

The Elastic Past

Visual Interpretations of Life's Early Lessons

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As part of the Yellowstone Art Museum's exhibition series, *Mind, Memory, and Image, The Elastic Past: Visual Interpretations of Life's Early Lessons* includes work by Lynn Criswell, Shanna Fliegel, Patrick LoCicero, and Mary Ann Papanek-Miller, artists who explicitly explore remembrances of the past, chiefly informed by their own childhood memories. Each artist has a distinct viewpoint and approach to art production; however, their work shares much in common, reflecting a psychological perspective of the twentieth century, Carl Jung's theory of a "collective unconscious," a widely misunderstood and misconstrued concept in which he suggested that some experiences or memories are innately encoded in each being. These experiences include archetypes that exist beyond our individual experiences at a subconscious or primordial level—they are organic, instinctual, and not based upon intuition.¹ These archetypes appear in literature and art, and can be seen in this exhibition. Jung might suggest that the commonalities present in each exhibiting artist's work are archetypes expressed outwardly—the hero, the anti-hero, the God figure, the trickster, the mother figure, the messenger, and similar.

Organically, the operation of memory continues to be largely a mystery, but it is understood as a system for encoding, storing, and retrieving information. It might also be said to be the repository of knowledge. Without memory, life experience would devolve to the instinctual level as we could not recall what we've already learned. We would react rather than anticipate or make conscious decisions. Current thinking suggests that the storage of memory is benefited by healthy sleep. During sleep, it is thought that the events and experiences of the day are encoded, sorted, and stored. At a barely conscious level, a dream may be a visual manifestation of the sorting process. As electrical signals are transmitted to different portions of the brain, seemingly unrelated images may occur. In the early twentieth century, Dr. Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries

sought to understand the relationship between sub-consciousness, cognition, and memory. They used dream study as the basis for psychoanalysis—a tool with which they might be better able to understand individual behavior. This field of study provided fodder for the movement in art that would become known as Surrealism—a literary and visual art movement that explored the subconscious state.

In 1931, Spanish Surrealist Salvador Dalí created *The Persistence of Memory*, a painting emblematic of early Modernist narratives influenced by psychoanalysis. The title of Dalí's painting continues to resonate with much contemporary art production that uses puzzling visual narratives influenced by memories or subconscious thinking, which result in acutely personal symbols; or, as Jung suggested, archetypes. In such cases, exemplified by selections included in this exhibition, the key to understanding exact artistic intentions can be elusive. The relationship between the artists' subconscious and conscious acts in their visual decision-making provides for a variety of interpretations that are filtered through the viewer's own experiences and memories. Personal associations often lead the viewer to regard visual narratives as simultaneously familiar and oddly mysterious—the ambiguity that exists between instinctual and intuitive responses.

In the past century, the study of childhood development has led further to a belief that human beings share much in common with one another (organically based upon cognitive development), and fewer degrees of separation exist between individual experiences than we might be inclined to believe. These differences are sublime and may be influenced as much by the environmental conditions encountered in our own journeys as they are by our own cognitive capacity. The formative experiences that created definitive lifelong impressions for each exhibiting artist are evoked in the selections that form *The Elastic Past*. The manners in which these artists' works differ create an intriguing visual dialogue that accentuates their individuality while revealing coincidental (or are they archetypal?) notions about life and art with which one can personally identify. Key similarities exist in each exhibiting artist's work: archetypes, materials and process, and intellectual concerns, to name a few. The artists have provided the intriguing visual stimuli to pique our imaginations and trigger our own memories, often employing humor and intrigue to propel us in our journey of discovery.



(Fig. 1) *Cage/Tree Wall*, 2012-2013, pigment inkjet print on Turkish industrial felt, 1950's Lucite birdcages, and sheet lead, dimensions variable

Lynn Criswell's formative experience is encapsulated in her statement:

"I'm not thrilled with the lingering and still perceived standard of sweetness and vulnerability, which generates the notion of domestic protection of young girls. 'Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of.'² While the young boy, although not officially sanctioned, will grow up strong and wise if left to indulge to some extent in his wild ways. Most of us don't believe it, but culturally I think it shaped us. I was never the quiet girl who sat primly and drew in a sketchbook, not me; I prefer to say 'bare-footed, stubbed toes, tumbleweeds and horned toads, that's what little girls are really made of.'"

Clues to deriving meaning from Lynn Criswell's visual narratives may be revealed by the knowledge that she has participated in numerous residencies and visiting lectureships that have taken her from northern California, where she has maintained her studio practice for nearly 30 years, to a diversity of places in

the United States and abroad. She most recently concluded a year-and-a-half-long residency at Sabanci University in Istanbul, Turkey. Knowing this, one might postulate that her bird imagery in work such as *Cage/Tree Wall* (fig. 1) is a surrogate for self or the human spirit.

This is a good place to begin; but then, regard the work on its own merits, and revel in the mystery of the message. The work is crafted with undeniable precision that connotes the artist's commitment to materials and process that enhance the relationship between specificity and ambiguity—an interesting visual paradox that exists be-

tween the crisp-edged, self-contained elements, and the undefined space contained in the visual plane. The individual elements would be interesting enough on their own, but the manner in which they are assembled and collaged leads to greater visual, intellectual, and emotional interest.

Birds are recurring elements in much of the Criswell's work (a major commonality among all four exhibiting artists). What do these images represent? Perhaps they are archetypal symbols for messengers, or as suggested earlier, a symbol for self—the artist's resistance to being confined or defined based upon some clichéd cultural notion about gender roles. Now combine these avian subjects with the axes, tree, photos of school-aged children, and the large rabbits. What interpretations come to mind? Are we Alice being led down Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole? Are visual puns, such as splitting hairs, part of the work? Are the axes a reference to not telling lies? Why have the eyes and mouths of the girls been constrained—see no evil, speak no evil, or tell no lies? Or, is this a statement



(Fig. 2) *Two Starlings*, 2012, pigment inkjet print on Turkish industrial felt, 81 x 58 x .125 inches

about how identity can be squashed in one's formative years? The visual information adds up differently for each viewer. As in good literature or storytelling, the narrative isn't fully revealed until it is completely digested. Unlike an Agatha Christie novel, all of the clues are present. The viewer provides his own twist to discern the ending—or in this case, the artist's intent.

Like enumerable artists in the Post-modernist age, Lynn Criswell's work defies categorical definition. She is not a painter, a photographer, or a sculptor. She is an artist. Moreover, she is a storyteller, and perhaps a modern-day shaman, who draws from the deep well of her anima, memory, instinct, and intuition to create evocative visual messages.

Lynn Criswell earned a Master of Arts degree in Art from California State University, Chico. She has exhibited and taught nationally and internationally. She has created several site specific art installations, and her work is included in significant private and corporate collections in the United States and abroad.



(Fig. 3) *Favorite Kitty*, 2008, cast bronze, cast aluminum, sheet lead, and fabricated steel, 62 x 24 x 14 inches

Shanna Fliegel



(Fig. 4) *A Last Resort in an Extreme Circumstance*, 2012, earthenware, 20 x 15.5 x 24 inches

Shanna Fliegel's ceramic sculptures are seemingly related to adventurous children's stories by authors such as Lewis Carroll and Maurice Sendak. When viewing *A Last Resort in an Extreme Circumstance* (fig. 4), it is difficult not to recall the following passage from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1871.

"'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.'"

Differing in form from her relief sculptures, in which she uses a collage-like composition to form her narrative (another common practice among the exhibiting artists), Fliegel's fully in-the-round sculptures are consciously accentuated by

inventive relationships shared by archetypal characters poised in disarming situations. In keeping with good fiction, the artist suspends our disbelief, and we enter into an imaginative, yet plausible world. Her animals are true to form, but tweaked by the inclusion of odd, futuristic, and manmade accoutrements that raise her art beyond clichéd observations. Her humanesque figures are weirdly distorted and purposely grotesque, but they also retain a strangely affable quality, like the monsters from Maurice Sendak books. These odd chimera-like figures (the antagonists in the artist's fiction) are dependent upon other creatures (the protagonists) to transport them. Utilizing archetypal forms, the artist creates metaphors about our own stewardship of and relationship with the natural world. For example, the glutton that rides in a wheelbarrow, straddling a tortoise in *The Role: Charismatic Megafauna* (fig. 5) is seemingly loath to arrive hurriedly to any specific destination. The masculine figure looks heavenward as if to ask for more, or, is this all there is? The sprinkled-donut wheel is an ironic visual element that adds to the absurdity of the narrative, providing comic relief. The sculpture's title provides another clue to the artist's intent. How does charisma play into the relationship—more irony? Perhaps, but what does the artist truly mean? And which character is central to the "Role"—the glutton or the tortoise, or both? The implication of charisma as a trait in this relationship connotes that



(Fig. 5) *The Role: Charismatic Megafauna*, 2012, earthenware, 19 x 24 x 28 inches

each figure is complicit in an unknown but interconnected outcome. The tortoise appears neither to be amused nor sympathetic. Nor does it appear to be the beneficiary of any positive outcome from this relationship, but it is somehow unable to resist aiding its consumptive companion.

Fliegel's statement reveals the intent that runs through much of her work:

"The disposition of contemporary society's relationship with wild and domesticated animals is complex. By chronicling the many threatened and vulnerable creatures that inhabit the natural world through figurative forms, I hope to capture their fragility as permanent artifacts."

Like other social critics who employ humor, irony, and hyperbole, Shanna Fliegel draws the viewer into a conversation that at first amuses and then leaves one questioning his/her own humanity and relationship to the natural world. Her craft is equally compelling, and the manner in which she forms her work adds to the believability of her narrative.

Shanna Fliegel earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in Studio Arts: Ceramics from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville; and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Studio Arts: Ceramics from James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. She has taught at Montana State University, Billings, since 2010, where she presently serves as Assistant Professor of Art. She exhibits widely in the United States, and her work is in collections in Colorado, Montana, Maryland, and Virginia.



(Fig. 6) *Domestic Affection*, 2013, earthenware, 37 x 39.5 x 2 inches



(Fig. 7) *Domestic Affection* (detail)



(Fig. 8) *Wagon Growth*, 2010, oil on canvas with collage,
40 x 32 inches

An adjunct faculty member at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Washington, Patrick LoCicero may be best known for paintings such as *Wagon Growth* (fig. 8), which feature a centralized iconic image (in this case a strong reference to childhood) surrounded by images from the more distant past. These elements typically allude to travel, as the artist states:

“My paintings refer to the idea of traveling as a metaphor for multiple kinds of passage—literally, symbolically, and culturally. I am fascinated by the idea of physically moving from one place to another as well as the concept of moving through memories and associations from one time period to another. The contrasts that are set up between the collaged surfaces and the painted image are as interesting to me as the play between the actual shallow space and the implied deep space. I am always striving for a close material and conceptual relationship between the painted and collaged surfaces of my pieces.”

In his most recent works, LoCicero uses exotic and/or extinct birds as a central image. Though the birds are not in flight, they connote the ability to travel freely. The collaged elements serve as a catalog of distant times and places that his central messenger (perhaps a surrogate for self, or an archetypal symbol) may have witnessed or desires to witness. His work is less about social satire than it is about social anthropology or archeology. His “digs” consist of mining a vast array of printed images, expertly cutting away extraneous detail, and sorting each image into a storage container for future use—not knowing at the time what purpose it might serve. In the age of Photoshop, LoCicero prefers hand-manipulation of collage elements combined with painting to construct his images. The shift between the implied and real space is a complex puzzle loaded with visual tension that leaves the viewer wondering which layer precedes the other, while navigating the pictorial relationships to understand his narrative.

Returning to other commonalities present in our exhibiting artists’ work, LoCicero’s *Graduates* (fig. 9) references stereotypical photographic portraits from a bygone age. Unlike Lynn Criswell who uses childhood pictures, Patrick elects adults as subjects for his narrative. In this example, the central figure is a rather ordinary goose carrying an assortment of avian kin on its back, sporting a fedora (a trademark of much of the artist’s work—recalling the Surrealist René Magritte—and signifying the goose’s gender), and donning a set of wheels. The latter element



(Fig. 9) *Graduates*, 2010, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches

reinforces the theme of travel and suggests evolution. Each element (including the row of tobacco bands) combines to convey a puzzling personal message. In

the absence of a play-by-play, blow-by-blow, a plus b equals c interpretation, the ambiguity of the artist's references allows the viewer to explore his intuitive response to the imagery, informed by his own memories and experiences. These visual exercises remind us of our childhood when we sought to find answers to seemingly difficult questions. Why is the sky blue? Why does the goose sport wheels? Why is the grass green? Why is the goose carrying other birds on its back? Why do geese fly in a vee? Why are portraits of people included in the background? Why, why, why? And like an exasperated parent, the artist might simply answer: because. This isn't to suggest that contemporary artists are impertinent; rather, that they desire the viewer to explore the work with the same joyfulness with which it was created. LoCicero's work provides considerable opportunities for personal discovery and encouragement for the inquisitive viewer to seek out more specific knowledge about his historic visual references, in order to clarify specific intent.

Patrick LoCicero earned his Master of Fine Arts degree in Art from the San Francisco Art Institute, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from Ohio State University, Columbus. He exhibits widely in the United States and is a recipient of the Maryland State Arts Award. His work is represented in numerous private and public collections. In addition to his studio work, LoCicero is an adjunct faculty member at Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle, Washington.



(Fig. 10) *Art History*, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches

Mary Ann Papanek-Miller



(Fig. 11) *Free Water Project: mown grass, I*, 2007, acrylics, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, and graphite drawings on vellum, 62 x 79 inches, in seven sections

Mary Ann Papanek-Miller admittedly “bombards” the viewer with visual information, often using associative and dissociative images to intentionally activate all one’s senses. Her narratives are motivated both consciously and subconsciously. Freud and Jung would have much to say about her work, which is drawn from a deep well of experience influenced by childhood memory, literary references, personal experience, pop culture, and more, often forming critical messages that address ecological concerns. Add communications theorist Marshall McLuhan to this conversation, who might apply his adage “the medium is the message,” which first appeared in 1964 in his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Considering the manner in which this artist composes two-dimensional images laden with dense layers that suggest the crossfades, dissolves, and quick edit montages used in electronic media technologies, such as film, television, and the Internet as well as her use of traditional media and processes, one might agree with McLuhan’s supposition.

Embracing the foundations of language, Papanek-Miller is an avid drawer who uses collage, transparent, and translucent materials to translate her ideas into a tangible form, creating vectors and tangents that mirror the organization of memory and the abstractness of time. She organizes her work as a means to convey the paradoxical nature of time, and each layer represents singular ideas placed within a larger context filled with iconic and archetypal references.

Papanek-Miller's visual works reflect her concerns about ecological issues. She purposefully uses a personal visual vocabulary to create a healthy discourse about her concerns. The whimsical visual elements derived from youthful memories, imaginative invention, and intuition serve as devices that break down polarized or rigid points of view. In *Free Water Project: mown grass, I* (fig. 11), for example, the formal construction of each collage is extenuated by the use of a series of related but separate framed elements—messages within messages, within a broader message. This playfulness is akin to looking at a mirror reflected in another mirror. In such cases, the visual “bombardment” is reinforced, but also allows the viewer pauses where one can absorb the visual intent. The individual elements are separated, but related to one another in an episodic composition, punctuated with graphic and photographic representations, silhouettes, and stenciled images. No visual invention is overlooked.

Of her work, Papanek-Miller states:

“My ideas often employ images and layers as an afterimage in my work ... mixing ideas with chance, and reflections from childhood (through stories, songs, and rhymes) that are then woven with a deep concern that I have for the environment,



(Fig. 12) *Free Water Project: “DO NOT FEED PIGEONS (CHICAGO MUNICIPAL CODE 728-710)”*, 2010, acrylics, collage, graphite on paper with layered nylon cloth mounted on wood, and graphite drawing on vellum, 34 x 142 inches, in five sections



(Fig. 13) *Looking for Alice: “taking (the) water(s)”*, 1.2, 2009, acrylics, collage, and graphite on paper mounted on wood, 40 x 30 inches

specifically regarding my current interests in animals, land, and water (access, use, and ownership).”

Using a cast of characters that appear in multiple works, Papanek-Miller often imbues innocent images with more unsettling attributes that may seem antithetical to an otherwise humorous account. In works such as *Looking for Alice: “taking (the) water(s),” 1.2* (fig. 13), what appears to be a patriotic doll or figure from the eighteenth century is cloaked in a bunny mask or hand puppet—an image that evokes thoughts of other sinister hoods. Though the background layers are revealed through the bunny, the artist purposely conceals the head of the figure, disguising a literal clue in the overall narrative. That which is absent in the artist’s work is equally as telling as that which is so abundantly present. As in a lucid dream where many details may be blurred, this purposeful omission

heightens one's curiosity and extends the possible interpretations, revealing an interesting strategy in the artist's multi-faceted art practice.

Mary Ann (M.A.) Papanek-Miller earned a Master of Arts degree in Metals from Northern Illinois University and a Master of Fine Arts degree with a dual emphasis in Drawing and Metals from the University of Houston, Texas. She exhibits widely in the United States and is a recipient of a State of Minnesota Artist Initiative Grant. She has served as Professor of Art and Department Chair at the University of Montana; Bemidji State University, Minnesota; and Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle, Washington. She currently serves as Professor of Art and Department Chair of the Department of Art Media and Design at DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

Cultural and personal identities are formed through respective and collective memories, and the subsequent stories that are conveyed through a common language—in the case of this exhibition, the language of art. The visual dance conveyed through *The Elastic Past: Visual Interpretations of Life's Early Lessons* is merely the tip of the iceberg in the artistic oeuvres of the participating artists. The interpretations and observations contained in these pages are only suggestive of the infinite possibilities imaginable when viewing the selections that represent these artists' work. And like the art that has preceded and influenced these artists, one can easily imagine that their work will be felt in the continuum of art-making due to the influence they wield in their individual orbits. The impressions they leave with those fortunate enough to witness their output extends the "collective unconscious."

The Yellowstone Art Museum Board of Trustees, staff, and devoted volunteers thank Lynn Criswell, Shanna Fliegel, Patrick LoCicero, and Mary Ann Papanek-Miller for sharing their creative work with our patrons. Their participation in our exhibition series *Mind, Memory, and Image* is not only gratefully appreciated, but adds to the museum's institutional memory.

Additionally we thank our exhibition sponsors: Dr. F. Douglas and Karla Carr, J. Garrett and Stacy Lillis, Robyn G. Peterson, and USBank for making this exhibition possible.

¹ C.G. Jung, "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious," in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 9, part 1, trans. R.F.C Hull (London: Routledge, 1968).

² Opie and P. Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951, 2nd ed., 1997), pp. 100–1.

The Elastic Past: Visual Interpretations of Life's Early Lessons Exhibition Checklist

Lynn Criswell

- Favorite Kitty*, 2008, cast bronze, cast aluminum, sheet lead, and fabricated steel, 62 x 24 x 14 inches
A Statement or a Question, 2008, cast bronze, cast aluminum, sheet lead, and fabricated steel, 59 x 24 x 14 inches
The Meeting of Chicken Boy and Sonia, 2009, oils, sheet lead, and plaster on birch panel, 61 x 64.5 x 1.5 inches
Cage/Tree Wall, 2012-2013, pigment inkjet print on Turkish industrial felt, 1950's Lucite birdcages, and sheet lead, dimensions variable
Two Starlings, 2012, pigment inkjet print on Turkish industrial felt, 81 x 58 x .125 inches
Floating Cages, 2012, pigment inkjet print on Turkish industrial felt, 77 x 55 x .125 inches

Shanna Fliegel

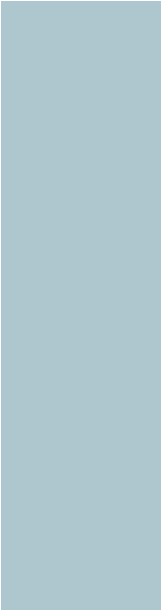
- A Last Resort in an Extreme Circumstance*, 2012, earthenware, 20 x 15.5 x 24 inches
Endemic to Antarctica: From 3,000 to 400, 2012, earthenware, 23 x 13 x 17 inches
The Role: Charismatic Megafauna, 2012, earthenware, 19 x 24 x 28 inches
Juvenis Collection, 2013, earthenware, 24.5 x 24.5 x 9 inches
Transient Security, 2013, earthenware, 55 x 33 x 7 inches
Domestic Affection, 2013, earthenware, 37 x 39.5 x 2 inches

Patrick LoCicero

- Merchant of Venice*, 2010, oil on canvas with collage, 44 x 42 inches
Picture Study, 2010, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches
Wagon Growth, 2010, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches
History of the World, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 60 x 60 inches
Art History, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches
Graduates, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches
Water Lilies, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 60 x 60 inches
Baggage, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches
Signatures, 2012, oil on canvas with collage, 40 x 32 inches

Mary Ann Papanek-Miller

- Free Water Project: just add water*, 2005, acrylics, oils, graphite and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, and graphite on vellum, 72 x 126 inches (in 6 sections). Funded by a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board and the National Endowment for the Arts
Free Water Project: mown grass, I, 2007, acrylics, oils, and collage on weathered paper mounted on canvas, and graphite drawings on vellum, 62 x 79 inches (in 7 sections)
Looking for Alice: "taking (the) water (s)", 1.2, 2009, acrylics, collage and graphite on paper mounted on wood, double framed, 40 x 30 inches
Looking for Alice: "taking (the) water (s)", 1.3, 2009, acrylics, collage and graphite on paper mounted on wood, double framed, 40 x 30 inches
Free Water Project: "DO NOT FEED PIGEONS (CHICAGO MUNICIPAL CODE 728-710)", 2010, acrylics, collage, graphite on paper, with layered nylon cloth mounted on wood, and graphite drawing on vellum, 34 x 142 inches in 5 sections



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