

## Nestlings

*Three Swarm Gallery artists find us environmentally problematic.*

By *DeWitt Cheng*

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Ambiguity, beauty, and irony characterize the environmentally themed show, *Natural Selection*, and a related installation. Vaughan Bell's ecological concerns are serious, but her conceptual sculptures embrace absurdism. The Romantic poet Gérard de Nerval, who walked a ribbon-leashed pet lobster in 1840s Paris, was apparently the inspiration for Bell's "Surrogate Mountain (Mountain for City)." The sculptures are pizza-size scale models (at 1:30,000) of Mt. Rainier in cast paper mounted on wooden chassis outfitted with wheels and a leash. Bell invited visitors at a previous show to "take one for a test walk." Resembling papier-mâché volcanoes, starch-stiffened dishtowels, horseshoe crabs, or desiccated octopi, they evoke humor and pathos rather than awe at nature's grandeur. Some of these mountains are outfitted with speakers emitting whale cries and mounted low on the wall: clouds echolocating or singing. Adoptable "Pocket Biospheres" containing plants, water, and tiny organisms, and house-shaped terraria into which you can insert your head also mock our cuckoo attempts to possess (or be possessed by) nature. Remember the old peasant in Woody Allen's *Love and Death*, proud of his little piece of land?



Josh Keyes' "Sowing."

Josh Keyes' paintings are more ambiguous. Painted impeccably in a realistic illustrational style, they depict dioramas or terraria/aquaria (the painting's edges coincide with the glass corners) in which wild animals pose amid overgrown verdure or transparent pale-blue flood waters; they're scenes of ecological collapse and renewal from which, having abandoned their traffic signs and graffiti-covered statuary, humans are absent. In "Evacuation I," a stag stands submerged, carrying on his back and in his antlers passenger raccoons and birds, while fish swim above the waving grasses past a fire hydrant. In "Sowing," a buffalo ambles down a striped slab of highway, grass sprouting up in its tracks, as if reclaiming the interstate-paved Great Plains. While Keyes has personal associations with the animals, his critters never become human surrogates for us, as they do in Landseer, Delacroix, Stubbs, or Marc. They remain emblems of species that somehow coexist without eating each other in these post-human landscape dioramas, Peaceable Kingdoms (1:48 scale or so) without people,

though made in the hominid style.

Reenie Charriere's installation *Washed Up* comprises scavenged Oakland Estuary flotsam placed into Ziploc bags half-filled with dyed water and assembled into a tree-like structure, at the foot of which surf continually laps (in a surprisingly convincing DVD projection with sound). It suggests those ancient colonial animals, jellyfish, and their upstart simulacra, plastic bags, now rotating slowly clockwise in a Sargasso Sea, Texas-size or larger, between California and Hawaii. *Natural Selection* runs through September 13 at Swarm Gallery (560-2nd St., Oakland). [SwarmGallery.com](http://SwarmGallery.com) or 510-839-2787.