

LET'S TALK ARTS

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

A Question & Answer Session with Artists Hannah & Blake Sanders

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By: Dr. Joni Hand

Blake and Hannah Sanders are collaborative artists whose work focuses on environmental concerns including pollution and sustainability. They strive to involve the viewer in their commentary on how we interact with our environment. Their exhibition at the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri, from October 2 – 31, 2015, places their own work at the center of this discourse as they question their own impact on the environment. In a recent interview by Dr. Joni Hand, Assistant Professor of Art History at Southeast Missouri State University, Blake and Hannah expand on some of the issues they confront in this exhibition.

JH: The dinosaur is a reoccurring motif in your work. Would you explain its significance and how it references the issues of sustainability and climate change in your work?

HBS: The dinosaurs depicted in this exhibition are living fossils wreaking havoc on the landscape as an expression of the damage fracking and oil and pipeline leaks has inflicted on much of the country. Unfortunately the benefits of the uptick in domestic fuel extraction—cheap gas prices and utilities paired with the nationalistic pride of “energy independence”—have clouded our collective perspective of the dangers of these shortsighted, toxic practices. Earthquakes are now commonplace in Ohio and Oklahoma; shrimp and fish in the Gulf of Mexico are still carrying cancers and lacerations caused by the oil and dispersants remaining from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion and spill. Those examples are not expressions of the Earths’ natural cycles. They are tangible effects of reckless energy practices.

JH: Do you make a distinction in your work between manmade environmental disasters, such as the BP spill, which could have been prevented, and phenomena like naturally occurring methane gas leaching into the air?

HBS: Generally, we discuss the contemporary effects of human-made environmental impact. To comment in any detail about naturally occurring phenomena would presumably

water down our message; essentially letting humanity off the hook for our verifiable contributions to what is an increasingly warm, sickly planet.

That said, natural history does have an important role in our work. Dinosaurs reference the cycle of mass extinction and regeneration the planet has been through many times. Strata of earth is another recurring motif that references the geologic- broad view: we as a species have made one heck of a mess and may make the planet uninhabitable for ourselves, but in the long view, the planet has taken a lot of abuse over the last 4.5 billion years and has always recovered. It has survived before and it will survive us. Our question then becomes, just because we may not be WHOLLY responsible for rising temperatures, increasingly acidic oceans, and the mass extinction of species, is there any reason why we shouldn't change our behavior so we are consuming less and living a cleaner lifestyle? How is conserving resources and thinking about how our behaviors affect others a bad thing?

JH: How does the printmaking process speak to the issues of sustainability and environmental consciousness that permeates your subject matter?

HBS: That's a tough one. Printmaking in and of itself can be a pretty messy medium. Traditionally printmakers use oil based inks, heavy solvents, and waste a lot of paper. The irony of preaching environmentalism while using dirty processes is not lost on us. This is partly why this show focuses so much on our own complicity in the mess. However, we've made major strides to clean up our practice whenever possible. We print on repurposed fabric, mostly worn out bed sheets. Old clothes, fabric scraps, and proofs on sheets are turned into the crochet "footprints" that reference clouds, oil plumes, and weather systems. Our plush sculptures are stuffed with plastic grocery bags. In the studio we clean up with vegetable oil and dish soap in the place of paint thinner and other petrochemicals.

Metaphorically printmaking works for us for a couple reasons. First, printmaking is known as the democratic medium. Being able to print multiples allows our message to get to a larger audience. We can increase consciousness about our issues on the cheap. Also, printmaking has had to evolve its practices time and again in order to remain a relevant art form. As a species we must evolve our behaviors and priorities in order to reduce our global impact. If we don't we'll have to evolve biologically to be able to survive an increasingly hostile environment.

JH: Audiences differ in their understanding of environmental issues. How does the location of an exhibition affect your work? Do you see your work as instructive?

HBS: We think about the location of our work only in that when possible we choose pieces that speak to the specific environmental concerns of the region the exhibition is in. For example it made more sense to include work that discussed fracking and oil extraction in a recent exhibition in New Mexico rather than work that focused on ocean pollution. We do

we encourage a dialog. It is difficult to make artwork that communicates an explicit message without coming across as preachy. By taking a stark look at our own behaviors and their impact, we hope that this work provokes our audience to examine their choices as well. I don't think the work is instructive per se; I don't know that it teaches, but it does ask the audience to consider the themes presented. Fortunately, I don't think the work requires much prior knowledge of environmental issues, but hopefully folks will want to learn more after checking out the show. There's definitely potential to skew the work in the future toward being more didactic, more instructive, á la youth oriented natural history museum exhibits. Stay tuned!

JH: As educators, how do you instill in your students the importance of the environmental issues you address in your work?

HBS: We encourage greener shop practices: conserving materials and using cleaner alternatives to solvents and petrochemicals. We try not to be explicit about our ecological beliefs in our classes since professors already get a bad rap for political proselytizing, so instead we focus on health and safety when explaining these choices rather than environmental impact.

We foster a culture that focuses on the studio community, how one's actions affect the lives and conditions of others. This is made obvious every time someone leaves an ink mess that screws up the color of the next person printing. It's easy for students to see how the benefits of clean shop practice can be extrapolated into a greener, conservation minded lifestyle in general.

We practice what we preach in our studio practice as I mentioned above. We also set an example by walking as much as possible (can't tell you how often students remark that they see us walking all over town, it makes a difference!).

JH: How does installation expand on the important issues you confront in your prints?

HBS: The contemporary art world seems increasingly disconnected from the general public. Unfortunately art is seen as stuffy, self-consciously cerebral, and unapproachable. A frame is literally a barrier between the viewer and the artwork. Installation breaks that barrier. Taking our pieces out of the frame, and sometimes off the wall invites the audience to interact with the work. It breaks the mystique of art in a useful way. In our case if folks get up close and personal with our work and actually handle it they will gain an appreciation for how the recycled/repurposed materials we use incorporates our message into our process.

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