

Susan Detwiler: *Feral*

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Susan DETWILER: *Feral*

Gil McELROY

I've a large hedge separating my rural property from that of my neighbour, and in the springtime, it plays host to the nests of several different bird species. Spring days are striated with the never-ending flights of adult birds into and out of the hedge, bringing food to the insatiably hungry young hidden deep inside.

Life, it seems, thrives along the edges of things, in those fecund zones where water meets land, where forest meets field—even where hedge

meets lawn. The latter is the kind of place where Susan Detwiler locates her sculptural and video work: that intermedial zone where Nature runs smack up against the artifice and contrivance of human desire, want, and even need. My hedge—hardly an indigenous thing out here in south-eastern Ontario—is very much a part of that kind of intermedial zone, not, in the end, very different from a road on which squirrels and raccoons (and the odd bird) end up flattened beneath the wheels of cars.

So our lives, then, are all about the incursions upon what little is left of

Nature, and what we encounter in Detwiler's recent gallery installation *Feral* is the metaphorically pointed end of an aesthetic stick, jabbing us with keenly wrought reminders of our impoverished relationships with all that is, in fact, authentic about our world.

We can start with *Blinds* (2001), two sculptural works that instantly evoke the hunter-prey relationship that comprises part of one sub-culture of humanity's entanglement with the world. These pieces are, of course, hunting blinds—places from which to observe and (hopefully) simultaneously not be observed. Essentially two vertical tubular things of cloth held in place with a plastic framework, one is high enough in which to stand, the other meant for sitting (and is fitted with a small folding camp stool, for gallery visitors are allowed—even encouraged—to physically enter into these things). Both blinds are clad in the patterns of camouflage that would, with great optimism, cause these artefacts to blend into the environment of, say, a forest. Here in the gallery, they of course do no such

thing: the camouflage patterns accomplish quite the reverse, thereby ensuring that the artefactual status of these objects is overtly front and centre. Detwiler situates these blinds so as to frame very specific views: the mesh-covered window of each looks out upon a small cloth appliqué cut-out of an animal shape (a bear and what appears to be a running dog) affixed to an adjacent wall. The life-and-death seriousness part and parcel of the hunt for millennia has been reduced, here, to utterly benign, tamed and highly sanitized caricatures. In the end, it's not much to see for all the effort of participating in these pieces, and it's actually rather ridiculous—but utterly meaningful for being so.

Seed Pack (2005) is the central artefact from the video work *Seedwalk*, one of two video elements comprising the exhibition. Detwiler customized a standard hiker's backpack so that its aluminum frame now supports a study cloth bag filled with bird seed (and in case the point might be missed, the off-the-rack textile of the bag is imprinted with the images of



Susan DETWILER, *Snow Suit*, 2005. Polyester, flannel. Photo: Rick Kowalczykowski.

Susan DETWILER, *Blinds*, 2001. Polyester and cotton fabrics, vinyl netting, plastic frame. Photo: Rick Kowalczykowski.



Susan DETWILER, *Seed Pack*, 2005.
Hiking pack, bird seed. Photo: Rick Kowalczykowski.

different bird species). In the video, she walks a path through the woods with a bottom hole in the bag slowly depositing a trail of bird seed behind her. For exhibition purposes, Detwiler situates the backpack on the floor set atop a large mound of bird seed that comprises the terminus of a trail of seed that sinuously snakes off to a corner of the gallery space. No risk of avian life in here; just the possible poaching of mice that might have made the gallery an intermedial zone.

Snow Suit (2005) is artefactually part and parcel of the second video work shown as part of *Feral*. It's a quilted white snow suit—a hooded thing with tight black cuffs at the wrists and ankles to keep moisture from infiltrating—that is the kind of camouflaged stuff worn by hunters and even soldiers for winter use. In the video work *Exercises in the Bush #1*, Detwiler is shown maneuvering her way through a winter landscape, stopping in her tracks at various points in an effort to disappear and blend into the background. She's marginally successful in her efforts, but here in the gallery, the suit—arranged on the floor in a kind of a kneeling posture—is entirely out of its element, an empty husk of pure artefactuality disengaged from context and consequently stripped clean of purpose and function. Here, it's just some odd looking figurative thing seemingly on the verge of total physical collapse, abandoned by that which gave it form and substance. Had Detwiler's video piece not claimed a prior context, *Snow Suit* could easily be likened to the transformative chrysalis from which a butterfly has emerged and departed.

But the possibilities of metaphor can't happen in the face of competing visual demands that restrict the range of readings.

Forest Growth After Lisper (2005) sculpturally articulates a reimagining of an Arthur Lisper work, *Sketch, Forest Growth*. Lisper's two-dimensional rendering of a three-dimensional scene from nature is reinflated, redimensionalized by Detwiler courtesy a selection of artefacts to stand in place of the natural. And so outdoor apparel like scarves, toques, hats, socks, jackets and blankets accumulate on a wooden chair that itself hosts a canvas-clad canteen, then spill out across the floor in a meander that echoes the shapes, colours and contours of the landscape in the Lisper original. The clothing is itself recontextualized via the insertion of a number of small model trees at various critical locations. And *voilà*: an arguably allegorical construction utilizing Arthur Lisper's work as source material. We're three degrees removed, here, from Nature, but Detwiler, via all things artefactual, successfully proffers the possibilities of a re-engagement with the non-artefactuality of the world from a distance.

And from just such a distance, the strengths of *Feral* make their whole case. ←

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Susan DETWILER, *Forest Growth After Lisper*, 2005. Wood chair, canvas bag, outdoor wear, model trees. Photo: Rick Kowalczykowski.