animal vegetable mineral

Eva Lys Champagne

The University of Montana

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animal vegetable mineral

by

Eva Lys Champagne

Bachelor of Arts, Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA, 1995.

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Approved by:
Perry Brown, Associate Provost for Graduate Education
Graduate School

Professor Elizabeth Lo, Chair
Fine Art

Professor Brad Allen
Fine Art

Professor Hipolito Rafael Chacón
Art History

Professor Michael Monsos
Drama/Dance
animal vegetable mineral

Chairperson: Professor Elizabeth Lo

There is a radical unity supporting the vast diversity of appearances in nature that makes distinct categorizations like “animal, vegetable or mineral” superficial at best. The unifying element has been called energy, or, as Emerson put it, “thought is the common origin.” This guiding principle, a life spent by the sea, and an enduring fascination with nature’s forms, has resulted in my current body of work.

By combining formal references to animals, vegetables and minerals I create intentionally ambiguous ceramic sculptures that seem to exist in the fluid margin between categories. My aim is toward something composite that challenges the habitual assumption that objects must be either one thing or another in favor of a more open “both/and/maybe” interpretation of form. Through this investigation I hope to share my curiosity about the likeness that pervades the variety in life.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii

Images ......................................................................................................... iv

I. Introduction ............................................................................................... 1

II. Discussion ................................................................................................. 3

III. Conclusion .............................................................................................. 26
Images

1. Partial view of *animal vegetable mineral* installation..........5
2. View from entry hall into east end of gallery....................5
3. “Into the inevitable,” 2009.............................................7
4. View of “Common origin: drawing series, 
   entry hall of gallery..................................................11
5. “It has been a luxury to draw the breath of life II,” 2009.......14
6. Detail, “It has been a luxury to draw the breath of life.”.........15
7. “This ethereal water,” 2009.............................................17
8. “Permanence is but a word of degrees,” 2009.....................20
10. Details, “Sturdy and defying,” “After its own law,” “Into the 
    inevitable.”...............................................................21
11. Details, “The renewing principle,” “Magnanimity shows 
    itself,” “The tone of having is one, the tone of seeking is 
    another.”...............................................................22
12. Detail, “Navigable sea III: always a residuum unknown,”.....23
I

These are morning matters, pictures you dream as the final wave heaves you up on the sand to the bright light and drying air. You remember pressure, and a curved sleep you rested against, soft, like a scallop in its shell. But the air hardens your skin; you stand; you leave the lighted shore to explore some dim headland, and soon you’re lost in the leafy interior, intent, remembering nothing.

-Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Until coming to Montana, I’d always lived on the ocean. The Ocean. Actually, many oceans: the South China Sea, the Pacific Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico. My homes have been islands, coasts, bays and peninsulas.

My ocean-absorption was never apparent to me until I moved inland. When I did I lost my sense of direction. I dreamed of swimming and flying, of breathing under water. I suddenly needed to surround myself with reminders of the sea, artifacts of a life past, a lost love, or more precisely a long-distance affair of the heart. I began making work that had hollows. These hollows recalled tide pools and were places of shelter. This woman used to be an island and now she was so much flotsam. The hollows invited rest; offered refuge from the vast expanse of…land.
But, oh, such land that is western Montana! Silent, imposing boulder fields emanating heat in August, tiny wild orchids peeping from spring snow, silky soft verdant grasses that lengthen into strands of flowing gold. The rivers and creeks, with their pulsing, bubbling currents tickled and teased my melancholy, and drew me out of my shell.
We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul”

My current body of work, represented by the Thesis Exhibition animal vegetable mineral, is a result of my growing comprehension of the underlying unity that supports an enormous variety of appearances in nature. The drawings and sculptures intentionally encourage a marine interpretation, and this is for at least four reasons: one is personal, the second is metaphorical, the third historical, and the fourth scientific. The first is my affinity for and history with the ocean. The second reason is that the ocean has so many psychological and cultural connotations that aid my purpose. The sea represents the unconscious, the unknown and unknowable, dreams, mystery, dark fear, the brute force of nature, temptation and also the source; the womb. It is rich with metaphor. One need not have direct experience of the sea for it to bring up personal and powerful associations. It is an ideal setting for the suspension of presumptions.

The third, historical reason for the ocean-sense of animal vegetable mineral is that since scientific exploration of the seas began in the 18th century, marine biology has had a great impact on the visual arts. The drawings, paintings and lithographs of Anne Vallayer-Coster, Philip Henry Gosse, Sir Alistair Hardy and Ernst Haeckel among others established marine imagery as both a scientific record and art. The newly disseminated imagery
fascinated viewers because it was both real and fantastical. The Art Nouveau movement of the early 20th century presented it in the form of paintings, prints, architecture and interior design. Thus was the natural beauty and mystery of the sea stylized, civilized, and absorbed into cultural and domestic life.

Finally, it is underwater that we find so many life forms simultaneously exhibiting the traits of animal, vegetable and mineral, defying imposed categorizations in place since at least the 18th century. The most ubiquitous example of such an organism is the coral. Coral has been classified as “vegetable” because of its fixed, aborescent form, and its grove-like colonies. Coral’s process of calcification that creates its structural beauty justifies the “mineral” classification. Further, the individual polyps that constitute a coral colony are host to unicellular algae inside their own cells. The algae provide nutrition through photosynthesis to the animal host, which in turn fertilizes the algae with its recycled wastes, creating a mutualist form of symbiotic relationship. This example, and there are many more, flies in the face of the accepted assumption that an organism must be one thing or another.
Figure 1: Partial view of *animal vegetable mineral*.

Figure 2: View from entry hall into east end of gallery.
Every chemical substance, every plant, every animal in its growth teaches the Unity of Cause, the variety of appearance.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History”

If the ocean is the setting, then my conviction that all life is unified at a radical level is the subject. The sculptures and drawings of imaginary, ambiguous “creatures” in suspended animation are the result of a formal exploration of this premise.

The sculptural forms themselves are a literal, yet vague, interpretation of hybrid or composite entities. I say vague because nowhere in the body of work will the viewer find concise, rendered formal clues as to function or identity. There are no explicit details identifying anything as something specific or “real,” no talons, or eyes, or scales, mouths, leaves or petals or branches. Instead, functions of each whole sculpture and its parts are alluded to, suggested, but ultimately and intentionally left unresolved. The viewer must come to terms with the fact that he/she cannot classify the object; tuck it away in a simple definition so that all further thought about it can cease. And how might it feel to do this? To look at an object, get the distinct impression that it represents some living thing, and yet be unable to satisfactorily label it as any type of living thing? Perhaps the viewer will come to the same conclusion I have, which is more like the antithesis of a conclusion: that it doesn’t matter if I can’t name something. By not naming, it remains free and open to interpretation. If a thing is unnamed, it is invulnerable to new information; it can’t be contradicted and it is not exclusive, which means it is full of potential.
Perhaps I’m talking about more than art.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

-Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

Figure 3: “Into the inevitable,” 2009.
I think of the sculptures in the gallery as a collection of fossils retrieved from a secret dream-ocean where no conceptual separation exists between animal, vegetable and mineral. Retaining their vibrant color, but having lost all the weightlessness and soft wetness implied by their contours, they become like trophies or specimens brought home from an intuitive expedition to a place where,

There is one Link, one Life eternal, which unites everything in the universe -animate and inanimate- one wave of Life flowing through everything.

-Paramahansa Yogananda

The idea that underneath all the show, all the variety, we are made of the same stuff as the mountains, the rivers, the fish and the algae is one for which I have endless fascination. The idea that every thing may simply be an individualized focus of one Intelligence, that everything we experience through the senses is but thought condensed through intention and will until it can be perceived by our faulty, prejudiced sense organs, sets me free. I am pulled past the breakers of quotidian reflection and out to sea.
(Balmy nights floating on my back in the calm sea, facing an ocean of stars, and feeling utterly supported yet unbounded, as if my skin no longer held me apart from the soft arms of the atmosphere. I became the water and its movements were mine; I expanded and dissolved into the sea and the endless sky.)

(Straggling back up onto the land [after a near-drowning in 1991] I shakily headed a little ways down the beach and collapsed. I won’t pretend my thoughts were coherent, but I spent a long time absorbing what had happened, trying to discern when the danger really began. One of my first memories came to mind: I was three years old, on the beach in Amagansett, Long Island. It was of my parents’ very urgent scolding to “never turn your back on the ocean.” I thought about how the ocean changed from being the cool, splashy, inviting friend to being a roaring, churning, furious force abysmally deep in the space between two shivering breaths. )
On the right hand wall of the foyer of the gallery are ten small drawings in a row. The drawings are graphite on Bristol board. They are renderings of objects that appear to be some combination of animal, vegetable and mineral. The drawings were made from memory of sculptures that are in the next room. They’re meant to seem like specimen drawings: clean, idealized, devoid of context. All the “juice” of the subject is on the borders that frame the drawings themselves. These are made by collage, a layer of acrylic wash, and then a freehand pattern drawn in and colored with pencil. I made four sets of collage patterns, each set using its own unique set of materials that I’ve been collecting for over ten years: postage stamps from Africa, origami paper, rubbings of Greek coins, instruction labels for Chinese household products, old maps, etc, the accumulated memories of a peripatetic life, and are almost obliterated by the subsequent layers of wash and drawing for which the collage serves as a ground. The texture of the collage pattern is a constant throughout the series. After a cool or warm hued wash the final pattern is drawn. Each pattern originated from formal details of sculptures in the exhibit that were distorted, elaborated, repeated, decorated and treated with saturated color until they resembled fabric prints or wall paper. At first glance this border treatment may appear merely decorative, frivolous. But the source material for most decorative patterning is nature, and in this case the “nature” is the exhibit, *animal vegetable mineral*.

The drawings have been coated in castable plastic, thereby sealing them and also making visual reference to water. The drawings serve as an *entée* into the main body of work; as a partial catalogue that introduces the viewer to this other world next door.
Figure 4: View of “Common origin” drawing series, entry hall of gallery.
Sculpture is a three-dimensional projection of primitive feeling: touch, texture, size and scale, hardness and warmth, evocation and compulsion to move, live and love. Landscape is strong – it has bones and flesh and skin and hair. It has age and history and a principle behind its evolution.”

- Barbara Hepworth

The main gallery is dimly lit and painted a deep sea blue. The intended effect on the viewer is one of being simultaneously submerged and suspended. The room is filled with 24 sculptures in all: 12 floor pieces and 12 wall pieces. The scale of work ranges from five inches high to over five feet high (including stand). Much of the work is on stands of varying heights, made of steel and stained concrete. The curves of the thin steel bars contribute lift and movement to the works, which otherwise convey an undeniable sense of mass.

The exhibit’s color palette is saturated, including bright greens, turquoise, various pinks and crimsons, yellows, pale blues and ambers. Textures also vary: stony-smooth, knobby, pitted, ridged, dry and tacky, satin and glassy. A simple formal vocabulary has been used in many different arrangements, and in varying degrees of multiplicity to give a greater impression of variety than actually exists. That vocabulary consists of the main mass of a sculpture, cones, pinched cups, twists of clay, tiny beads and bumps, curved, short coils, scalloped carvings and scratches. There is nothing overly refined, and certainly nothing complex in and of itself.
Scale plays an important role in this body of work. Most of the very large sculptures would appear more readily acceptable if they were a fraction of their size. A good example of this is “It has been a luxury to draw the breath of life II,” (Figures 5 and 6) In its stand, it reaches well over five feet in height. It looks like some kind of worm, or sprout, but both of those things would be much smaller. As it is, “It has been a luxury” approaches the monstrous. Its surface is dry, stone-like, pale blue and green, with scale-like ridges encircling it along its length. A large knob, resembling a head, twists away from the snake-like body thrusting upward. Two spring green, satiny, limb-like, half-uncurled tendrils emerge from the end opposite the “head.” It is unclear whether these tendrils are a part of the main body, or if they are being forced from the main body, or even if they are being consumed by it. But there is movement that is hard to define as benign, ecstatic or violent, and the title, which is a declaration in the past tense, adds to the mystery. Had this sculpture been five inches high, it would have lacked drama, and it would have been easily dismissed.
Figure 5: “It has been a luxury to draw the breath of life II,” 2009.
Figure 6: Detail, “It has been a luxury to draw the breath of life II.”
A piece that is diminutive in scale but seems to represent something grander, is “This ethereal water,” (Figure 7) It is mounted on a wall shelf, and stands at ten inches high. It is a bumpy, light yellow color, with some manganese brown accent. The form is a bottom-heavy ovoid, with a deep, erosion-like hollow from the top down the center which opens to the front of the piece. Inside this canyon-like space is a pool of turquoise glaze that runs like a river along a ridge out from the center of the piece and down the lower outside. The blue glaze has been covered with plastic to enhance the watery effect. This is a placid, yet also mysterious piece. It’s the size and shape of some tropical fruits, or a small exposed tree stump, yet it seems to contain an entire landscape within it.

I often have deliberately chosen scale, textures and glaze surfaces that seem incongruent with form in order to cause what I most desire to offer the viewer: wonder. This work is playful, but it’s serious play, about expansive ideas. I’m not trying to fool anyone by making these forms ambiguous, I’m trying to share a healthy feeling of curiosity and fascination about the nature of life.
To see a world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wildflower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

-William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

*Figure 7: “This ethereal water,” 2009.*
The material and processes the potter uses are not a category distinct and separate from the expression the artist makes with them.

-Michael Cardew

To make art, I require quiet, solitude, experiences in nature, reading and contemplation. Often I “see” whole forms in my mind as I wait for sleep. In my mind’s eye they are moving somehow—not a lot, but subtly pulsing, rotating, breathing. I draw a good bit, usually to “lock in” an image that I don’t want to lose. I mentally revisit the image often because the drawn version can rarely capture it satisfactorily. I am an intuitive artist, and a challenge for me has been to harness that intuition; make it the instrument of my will, and not the reverse.

My clay is a very strong stoneware body. I build using coils, and hand-pounded slabs. My tools are few: a scoring tool, a serrated metal rib, a smooth rib and a paddle. For making surface texture I may add a tool or two, but most often the surface is finished with my hands or one of the above tools. The very low-tech approach is deliberate: I wish to interact with the clay as directly as possible.

Coil building can be slow, especially for large work that needs time to set up enough to support itself. For this reason, and to make the best use of time, I always have at least two pieces going at once. Most often I have two or three large pieces and several smaller ones in process at any given time. The measured pace of coil building and being able to move from one to another work in progress allows me many occasions to consider each’s development
while also keeping a perspective on the big picture: how the work is shaping up as a whole.

After a significant drying period, the work is bisque-fired and then glazed with low-fire glazes. As with building, I like to keep my glaze application methods simple and direct: brushing, pouring and sponging are my preferred methods. I use primarily two base glazes, varying them with several different colorants to change hue and also tactility of the glaze surfaces. Many sculptures undergo two or three glaze firings in order to build up layers of glazes.

Finally, some sculptures require a little something extra at the end, like a glassy pool, or gold tips. After the last glaze firing I sometimes pour castable plastic into pieces, or do a luster fire, or add gold leaf to details.

There are so many steps and stages to making a single piece, that my original intent for a piece can change along the way as new perspectives takes hold. I try to avoid stubbornness when this happens, and allow the piece to guide my hands. It’s a delicate balance to maintain between controlling the material, enforcing my vision and will, and allowing the nature of the material and new ideas to lead.

Building this body of work, what’s been going through my mind is: “Make what I need to make, don’t worry if it looks like art or not.” Wonder, play, what if? Why not? Pretend, awkwardness, grace, enjoyment. Many times I would be laughing out loud as I completed a piece. It was finally a bubbling up of joy in what I was making; I have been enjoying myself.
Figure 8: “Permanence is but a word of degrees,” 2009.

Figure 9: “Fluid and volatile,” 2009.
Figure 10: Details, “Sturdy and defying,” “After its own law,” “Into the inevitable.”
Figure 11: Details, “The renewing principle,” “Magnanimity shows itself,” “The tone of having is one, the tone of seeking is another.”
For the artist, dialogue with nature remains the *conditio sine qua non*.

-Paul Klee

Surround yourself with the best company, those who will inspire you and strengthen your discrimination and will power.

-Paramahansa Yogananda

No one makes work in a vacuum, and I gratefully acknowledge many influences to my way of perceiving and thinking about the world, to my working methods and philosophy, and to my sense of beauty. I have quoted several of these throughout the text, but will more explicitly describe their impact upon me here.
First and foremost is the simple and indispensable experience of walking, looking, swimming, listening, floating, sitting, breathing and being in the natural world. More than anything else, nature is my master and mentor.

I have been strongly influenced by reading. I read to lift myself up a little higher, to try and understand better the nature of existence. I read biographies, memoirs, poetry, essays and science. Two authors rise to the top of this group in importance, and they are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Paramahansa Yogananda. Both share a deep understanding of the workings of nature, and how humans fit into this living system. They are both poetic and affirmative but not the least bit sentimental. These were great men, and after nature itself, they are my “best company.”

Finally, several visual artists have influenced me and played a role in shaping my aspirations as a maker. Barbara Hepworth has been significant to my appreciation of form, and of form as content. Her work, especially during her Cornwall period, is so successfully evocative of the sea and its sweeping tides. Her sculptures’ masses and lines possess a lyrical grace and balance; they reveal a masterful manipulation of scale, and an intimate, confident understanding of her materials.

David Shaner also created work that expressed an intimacy with place. His “Cirque” series is important for me because of its landscape-as-body quality, and the manipulation of scale. As with Emerson, Yogananda and Hepworth, Shaner’s work has always struck me as poetic and affirmative, without sinking to sentimentality.
Richard Devore’s tall vessels showed me early in my experience of ceramics how a vessel can be so much more than that. These quiet, but imposing pieces became for me sculptures, landscapes, and even skin and bone. He mastered ceramic materials and balance, grace and subtlety in a way that didn’t call attention to these things, but transcended them, and expanded my understanding and appreciation of the vessel as a formal subject.

The last artist I will credit as an important influence (although there are many more) is Sadashi Inuzuka. His installations create a meditative space, an alternative to day to day reality, while addressing issues crucial to that reality. His intense, solitary work process, clarity of intent, and excellence at altering an environment to elicit a visceral yet contemplative response from the viewer have earned my admiration and deep respect. I still have so much to learn.
Can ceramic sculpture convey a feeling of wonder? If so, is it reasonable to believe it can then guide that wonder toward thoughts on the nature of existence? My strong sense of the ridiculous chides me with these questions incessantly. While I believe that the artist’s intentions can become embodied by the artwork, still it requires a receptive viewer to complete the communication. Since I cannot guarantee the receptivity of my audience, all I can do is continue to clarify my intentions and improve my communication skills through the medium I’ve chosen: clay. I am glad but not satisfied if the viewer sees in my work only the strangeness, the playfulness and the awkward grace of my forms. Nonetheless, making art is honorable work, and not entirely dependent on specific viewer responses for success. Often I feel my work is part of a conversation I’m having with…well, I can’t say with whom, precisely. And by not naming, that conversation remains full of potential.