing the Rockies, the Grand Canyon... Today, 32 years later, I find myself back in central Arizona with an eye for a contemporary art scene and I wasn't disappointed. I began my tour at the ASU Art Museum in Tempe. Among a number of excellent shows there, is curator Heather Lineberry Sealy's

*Nowhere to Hide: Three Artists in the Desert*. The exhibition, which looks squarely at sustainability and waste through the eyes of the artists, is both powerful and poignant. Richard Lerman is a multi-disciplinary installation artist whose work tells the tale of the abruptly changing local water supply. There are variously sized stacks of bottles that register the big swings in rainfall; recorded 'sounds' of indigenous desert plants as they bend against the omnipresent dry winds, while the main structure of the installation, a pair of large power tower shaped structures made of thorny stalks that support spans of copper wire (copper is a local industry) together suggest the precarious state of local affairs. Is Lerman posing a question, regarding

what we believe we need to survive? Or, is he asking us to think more about what we actually need to sustain life, as he reminds us of the power and preciousness of nature.

Julie Anand spends a lot of her time gathering debris. It would not be unusual to spot her on the side of some highway collecting everything and anything that loses its luster or purpose, as it finds its way out the window of a passing vehicle, and onto the roadside. You see, Anand wants us to know what she is finding, and she wants us to think about why we think it is no big deal to just toss this stuff anywhere we see fit. She does this by scanning or photographing each object, then assembling these images as a digital collage in the form of fine, large

format prints. The fact that she sets the multitude of images against a pristine white backdrop makes everything look clinical and sterile, as if to say, "Here, take a look, there's no risk of cut or infection. But remember, you touched these things before, and they're still here." Yet, as art, as a visual narrative, these works will fill your thoughts like speed-reading through a novel. Anand's directness of her approach produces a great clarity of vision, and this abridged version of consumerist waste is a powerful tale.

I find the work of the third artist Carrie Marill to be the most engaging since she appropriates a type of illustration that I was exposed to as a child. The artist's process is to scan educational style, 1940s and 50s book illustrations which she 'updates' by painting in 'green' references or symbols such as wind energy towers, recycle waste bins, conscientious bicyclists and solar panels. On the same surface, she adds the antithesis of such idealistic thinking such as cellular towers installed in trees, or aged nuclear power plants spewing radioactive iodine laden smoke in the middle of a farming area. As a result, the battle between the eco-friendly and the big bad problem becomes this Surreal, seductive, choreographed reality. I appreciate most of all, the universality of Marill's language and sense of humor as both will keep most engaged long enough to get the message.

A second exhibition curated by John Spiak titled *I'm Keeping an Eye on You* features the work of 10 dedicated video artists. I can only tell you, since I was unable to spend enough time to view the entire show, that I viewed only one video in any great depth. *The Interrogation* by Michael Mohan is his reaction to the urging of teachers to question "suspicious" students to determine if they are potential mass murderers – this in the wake of the concern that followed the Virginia Tech shooting. Instead of formulating subtly probing questions, the artist asked an

actor – a 'school counselor' – to pose questions that are, in many instances, absurdly inappropriate and insensitive. Preying on the student's anxieties and lack of confidence, the counselor even asked the unsuspecting teens to write their most personal secret, which she revealed to the camera after they left the room. This, after she promised to burn, and never read their secret notes. The combination of the self-consciousness of the teen years with the awkwardness of the whole set up will make any viewer remember the rawness of their own growing pains – something very few of us will want to relive!

The Tempe Center for the Arts, which boasts both visual and performance based offerings in its two year young lakefront home has an exhibition titled *Faces*. Catering to a more general audience, this show features many aspects, or, to be more exact, purposes of creating a representation of a human face from the classic portrait to the

abstract or Surreal, to forensic 3-D models gleaned from skulls to produce the identity of an anonymous skull.

The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art has two excellent exhibitions. The first is a traveling show that originated at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, called *Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth* which features the *Soundsuites* of former Alvin Ailey dancer Nick Cave. The main room of the exhibition holds dozens of vibrantly colored, and inventively constructed and designed costumes, which, when used in Cave's energetic and ritualistic performances make distinctive sounds. Besides Cave's obvious genius with color and texture, and his ability to creatively repurpose old fabrics and objects, you have to love his innate ability to blend African ritual costumes with pop cultural references in a way which expands the two to limits previously unimagined, while maintaining a hint familiarity. A second room installation includes some



*Nick Cave, Meet Me at the Center of the Earth, 2009, installation view at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art*

still shots of the artist in costume, and a video of past performances, which makes clear how seductive the movements, and sounds are when Cave briskly and methodically performs in these stellar works.

A second group exhibition *Looking Through the Other End of a Telescope*, curated by Claire Schneider, Cassandra Coblentz and Claire Carter, includes the uncanny handy-work of two artists Jon Fisher & Jeff Shore in a piece titled *Reel to Reel* (2009). Here, the magic of film

making comes full circle, literally, within the constructed installation of wood, wires, Plexiglas, electric motor, tiny hand-made room and landscapes, turntables, bulbs, computers, speakers, video projector, levers, pullies, surveillance cameras, etc. that yield a dreamy, moving, pinhole photography looking, alternative black and white world. It's hard to describe the visceral effect of the story that unfolds in the resulting film, but I was reminded of the first time I saw *The Wizard of Oz*,

and this, albeit without the big budget and cast, comes pretty close to that magical instance when reality and fantasy become one.

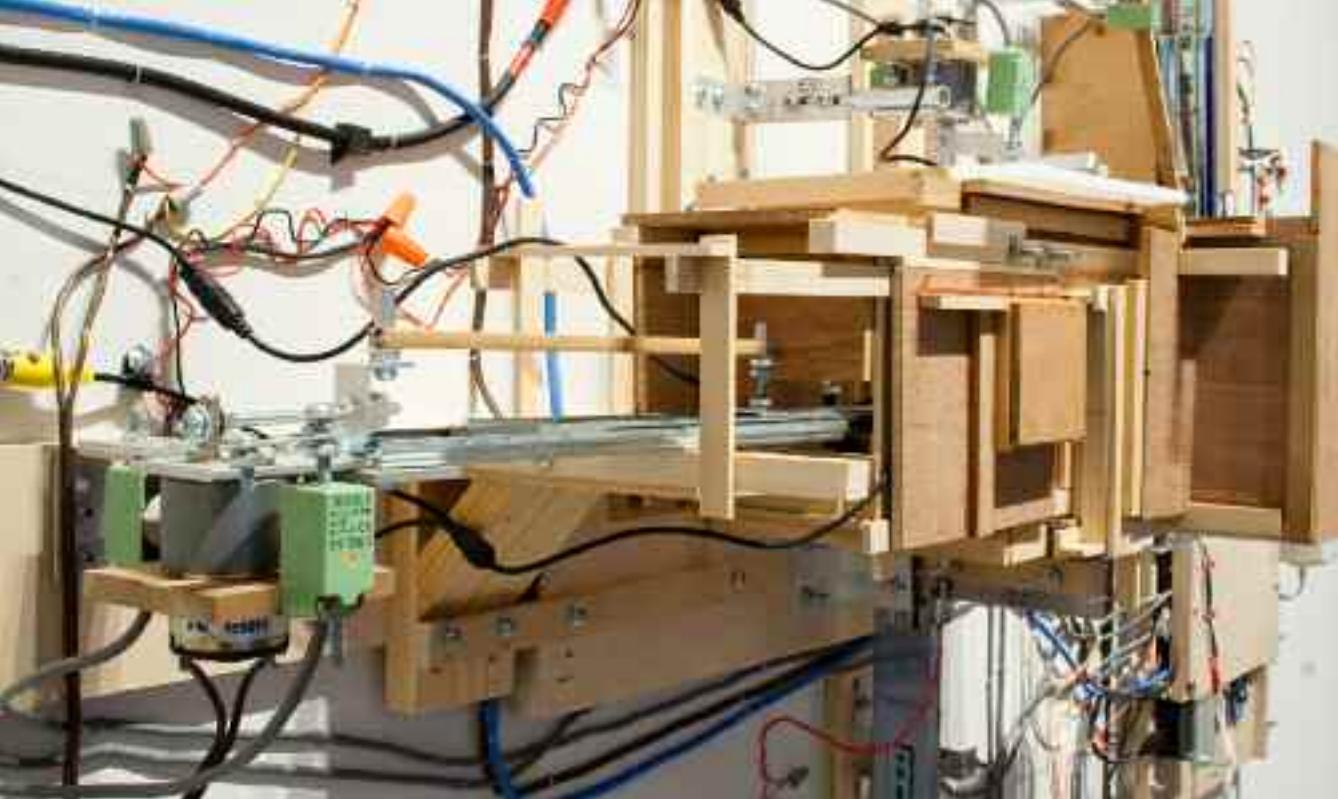
In addition to the museums, there are also excellent galleries in central Arizona. The exhibition of Mayme Kratz's one-person show at Lisa Sette Gallery in Scottsdale is one such example. Working with dried plants and insects embedded in thick pools of resin, Kratz creates a sort of spiritual, albeit dark, landscape. In seeing the nasty looking tarantula hawk suspended in resin in the work titled *Certain Day* (2009), I am immediately reminded of those prehistoric fossilized insects you sometimes see that get caught, frozen in amber. Delicate, yet uncompromising, Kratz plays with our emotions with the simplest of palettes and fewest of elements as her compositions reveal a dramatic, beautiful and fantastical natural world.

The second, and much larger Bentley Projects gallery is housed in 22,000 square foot space in Phoenix. Here, you will find a show by the newly formed dynamic duo of Hector Ruiz and Dose. What is important to note, is these two artists had never met before this collaboration, let alone work together. Dose, who is a seasoned graffiti artist, and Ruiz, who deals with social and economic issues in his art, makes for an excellent paring. Most of the works are quite large and surprisingly fluid as the artists worked with no particular strategy or plan. Vibrant and volatile color schemes complimented by bold juxtapositions of symbols and styles, as is the case in *Adam and Steve* (2009), is just one fantastic result. With works like *Dirty Laundry* (2009), there is a particularly strange cacophony of lines, marks, and effects that should have been dizzying, but are not, since there is a seamless interactive awareness in their intent. I suspect their success is also due to the total freshness of the compositions, and the potency and richness of the colors and patterns that keeps it all together.

The third quality exhibition, in



Hector Ruiz, *Adam & Steve*, 2009, 101 x 137", mixed media on canvas



*Jon Fisher & Jeff Shore, Reel to Reel, 2009, installation view of Looking Through the Other End of a Telescope at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art*



*Randy Slack, something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, 2009, 90 x 192", enamel, china marker and acrylic on four luan panels*

what can be best described as an exclusively 'First Friday Gallery' in Phoenix's Legend City Studios is an exhibition titled *Chaos Theory X*. The importance of this show is that it features an excellent overview of the emerging and established talent in Central Arizona. One large mixed media work in particular, "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue" by Randy Slack, dominates the space as it pits a paint-by-number version of Da Vinci's *Last Supper* against such Pop icons as Homer Simpson, and some devilishly evil Disney characters. Here, a highly diverse use of techniques and theories are tamed by an 'incompleteness' in the painter's approach, while the promise of violence or clashing ideology keeps you engaged. The anchor to all of this madness is the dairy industry's 'REAL' logo, which, when placed here, brings forth how the various interpretations of reality or 'truth' can erupt and create conflict.

The Phoenix Art Museum is home to a wonderful collection of over 17,000 pieces of art, including very memorable works of Contemporary and

Modern Art such as Joseph Stella's dazzlingly painted *Flowers, Italy* (1931) featuring a multitude of techniques and textures that are quite exciting to the eye, and invigorating to the mind.

An exhibition by curator Becky Senf titled *Face to Face: 150 Years of Photographic Portraiture* is comprised of a wonderful variety of photography that puts forth the many aspects of the portrait. With works like Harry Callahan's earliest, 'Brownie Camera' sized, yet dramatic works when he had just begun his photography career, to Mickey Pallas' photograph that sets up the ultimate ideal scenario for 'all' Americans (just to sell a car) in *Buick Convertible and Family, Chicago* (1959). Yet what is most noteworthy about this show is the way in which the work is paired or placed, and how the background information that can be read on neat display cards enhances that presentation. For instance, there are two portraits of the same person, taken in the same day by two very well known photographers. Edward Weston's *Charis, Lake Ediza* (1937) is highly erotic for its day, as Charis' lover in Weston took it. A far more platonic

portrait taken by Ansel Adams, takes a more reserved view of the subject in the work titled *Charis Weston, Minaret Area, Sierra Nevada, California* (1937). Aside from the obvious differences in the pose, there is also an intense gaze at the photographer in the Weston portrait, while Charis looks away, almost uncomfortably, in the Adams version.

A second show curated by Dennita Sewell in Ellman Fashion Design Gallery follows Patsy Tarr's love of the designs of Geoffrey Beene in an exhibition titled *Geoffrey Beene: Trapeze*. Aside from the fact that this 30-year 'collaboration' between client and designer is so abundant and complete, and the creative way in which these works were displayed in an open and fluid layout weren't enough – the exhibition also includes a black and white film of some of the fashions and models which comes off looking like a magazine shoot directed by Federico Fellini.

Tempe, Scottsdale, Phoenix – these are more than resort towns. They are also places where you can feed your mind and soul.



Mayme Kratz. All Things becoming Stars and Dust, 2009, resin, cicada wings on panel, 36 x 72"