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For HUM-113 Civilization III

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Drawer of Northern Cardinals; Various Dates and Locations

Iris print, 2001, by Terry Evans

Leaving the Columbus Museum of Art, I had a list of four pieces that I enjoyed, and that I felt worthy of an essay. Just as I was zipping up my coat I caught sight of a print mounted at the foot of a stairway. Moving closer it appeared to be a photograph of a collection of dead birds; mostly red but all very clearly dead. I almost walked away.

Although some of my own floral photography is inspired by the Botanical Illustration style (generally pencil or watercolour) of the 1700s and 1800s, a large picture of a drawer full of dead birds seemed unlikely to tell me anything. Yet as I looked more closely at the print by Terry Evans entitled “*Drawer of Northern Cardinals; Various Dates and Locations*” I kept seeing things. Birds, of course. Some bright red, some dull. The collection included different sizes and genders. Some are damaged and tagged as being found on the ground. Yes- each specimen has a 'toe tag' with date and location.

Most specimens have only their neck and beak visible; a few have their head sideways so you can see an eye. Oh, those eyes. Blank, white; almost glowing. Unsettling and worthy of a horror movie. Not a film genre I really like, and yet irresistible as presented here.

Not knowing anything about the artist, I went in search of more information; his (her?) biography, location, what other works had been published, and what this piece meant to the artist. I quickly discovered that Ms. Evans was born in 1944 in Kansas City MO and earned her BFA in Painting and Commercial Art from the University of Kansas. And yet she was exhibiting photographic work as early as 1978⁽¹⁾. In addition to exhibiting, publishing and selling her own photography, she is an Adjunct Teacher of Photography at Columbia College, Chicago⁽²⁾.

The photograph was shot on medium-format film and then digitized and printed on an Iris printer⁽³⁾ as a Limited Edition Print. It is, as the title notes, a drawer full of specimens. The drawer is part of the collection of Chicago's Field Museum; “*one of the world's largest natural history museums*”⁽⁴⁾ The image is about a foot and a half wide and two feet tall; not large by museum standards, but it presents the subject at life size.

While this piece is clearly “*photo-realism*” the Iris process and the texture of the paper means the image “*looks more like the specimen than the specimen itself.*”⁽⁴⁾ Ms. Evans is “*widely known for her spectacular photographs of pristine prairie*”⁽⁵⁾ as well as “*the urban prairie of Chicago.*”⁽⁶⁾ She has explored the prairies for many years; in fact she writes that “*the main reason I photograph at all is because I fancy myself to be an explorer.*”⁽⁴⁾ And that, it turns out, is how this artwork fits with her other works.

“*Evans seeks to have us pay attention to the ways we perceive both the natural and the cultural in this underappreciated (sic) landscape*”⁽⁵⁾ whether the landscape is the vast prairies or the collections of the Field Museum. On her website she questions the value of collecting samples even as she admits to having done so for years; “*I began picking up dead birds and an occasional mouse I'd see when I was out for a walk*”⁽⁴⁾

Why kill so many birds, insects, plants? Her answer is that this is the way we humans understand the world; by categorizing and labeling. Seeing the range of 'normal' and how things relate to each other. Parallels to the writings of Temple Grandin come to mind. Dr. Grandin is a “*world-famous animal scientist and autism self-advocate*”⁽⁷⁾ who speaks and writes about how an autistic person relates to the world. She posits that there are “*three different types of specialized thinking*”⁽⁸⁾ most often found in people on the

autism spectrum. Some autistic people exhibit a mixture of the three, others just one. She describes herself as a 'visual thinker'. One example she uses in interviews to illustrate this is that of “a *tree*”. She says that most children quickly learn to recognize a wide variety of sizes and shapes of plants as being trees, while she has to see and be told of a large number of varieties that are all included in “*tree*”. Until she has been shown and told that a maple, a beech, a birch, a pine, are all trees; that some trees have leaves, others needles; they may sport spring buds or fall colours; each of these is something unique, and not “*a tree*”. It is not that she can't recognize different plants as trees; she says that she can not visualize a generic “*tree*”. Rather, she has to learn the full range of 'tree' by 'collecting more samples' than most people who seem able to recognize various trees from a more generic description.

Ms. Evans then considers whether she is doing anything more than “*the same thing as photographing someone else's painting and calling it mine?*”⁽⁴⁾ She says “*I justified my work by telling myself that I'd made the selections from thousands of choices and I'd figured out how I wanted to present them, and isn't art, after all, about organization and selection?*”⁽⁴⁾ bringing the conversation back to collections.

Although Ms. Evans' subjects have included many landscapes, and her early work was in black & white, a quick comparison to Ansel Adams only goes so far. While she also is involved in 'environmental issues' (her early photographs came out of “*her contact with scientists and writers at The Land Institute.*”⁽⁹⁾), on her web-site she identifies with “*Northern German painters such as Durer, Hans Hoffman, and others*”⁽⁴⁾ for their “*keen sense of observation, almost scientific in its intensity.*”⁽⁴⁾ When asked directly to name

her early influences she replies “*biggest influence is Albrecht Durer*”⁽³⁾ “*He -and other northern German painters of the time-were so deeply attentive to nature, like the specimen collectors, in a way.*”⁽¹⁰⁾ This is not surprising when we recall her degree is in Painting.

The change of subject from exteriors (the prairies) to the interior of cabinets inside the Field Museum has turned out to be just one step in her photographic journey. Her book “*Revealing Chicago*” was published in 2005. Featuring aerial photographs taken during 2003 and 2004, this volume continues the artist's “*profound observation of place, and the unique colors, forms, and patterns that define it.*”⁽⁹⁾ And Ms. Evans' newer works have “*explored the steel industry and working steel mills, as well as using photographs of the Greenland ice sheet to examine the scale of climate change*”⁽¹¹⁾ to continue her examination of the world. And, more importantly, how we understand and relate to it.

NOTES

1. Artist's Biography; Catherine Edelman Gallery web-site

<http://www.edelmangallery.com/Evans.pdf>

2. Columbia College web-site:

http://www.colum.edu/Academics/Photography/Department-Information/Adjunct_Faculty.php

3. From personal correspondence with the artist; an email dated 01/18/2011.

4. Notes at the artist's web-site:

http://www.terryevansphotography.com/sp_index.php?dir=./statement

5. From the publisher's web-site description of

Evans & Worster, "*The Inhabited Prairie*" 1998, University Press of Kansas

<http://www.kansaspress.ku.edu/evainh.html>

6. Artist's Biography; Open Museum web-site:

<http://www.openmuseum.org/objet/show/1117?facet=2640>

7. Dr. Grandin's official web-site:

<http://www.templegrandin.com/>

8. Dr. Grandin's official web-site:

<http://www.templegrandin.com/templegrandinart.html>

9. Carol Ehlers, Curator; LaSalle Bank Photography Collection, writing in

Evans & Wheelan, "*Revealing Chicago: An Aerial Portrait*" 2005, Harry N Abrams, p.188

10. From personal correspondence with the artist; an email dated 01/19/2011.

11. From a promotion for Ms. Evans' public lecture at Goshen College in 2010:

<http://www.goshen.edu/art/2010/10/01/terry-evans/>