

September 9 - October 8, 2006

Oakland University Art Gallery

Co-curated by **Kevin Ewing** and **Dick Goody**

Kevin Ewing

interview by Dick Goody

What are the most exciting things happening in contemporary art right now?

Gary Panter released another Jimbo story. I saw the Whitney Biennial in the spring – it blew. Rubens had a couple recent retrospectives in Europe, which I missed. I’ve been looking at Charles Ray, Mike Kelley, Tom Friedman, Paul McCarthy, Inka Essenhigh, Gary Baseman, Doctor Who. Is any of that exciting?

How did you select the artists for this exhibition?

I first saw Brian’s work in an Ann Arbor show we were both in - it kind of creeped me out. I like the fastidiousness of Evan’s work - plus he makes an incredible guacamole, which I’ll force him to make for the opening. I like Matt’s barbed-wire sense of humor and anything to do with plastic robot men.

What does the title mean?

I wasn’t thinking about sculpture when I picked the artists, I hadn’t considered them sculptors – I still consider myself a painter. But now that I see them together, it’s obvious this work raises questions about what constitutes sculpture. There’s an overlap, the boundaries aren’t as clear anymore.

I think there’s a fracture between what you make (the product), which is often lush and sexy, and the ideas from which they come, which in our conversations always seems rather ponderous and subtle – yet the work is anything but. Why is that?

If you think you can always explain precisely what it is you’re doing in the studio, then nine times out of ten your art is probably crap. In the end, the artifact you end up with doesn’t need to have anything to do with what you were thinking about when you made it - in fact, it’s probably better if it doesn’t.

Do you think of your sculpture in terms of being an image or as a sign – or is it something metaphysical?

Does it matter? I’m always thinking about everything - life, death, art, sex, time, existence. I’m not making images, not even the drawings. They’re objects first, which can be perceived in a variety of ways - as an artifact, as a sign, or even as a simulacrum; it’s all in there. I suppose it’s metaphysical, but it’s also magical.

Are you saying we live in a magical world?

I’m saying there’s a busload of inexplicable stuff going on in life that I think art has the ability to tap into a whole lot better than say, accounting, or philosophy.

Contemporary art has no disciplinary boundaries any more, so where in your mind does that place sculpture in the context of painting?

Painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking - whatever - they’re all just a means to an end.

So if you’re not a painter or sculptor or image-maker, what’s happening?

I’m trying to figure something out, come to a resolution - so I make things - but I just end up with more questions. On any given day all I’m doing is opening up another can of existential worms.

The word “faux” comes to mind when I think of your work. Is it something ideal or real or is it a simulation?

Faux fur is not a copy of actual fur, with all its defects, but a copy of an idealized form of real fur. When I depict a deer or an elephant they’re idealized forms - idealized signs, of those animals within the work. But the work is real - the artifacts and the environments I create are not virtual – they’re the real thing.

Do you think that some contemporary artists get away with murder?

You want names? - The Chapman brothers, Damien Hirst, Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, David Salle, Tracey Emin, Laura Owens, Hal Foster – he’s not an artist - the Whitney Biennial, most of Chelsea. Nobody really gives a damn about anything anymore. Rome fell, and so will America. Until then, we’re stuck with vanity, narcissism and terrorism.

Jasper Johns said: Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. Do you think there is much of that sensibility behind this show or is it something different?

I think Evan, Brian and I are more interested in materials than objects, and about doing something with them as opposed to doing something to them. Take a material, do something with it. Even though Matt works with objects, he’s taking those objects and doing something with them, not to them.

Sometimes I wonder: are people going to get this work? That wasn’t the case with the Kristen Beaver exhibition – everybody got it, but it might not be the case here. Does this work have something universal for everyone or do people need to know about contemporary art to get it?

It’s up to the viewer. If I have to spell everything out, I might as well go back to designing deli signs. I’m supposed to be an artist, not an illustrator.

Is there something fundamentally different between someone like you who works with soft materials and someone working in metal?

Not fundamentally. If I make an elephant out of bronze or steel, I’m thinking about durability, permanence, how long something will last. If I make an elephant out of synthetic fur or foam core, I’m concerned with more transient issues. But it’s still about life and death - we all just have different ways of dealing with it.

Some of the work in the show could be compared to fixtures or accessories; in fact, the show has a utilitarian feel. Why is that?

This group of artists emphasizes surface and materiality, so it’s inevitable – we’re disengaging utilitarian materials and objects from their initial purpose and transforming them into conceptual vehicles.

When I first saw your work I thought of Man Ray – something fetishistic I suppose – and of Merrit Oppenheim – her fur-lined cup and saucer (Luncheon in Fur, 1936) – do you see what they were doing as being similar or different to the concerns that you have?

Look, I’m not fetishizing anything. I hate Surrealism - Breton, the unconscious, the irrational, sexual liberation - object-fetishism – Freud - who cares? Robert Motherwell wrote, “To give oneself over completely to the unconscious is to become a slave.” I’d rather look at Rubens – I want desire not dreams.

Besides Rubens, who else deals with desire?

The best painting about desire has to be Madonna And Child, 1450, by Jean Fouquet. More recently there’s been George Herriman (Krazy Kat), Eva Hesse, Cindy Sherman, Robert Crumb, Jeff Koons, Gary Baseman, maybe Inka Essenhigh. Most contemporary artists don’t get it – like Helmut Newton - they confuse desire with sex.

There’s also something fetishistic about Brian Nelson’s work – restraints, stainless steel – the whole medical fetish thing – doctors and nurses – what drew you to his work?

Brian’s objects exude a curious sort of physical density - a kind of compressed desire. Like Tony Oursler, he uses video projections to activate static surfaces. The medical aspect underlines the blurry distinction between helping and hurting, the interplay between helplessness and power. There’s something latently erotic in that.

What attracted you to Matt Blake's work?

His sense of humor. A Transformer robot can perform the same role as a mythological god in a Greek architectural frieze, because in Matt's world, context is everything. I think Matt's work shows it's possible to have a reverential attitude toward the history of art while at the same time letting some hot air out of formalism.

Your work is erotic – it has an S&M feel – yet some of the other artists you chose are indifferent to sexuality – or is there a sexual theme running through this exhibition?

The repression of desire is the easiest way to heighten eroticism - we all know we're not supposed to touch the art.

Both you and Brian Nelson make use of the table format. One thinks of a table as a place for bodies to gather around – a place of work, of negotiation, etc. Other contemporary artists have used the table format – I'm thinking particularly of *The Dark Pool*, by Janet Cardiff, 1995, *Rampart's Café* by the Starn Twins, 1996, and *Killing Time* by Ricky Swallow, 2004. What is it that draws you to the table?

Charles Ray's tables are better. But when I think of a table, I always think about the animals we eat. There's a humiliating helplessness to a living thing placed on a table. I think of a dog on a vet's table, or a person on an operating table, or even a religious sacrifice. The sense of vulnerability is almost overwhelming. Go home and lie down on your back on your own kitchen or dining table - it's a surprisingly unnerving experience. Don't ask me how I know that.

It seems to me that you and Brian Nelson are directly referencing the body. Can you speak to this?

You feel different about yourself when you're standing beside a Lamborghini on a racetrack than when you're standing beside a Rhododendron in a garden, or crouching over a puppy in a hallway - there's a shift in awareness of your body's vulnerability. Some artists try to alter that perception - Richard Serra, for example. Brian and I are simply heightening the awareness of what it's like to have a body in the first place.

Your work is lush, sensual and kind of paradoxical, but I don't see that kind of attitude in the other artists in this exhibition. Do you agree?

I suppose it has to do with my interest in the nature of human attraction. My stuff is focused outward, toward the viewer. The other artists are more interested in the embedded meaning of objects, not necessarily our attraction to them - their work looks inward, which can make it seem drier on the surface.

Evan Larson's work uses hard materials to make soft objects – metal flowers in other words – to me it has a cyber feel – in fact you could connect the production values of his work, and that of Brian's with that of cyber culture in that they are projecting pseudo versions of nature. Have you considered this aspect?

I don't think any of these artists are projecting pseudo versions of nature. Evan is analyzing natural phenomena - Brian and I are more into the metaphysical nature of existence.

Which brings us back to surrealism, which you hate, and yet a lot of the work has a Duchampian ethos. I've mentioned Man Ray in conjunction with you and I've just thought of some sort of connection with Francis Bacon – and you can't help thinking of Francis Picabia when you look at Evan Larson's assemblages.

Labels are for dead things - a form of taxidermy. I can talk until I'm blue in the face about the distance between my work and the Surrealists but in the end, art speaks for itself. Chuck Close used to try to argue that he wasn't a photo-realist, or even a figurative painter, which was, of course, calculated nonsense.

- Detroit | June 2006

1	2
3	4

Kevin Ewing 1

b. 1965 | Detroit, Michigan

Evan Larson 2

b. 1969

Brian Nelson 3

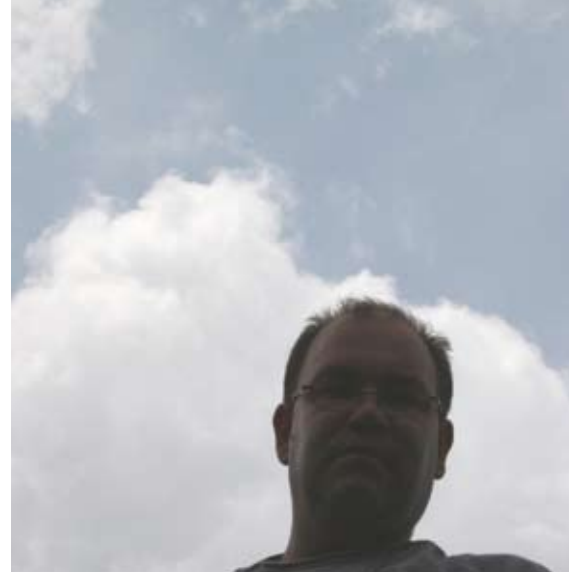
b. 1965 | Coldwater, Michigan

Matthew Blake 4

b. 1965 | Dearborn, MI

5

Artists





1	2
3	4

Kevin Ewing

statement

I am interested in the nature of human attraction - why we are attracted to particular things, even repellent things. Why is the Grotesque equally as powerful as our attraction to Beauty? I'm drawn to faux materials - by substituting synthetic materials we can sometimes outwit our natural attraction to the genuine article. This allows for an inversion of value systems - decadence can illicit repulsion, luxury can convey the abject - the fake becomes real.

By assimilating the violence of the world into more palatable surrogates, I'm negotiating a compromise between the abject and the covetable. I'm creating my own idealized world, where bad things happen, but the blood is never real, and everything comes out okay in the end - sort of. In this pseudo-safe world, idealized inhabitants interact with each other to create a magical place, where the ugly appropriate the beautiful, the phony co-opt the genuine, and where kitsch reigns king.

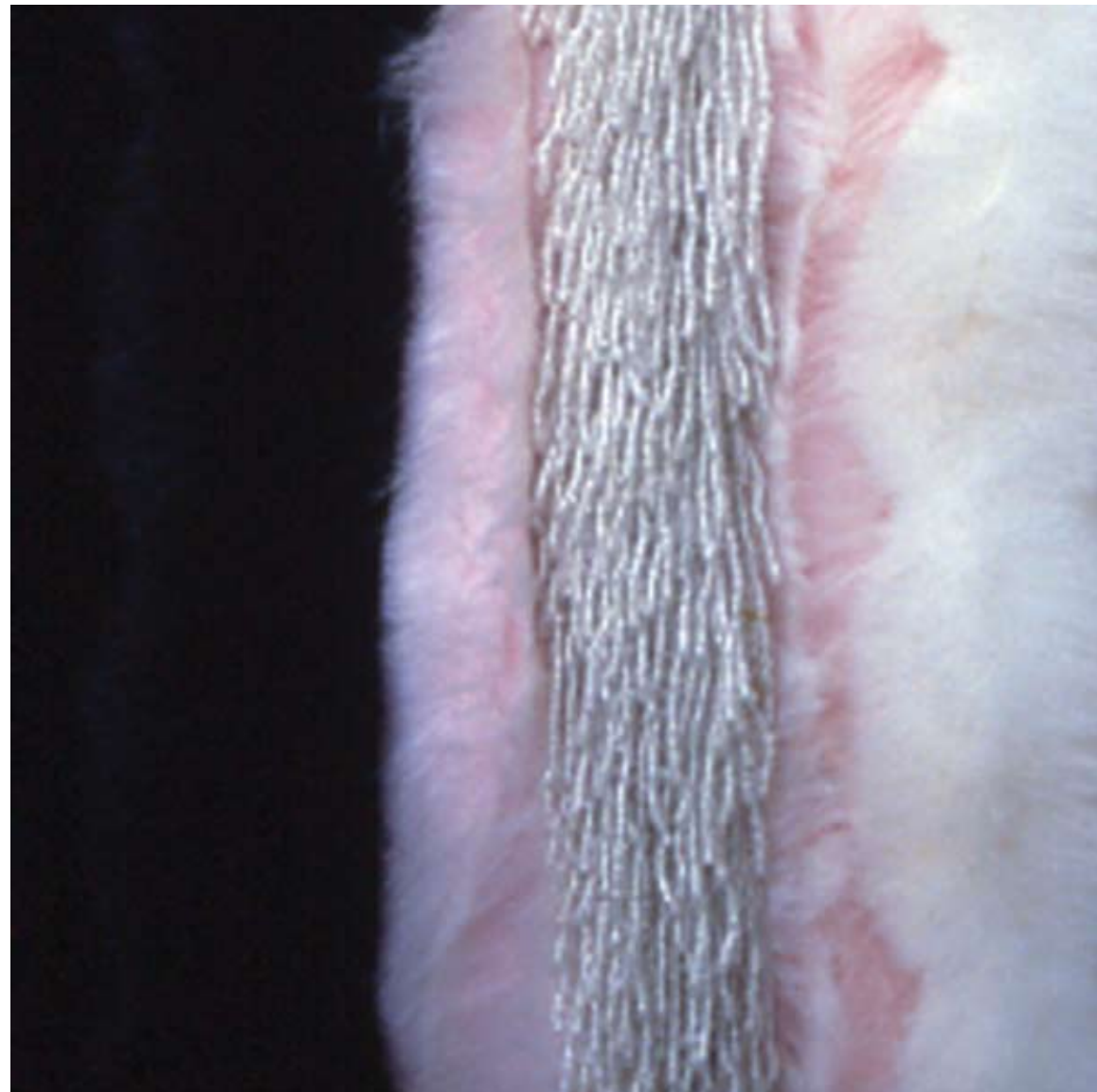
- 1 **Mr. Natural**
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005
- 2 **Mr. Natural**
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005
- 3 **Mr. Natural**
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005
- 4 **Mr. Natural**
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005

Kevin Ewing was born in Detroit in 1965. After earning a BFA in Graphic Design from the College for Creative Studies in Detroit in 1987, a professional path as an award winning graphic designer, art director, retail designer and freelance illustrator followed. Over time, a disparity between a passion for the fine arts versus a career in advertising became increasingly problematic. The decision to become a painter was inspired by Kathan Brown and her book *Ink, Paper, Metal, Wood* wherein she describes her San Francisco printmaking and publishing studio Crown Point Press and her relationships with the artists who worked closely with her there, including Richard Diebenkorn and John Cage. After a brief sojourn in San Francisco during the dot-com boom, Kevin returned to Detroit and was accepted into the graduate program at Wayne State University in 2004, where he was the recipient of a Graduate Teaching Assistant Scholarship and will complete his MFA in Painting

Kevin Ewing

vita

Pet Helskin
60" x 62" | Faux fur, textiles
2004





Kevin Ewing

in 2007. He is currently an Instructor of Record at Wayne State in both Drawing and Painting and has lectured on his work at both Wayne State and Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

A clue to his artistic investigations can be found in a childhood recollection: “When I was about twelve years old I had to take a sewing class in school. The assignment was to make a stuffed animal - I chose a bear. When I was finished I handed it to my teacher to be graded, and her face lit up. She brought it to her chest, squeezed it in her arms and said, “he’s overstuffed.” The thing that struck me most was not that I had overstuffed the bear, but that somehow this object was now a ‘he’. Inexplicably, I had created less of a something and more of a *someone*. This transformation struck me as magical”.

Nest (detail)

30" x 32" x 19" | Faux fur, textiles, branches
2005

selected exhibitions

2006 UNEXPECTED DRAWINGS

Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI

GROUP SHOW

Izzy's Raw Art Gallery, Detroit, MI

BEAUTY, THE SUBLIME AND INTENSITY

Gallery Project, Ann Arbor, MI

2005 GRADUATE EXCHANGE

Gallery 114, Kresge Art Center, East Lansing, MI

NEW VIEWS FROM OLD MAIN

Gallery 555, Detroit, MI

EAST/WEST

Gallery Project, Ann Arbor, MI

2004 XCHANGE

Forum Gallery, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI

ART ON TAP

Bookies Gallery, Detroit, MI

2003 SIGNS OF LIFE

Gallery 555, Ypsilanti, MI

Heaven (detail)
120" x 62" x 40" | Mixed media
2005





Evan Larson statement

My works are models and demonstrative tools for thought. These models pay homage to scientific instrumentation historically used for perceiving physical phenomena. In my work, I attempt to blend scientific and philosophic expressions with the unexplained, but equally valid world of sense, feeling, and experience. By aestheticizing the quantifiable known world of science and the uncharted reaches of emotion, I hope to create a hybrid. Such hybrids provide a forum that democratizes both physical and mental interpretations of art.

Mr. Natural
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005

My work focuses on relationships that occur in the world: relationships ranging from environmental factors (such as weather and formation of snowflakes); microscopic cellular interactions (synapses and dendrite connections); and information exchanges among fellow humans within their societal realm. In my work, mutation and disruption are applied to scientific models of thought. By creating events and catalysts, I attempt to humanize the scientific model while asserting the fragile and sometimes contradictory nature of an unpredictable world. Paradoxically, these unpredictable, inexplicable sentiments evade language and indicate a more primal form of communication.

Evan Larson is currently an Assistant Professor of Metalsmithing at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Past teaching experience includes Assistant Professor positions at Rhode Island College in Providence and Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. In 1999, he was the recipient of a Fulbright Research Grant to Korea, where he researched metalsmithing techniques in the Korean culture, comparing and contrasting work at Universities, Industry, and works produced by National Treasures. Other awards and honors include the Milwaukee County Emerging Artist Grant and the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG) educational endowment.

Evan Larson

vitae

Mr. Natural
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005





Evan Larson

Evan received his BFA from University of Wisconsin Milwaukee in 1995 and his MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1998. His work has been included in national and international venues such as, the "Internationalen Handwerkmesse" in Munich, Germany, the San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, Gallery: Facere Jewelry Art of Seattle.

In spring 2003, his work was included in "The Bracelet" an exhibition held in New York City organized by the Yaw Gallery Birmingham, Michigan. Evan has over fifty lectures and demonstrations at Universities across the United States, Korea and China.

Nest (detail)

30" x 32" x 19" | Faux fur, textiles, branches
2005

Heaven (detail)
120" x 62" x 40" | Mixed media
2005

selected exhibitions

Internationalen Handwerksmesse

Munich, Germany

San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum

California

Cranbrook Art Museum

Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

John Michael Kohler Arts Center-Main Gallery

Sheboygan, Wisconsin

New Jersey Center for Visual Arts

Summit, New Jersey

Gallery: Facere Jewelry Art of Seattle

Seattle, Washington

Fine Art Center Gallery

Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois

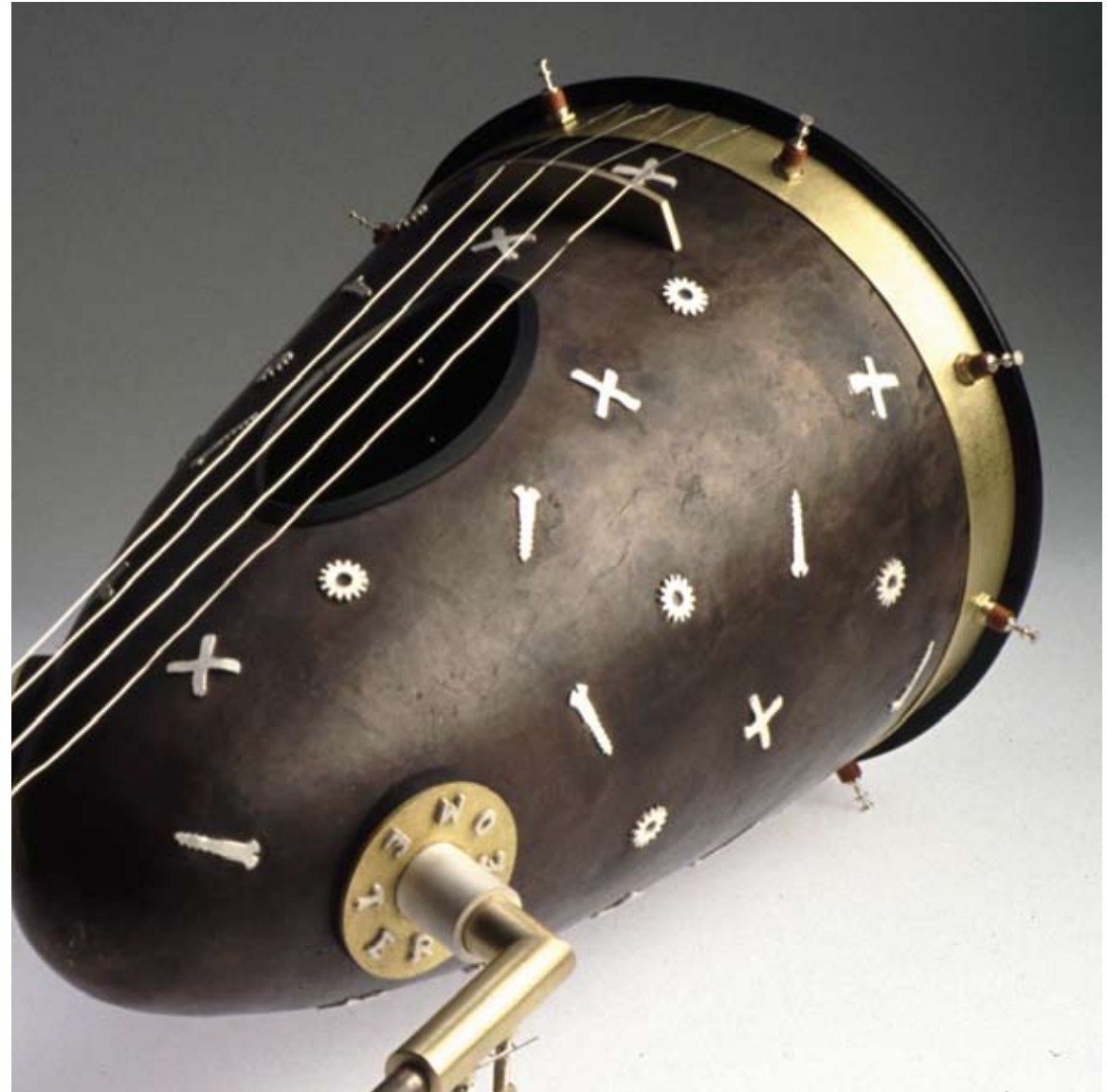
Yaw Gallery, At Navy Pier

New York

Banister Gallery

Rhode Island College, Providence, Rhode Island

Heaven (detail)
120" x 62" x 40" | Mixed media
2005





Brian Nelson

statement

Brian Nelson's work is founded on the dichotomy he has discovered between the basic but complex processes of life. He references a struggle between science and nature or sterility and life by using materials such as stainless steel tables, lead, test tubes, oxygen tanks, projected video, salt carved into cell structures, DNA, and tear drops, as well as Petri dishes of live organisms and images of trees swaying in the wind or clouds passing. Brian is known for his unique ability to combine refined craftsmanship and complex emotional and conceptual ideas into solid and fluid sculpture.

Gabriel

30" x 32" x 19" | Faux fur, textiles, branches
2005

Brian has been active in the Detroit area as an inspired artist and teacher for many years now. He has influenced students at the College for Creative Studies, Michigan State University, and is currently an Associate Professor of Sculpture at Eastern Michigan University. He has exhibited throughout the area, at the Center Galleries, Detroit Artist Market, Detroit Contemporary, Ford Gallery, BBAC, among others. He has received awards such as the prestigious Polk purchase award, Best in show at the Michigan Fine Arts Competition, as well as an Excellence in Teaching award from Michigan State University.

He received his BFA in Sculpture from Western Michigan University in 1990 and his MFA in Sculpture from Michigan State University in 1995.

Brian Nelson

vitae

Heaven (detail)
120" x 62" x 40" | *Mixed media*
2005





Brian Nelson

Her Breath (detail)

30" x 32" x 19" | Faux fur, textiles, branches
2005

selected exhibitions

2006 EXPERIMENTS

Gallery Project, Ann Arbor, MI

2005 FLOOR TO CEILING -20TH ANNIVERSARY SCULPTURE SHOW

Buckham Gallery, Flint, MI

2004 PUSHING OUT DEAD AIR

Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, MI

2003 SO FAR I HAVE NOT FOUND THE SCIENCE

Tangent Gallery, Detroit, MI

THE FORMAL ISSUE: THE STATE OF SCULPTURE AT MICHIGAN UNIVERSITIES

Midland Center for the Arts

2002 MICHIGAN FINE ARTS COMPETITION

Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association, Berkley, MI.

2001 BIENNIAL 21

South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, IN

2000 GREAT LAKE ERIE: IMAGINING AN INLAND SEA

Spaces, Cleveland, Ohio | Hall Walls, Buffalo, N.Y.

My Stuff

120" x 62" x 40" | *Mixed media*

2005





Matthew Blake

Nest (detail)

30" x 32" x 19" | Faux fur, textiles, branches
2005

Matthew Blake lives and works in Detroit. He studied industrial design at the College for Creative Studies. While there, he was a founding member of the sculpture collective, Propeller, which gained international attention exhibiting in Tokyo and Yokohama, Japan. In 1994, he was invited by UNESCO to Sarajevo, where he participated in a multi-disciplinary program to preserve culture during the siege. He currently divides his time between making art and playing music.

Matthew Blake

vitae



Heaven (detail)
120" x 62" x 40" | Mixed media
2005



1

2

Matthew Blake



1 **Mr. Natural**
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005

2 **Mr. Natural**
42" x 52" | Faux fur, textiles
2005

selected exhibitions

- 2006 **Riviera Triennial** Riviera Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
Strip Club
Riviera Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2005 **Summer Pack 2**
Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2004 **Biennial**
Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 2003 **Matt Blake - New Work**
Detroit Art Space, Detroit, MI
- 2001 **Alumni Hall**
Center Galleries, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI
- 1999 **Group Exhibition**
Alley Culture, Detroit, MI
61derful
Detroit, MI
- 1998 **It's Everywhere You Want To Be**
Eph McNally, Detroit, MI

Heaven (detail)
120" x 62" x 40" | Mixed media
2005



Oakland University Art Gallery exhibitions are made possible through the generous contributions of individuals, companies and foundations.

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The above gifts were made between June 2005 and June 2006.

Oakland University Art Gallery apologizes for any inaccuracies or omissions.

This exhibition and catalog were made possible by a grant from Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs and by the College of Arts and Sciences, Oakland University.



michigan council for
arts and cultural affairs



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Co-curated by **Kevin Ewing** and **Dick Goody**
Catalog written and edited by **Dick Goody**
Designed by **Stephen Schudlich** | www.ssid.com



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Director, **Dick Goody**
Assistant to the Director and Registrar, **Jacqueline Leow**
ISBN 0-925859-37-0
Printed by Tepel Brothers

Acknowledgements

Clark and Judy Ewing	Brian Nelson
Keith and Angie	Matt and Hazel Blake
Kurt and Amy	Kathan Brown
Dick Goody	Brandi...
Jeffrey Abt	Home Beautiful
Peter Williams	Upholstery
Julie Dummermuth	Acrylic Specialties
Stephen Schudlich	and Plastics
Evan Larson	

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