Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed

Sarah Briland
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Sarah Briland
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Washington University in St. Louis, 2003

Director: Jack Wax, Professor, Craft/Materials Studies Department

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

NATURALIS HISTORIA, RECONSTRUCTED

By Sarah Briland, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

Major Director: Jack Wax, Glass Area Head, Craft/Material Studies Department

When Pliny the Elder wrote *Naturalis Historia* around 70 A.D., the idea of natural history contained and connected biology, geology, and mineralogy with the history of painting and sculpture. Art was an extension of the natural world as its materials were extracted from plants, animals, and, particularly, mined and quarried pigments, stone, and metals. In my developing body of work, *Incidents of Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed*, I combine wasps’ nests, architectural fragments, and other found objects excavated from my surrounding environment with elements of glass that resemble lichen, crystallization, and geologic specimens. These works simulate artifacts of an alternative history; one in which the divergent histories of art, craft, biology, and geology are again united.
There is a singular convergence between my personal history and my studies in glassworking, art history, cultural landscapes, and natural sciences that is amalgamated through my work in the studio. These diverse trajectories are interwoven through my art practice as I seek to engage people in a critical dialogue about history, materiality, and our relationship with the natural environment and the built world. My yearning to understand the complex, layered histories underlying the meanings of place has led me to study earth sciences and landscape architecture as well as art. I have also worked in the fields of historic preservation and geology, and the experiences of being embedded in these varied discourses, studying the landscape through a variety of lenses, has profoundly shaped my artwork and my worldview, allowing me to shift between different perspectives and ideologies.

My interest in analyzing diverse and even mutually exclusive views has roots in my childhood experiences. Born in West Virginia and raised in a devout Pentecostal family, I grew up in a zealous culture steeped in eschatology, spiritual healing, and glossolalia. The physical world belied a deeper spiritual realm, one that could be interpreted through scripture, signs, and prophesies. As an adolescent I delved into the study of philosophy and natural sciences and began to understand the physical world in a radically different way, through reason and empirical data. Thus, I gained a deep-seated understanding of the methodologies of both belief and critical inquiry. As I began to question the religious strictures of my upbringing, I developed an internal dialectic in which I constantly pivoted between opposing worldviews. I continue to seek ways to synthesize these internal conflicts and to find meaning and a place of my own in this world. My
quest to discover the limits of my own understanding and to examine the conditions required for belief has become a lifelong exercise in hermeneutics.

In a world beset with niches and specializations, I believe that artists are uniquely free to absorb knowledge from various fields and find common territories between the seemingly disparate. This is a role similar in many ways to the natural philosopher in previous centuries, as both an observer of physical phenomena and an interpreter of subjective experience. My work is a syncretism of studio practice and the methodologies of scientific research and surveying that explores the fractures between human knowledge and the physical world. Through material experimentation and inciting anarchic chemical reactions within the environment of the kiln, I discover information about the properties of matter and metamorphosis.

I am deeply interested in the presence and meaning within material itself, what Robert Smithson referred to as the infraphysical. Glass is a material unlike any other with characteristics of both liquid and solid matter. It can imitate dust, ice, crystallization, a geologic specimen, or an oil slick. The techniques of glassworking evoke geological processes as they are based on heat, gravity, and time. In my work glass becomes a way of both transforming matter and of visualizing time through accretion. I employ the unique physical properties of glass to alter found objects and shift our perspective of the familiar. My process begins with a given structure: an object collected or excavated from my surroundings, such as an architectural remnant, a slab of stone, or a chunk of rotting wood. The found object is a core sample that I extrapolate in order to project a broader view of the landscape.

The objects I transform already contain evidence of history. I compound that history with crystallization as a manifestation of time and entropy. This correlation is part of a long tradition
including Robert Smithson’s iconic earthwork *Spiral Jetty*, J.G. Ballard’s influential novel *The Crystal World*, and Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophical treatise *The World as Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer particularly considered the crystal as a form of life that hovers between our distinctions of living and inanimate. He saw in its formation and fractal growth a “Will” but one that is merely “the corpse of… momentary life.”¹ Through the materiality of my sculpture, I investigate the interstitial space between the living and the inanimate, between growth and decay, between the abandoned, uninhabited places and the colonies of life that thrive among the ruins.

In 2012, I took up William Carlos Williams’ six-volume, *definitely unfinished*² entropic poem *Paterson* as a methodology for representing place. I began with particulars like the waterfall, the central recurring theme of *Paterson*. In my work, *A Slow Fall*, (figures 1-3) the waterfall is transformed into a frozen drip of glass oozing out of a rusty keyhole in a fragment of a door, precariously perched on another piece of detritus, a fractured brick. Pooled below is a dark slick with some kind of life bubbling in it, or perhaps it is an ooze that has crystallized and formed a surreal microcosmic landscape. In constructing this scene I filtered my personal experiences of surveying the cultural landscape, maintaining a petroleum resources archive, and untold hours sitting among vials of crude oil at work while watching images of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill broadcast through the media.

² I apply the term used by Duchamp to describe The Large Glass to Williams’ *Paterson* because the documentation of city through his epic poem was a Sisyphean task that he took on with full awareness of its impossibility and as a means of demonstrating the limits of representation while also employing that limited set to a sublime end.
Figure 1. *A Slow Fall*, 2012

Figures 2 & 3. *A Slow Fall*, 2012, details
Paterson has played a role in my development both directly and indirectly through the work of Robert Smithson. In a peculiar turn of fate, the poet, Williams, was also Robert Smithson’s pediatrician. Aside from this coincidence, Williams’ literary work had a profound influence on Smithson and both A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey, and Asphalt Rundown specifically reference Paterson. Photos of these works and Smithson’s Spiral Jetty had an early impact on my understanding of what art could mean in the landscape. I have returned to Smithson’s work and Collected Writings many times over the years but, while doing fieldwork and archiving geoscience data, Smithson’s Non-sites became particularly pertinent. His representation of specific sites via maps, diagrams, schema, and material specimens in the context of another place- in his case, the gallery or museum- was a familiar dialectic at the Geological Survey.

Working with the Survey’s databases I assisted in the deconstruction of the site into the irreducible constituents of the Turring machine: True and False. Qualitative methods are generally less favored because they are more difficult to analyze, archive, and extrapolate, and thus fall by the wayside over time. Scribbled field notes and hand-drawn maps give way to a constant stream of datapoints. A snapshot parsed along delimited boundaries is substituted for the flux of the Real, and the false trails, the just-missed, the intuited, the hidden and unobservable become the unresolved ends that are heaped up in the category of alternatives not taken up, as expressed in the diagrams of Charles Renouvier (figure 4). My studio practice is a means of exploring alternative approaches to understanding place and dissecting the language of representation.

While artists began patently undermining the veracity of representation in the 19th century, natural scientists took it up as a method of dealing with structures, systems, and places too vast to be presented outside of maps, cross sections, and models. The visual language of geology is beguiling in its attempts to represent place and advocate hypotheses of the dynamic forces at play between the biosphere and lithosphere. I have investigated these languages through printmaking in the past but during graduate school I have developed parallels through objects, culminating recently in the series Untitled Compositions (Figures 5 & 6). Visual hierarchies are presented and relationships implied between glass capillary mosaics, found objects, and puddles of resin-like amber glass. Just as geologists have demonstrated that the source of Baltic amber

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Pettena, "Conversation in Salt Lake City", Domus, November 1972, 298.

lies in the forests of the unfathomably distant past and that the coalfields around my hometown are the captured energy of a previous world, I imagine relationships between the disparate elements I have collected and created and put forward these reconstructions as specimens and models in the gallery.

Figure 5. *Untitled Composition IV*, 2013
I want to share my persistent vision of the world as a place both familiar and utterly strange; after all, who would believe, if he did not already know that the Eagle comes from an egg? Just as Ovid depicted in his *Metamorphoses*, I comprehend the environment, natural and manmade, as a teeming jungle of interactions in continual flux. This ceaseless transference of energy from one entity to another, and the boundless shifts in scale, granularity, and time stifle our understanding. We have constructed models and systems to extract information in the hopes that the Nature of Things will yield results, give way to our study, yet, as Foucault demonstrated

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through the example of the naming of species by Linnaeus and his ilk, such systems of knowledge do more to structure human thought than reveal truth.  

Similarly, I am compelled to wonder how we draw meaning from observations and how my own failures and misinterpretations of things beget new meanings. Objects, whether cultural artifacts or natural specimens, are touchstones for ideas. Philosopher of natural sciences, D.R. Oldroyd, points out that even geologic specimens are human artifacts in the sense that they are “abstracted- or extracted- from their original situations, and are commonly presented so as to substantiate a particular point of view. […] In this way the core library shares a predicament with museology in general, as it displays objects in a particular framework- espousing human theories, ideas out of the original context- be it cultural or natural- in which they formed.”

The wondrous and incredible variability of nature makes the determination of true relationships and correct interpretations a feat that can only be mastered by small degrees and great humility. Few histories illustrate this better than the history of the interpretation of fossils. The original meaning of fossil simply meant “dug up” and from Aristotle to the nineteenth century the term was applied to “any distinctive objects or materials dug up from the earth or found lying on the surface.” Great thinkers studied and wrote extensively about the phenomena of rocks that resembled living organisms. Many early geologists made painstaking surveys and maps, collected specimen, and interpreted fossils in such a way as to “prove” the Deluge. Still others concluded that fossil organisms were growing within the rock, as seminal ideas taking

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form, metamorphosing within the living body of the earth itself. Aristotle, Avicenna, and Albert of Saxony in turn proposed the theory of a “petrifying fluid” or “petrifying agency” - a force at work within the earth and flowing throughout the universe that turned organisms into stone. Fossilization and lithification were considered only part of the evidence for this force; hailstones and meteorites demonstrated that it existed in the heavens, corals and calcareous algae were manifestations of it in the sea, pearls and gallstones proved that stone could even form within the bodies of animals and man.

If the history of science demonstrates anything, it is that interpretations of data are in a continual state of play. Over the centuries even the most rigorous observations of natural phenomena have led to misguided or mythical interpretations, and despite our current mass of technical and empirical knowledge, often the answers still elude us. Such is the case with fossils, where there is still a large contingent of specimens that resist categorization; they may be “true” fossils of organic matter or mineralogical specimens that merely resemble once-living things. These specimens are termed problematica: objects of unknown origin.

In the microcosm of the kiln I generate my own problematica. Casting is akin to fossilization, generating a likeness by translating form via a matrix into a new substance. Casting and kilnworking processes allow me to transfigure found objects and to enact and witness the metamorphosis of matter by the geologic forces of heat, time, and gravity. Through these microcosms I can encounter geologic deep time on an intimate and personal scale.

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The pouring of honey in my thesis installation, *Incidents of Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed*, provides another alternative experience of time. The honey pour serves as a kind of timepiece, one that is situational and reacts to the microclimatic fluctuations of its environment’s temperature and humidity. Honey is a miraculous and strange substance: a vital material made by insects, a source of energy and sustenance, and- in a sense- ageless, as a foodstuff that never ruins or goes rancid. I consider it a symbolic energy and agent of change in my systems, like the petrifying force envisioned by Aristotle.

Alongside the basin with honey flowing into it sits an artifact of unknown origin. It appears like a calcified relic dredged from the deep sea or a transfigured form buried at Pompeii. There is no way of telling that it is in fact honey fired into glass and subsequently excavated from ash and plaster. On the floor beneath the altar-like pedestal lay other elements of transmogrification, fragments of decomposing Ionic capitals that are crystallizing and melting away. Like the honey, these forms are not static but slowly morphing and rusting in the atmosphere. The fire-scaled iron is a site of crystallization and growth; a tar seep pools within the hollow of one capital as it becomes host to various alchemical life forms.
Figure 7. Incidents of Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed, 2013
Figure 8. *Incidents of Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed*, 2013, detail

Figure 9. *Incidents of Naturalis Historia, Reconstructed*, 2013, detail
Just as the universe was born with “the total arsenal of entropy already at war within it,” these specimens show evidence of deterioration, oxidation, and crystallization. The closed systems I present are embedded, like us, within an entropic condition where chance plays the vital role. Chance is invoked when I encounter the found objects I collect while surveying the landscape, and it is the unforeseeable chance interactions where the manmade and the natural feed off of each other and develop into something else that propels my study. I consider my art practice a form of praxis: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.” In this body of work I am reviving Pliny’s methodology by fusing elements from nature with art objects and blurring the boundaries that separate cultural practices from the environment. I seek to re-orient our understanding of art as a deeply embedded impulse within the natural world.

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Works Cited


VITA

Sarah Ellen Briland was born on April 23, 1980, in Cabell County, West Virginia. She graduated from Huntington High School in 1998. In 2003, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture and Printmaking from Washington University in St. Louis, where she was the Conway Scholar. She subsequently worked at the Kentucky Heritage Council, the State Historic Preservation Office, and at the Kentucky Geological Survey, at the University of Kentucky.