

# LET'S TALK ARTS

a series of interviews providing context &  
consideration to the arts in southeast missouri

## A Question & Answer Session with *Wild Things* Best in Show Artist: Shelby Prindaville

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**JH:** You tend to create series of works utilizing the same subject matter, such as the bison in *Confrontation*, which was your winning piece in the *Wild Things* exhibition. How do you determine when you are finished with a certain subject?

**SP:** I don't know if I'm ever finished with any particular subject matter! I can be very obsessive in continuing to revisit the same subject over and over, and I believe that type of repetition has great value in terms of exploring the conceptual and compositional possibilities that arise from ever deeper investigation into specific animal behavior and form. The environment that I am in plays a huge role, though, which is one reason I really enjoy attending both domestic and international residencies. Being an artist in residence exposes me to new ecosystems, which in turn generates new bodies of work with different subjects. *Confrontation* and my other bison paintings stem from my two week-long residencies at Madroño Ranch in Medina, TX.

**JH:** Ruth Ann Reese, the juror for the *Wild Things* exhibition, commented that in *Confrontation* you were able to maintain the integrity both of the bison and the viewer. How does this observation relate to other works you have created?

**SP:** I appreciate Ruth Ann Reese's observation, as I do strive to maintain the integrity of my subjects while still allowing room for the viewer to make their own connections and conclusions. My ultimate goal is to demonstrate the value of engaging with nature particularly to those viewers – and there are far too many – who have been deprived of such important experiences, while incorporating a suggestion of the losses we've forfeited thus far. Some series are more weighed toward value and others toward loss, but all of my pieces are meant to encourage curiosity, conversation, and reflection. I think my intensive

studies and interactions with wild fauna and flora aid enormously in terms of capturing my subjects' presence and vitality.

**JH: When did you become interested in the connections between art and science?**

**SP:** The two have always been intertwined for me. My work's focus and level of representation necessarily involves interest in the fields of anatomy, botany, ecology, and zoology. I've also always enjoyed learning about the chemistry of art media. I had wanted to create very delicate, small-scale sculptures for some time but never found the perfect medium to do so until I collaborated in actually formulating a new polymer clay with Dr. John Pojman while pursuing my MFA at Louisiana State University. This collaboration resulted in the launch of 3P Quick Cure Clay and allowed me to create the sculptures I had been envisioning. Working with Dr. Pojman has been a marvelously rewarding adventure that has also led to my recent collaboration with our mutual friend Dr. Patrick Bunton of William Jewell College in creating functional and aesthetically attractive aquaponic systems.

**JH: In your artist statement, you discuss the isolation of the subject in your work as a reference to taxonomic illustrations. These types of illustrations often reduce the animal to a specimen rather than regarding it as a living thing. How does this approach to your subject matter demonstrate your idea of the role of humans in shaping an ecological balance?**

**SP:** My pieces reference taxonomic illustrations, but they don't follow the standards for taxonomic studies and are instead composed with the aim of engaging viewers into emotional connecting with the subject matter. I think there's something purgatorial about removing an animal from a strictly representational landscape which increases the intimacy between the viewer and the subject while also reflecting on ideas relating to discovery and documentation as well as the species' historical record, habitat loss, and conservation status – all of which have been and will continue to be shaped by human intervention.

**JH: According to your website, you have lived in a variety of places in the U.S., such as Philadelphia, Baton Rouge, and Leavenworth, KS. You have also spent considerable time in Spain and are currently completing an artist's residency at Nau Côlea. How do these divergent environments affect your work?**

**SP:** Each place has a completely different ecosystem, and my work responds and adapts accordingly. At exhibitions held in the same geographical location that generated the work, the highest praise I can hear from familiar locals is that I have captured the spirit of their environment. Different places sometimes require distinctive color palettes or media. Two watercolor on panel paintings I recently created specifically for a show in Philadelphia

depict pigeons on abstracted, gritty backgrounds that call urban sidewalks to mind, whereas my work from Baton Rouge has a more tropical atmosphere. On residency in Peru, I worked in watercolor on locally sourced, eco-friendly banana and sugarcane papers, while the bison paintings are acrylic on basswood panel. Here in Spain, I've been using new papers and panel supports and am working in acrylic as well as watercolor. I typically choose to paint on residencies because for me, paintings and the supplies needed to make them are more easily transportable than sculptures and installations. I would like to make some new sculptures later this summer when I return to Leavenworth.

**JH: Your interactive plant pedestals seem to encompass all of the ideas you are trying to express in your work concerning the role of humans in the shaping of an ecological balance. How did you come to design these micro-installations and how do they fit into your overall aesthetic?**

I primarily focus on fauna in my pieces instead of flora because it's easier for viewers to empathize with and sustain interest in animals, but I'm also really fascinated by plants – I keep over a hundred different plants in my home just for my own personal enjoyment! Through research, I found that there are a number of plants that react in a human time frame to human action (most react, but far too slowly for us to perceive). The two plants I have used so far are *Mimosa pudica*, which will collapse its leaflets and petioles in response to a number of different stimuli but will open them back up minutes later, and *Selaginella lepidophylla*, which will unfurl into a lively green display or close into a desiccated tan tumbleweed depending on the availability of water. I thought that bringing such animalistic and therefore sympathetic plants into the gallery could function as an interactive encapsulation of the relationships my viewers can choose to have with nature and of the consequences of those relationships. I visually connected these interactive pedestals with my other pieces through using a cohesive color palette, reflecting my pedestal building choices in my framing choices, choosing a delicate typeface that references my artistic hand for the pedestal text, and incorporating representations of the plants into several paintings. A looped video and the pedestal text demonstrate and provide all necessary information, and viewers can choose to lightly and knowledgeably engage with the plants, enjoy them, and preserve them for future viewers, or they can ignore, forget, or purposefully harm the plants; if the plants die, they are left dead in the pedestals until the end of the show and later viewers only get to watch and read about what they missed instead of getting the chance to experience firsthand the wonders these captivating plants have to share.

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The *Wild Things* Exhibition will be on view at the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri until June 26.

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