



**ART REVIEW**

**Artists use new tools to ask age-old questions**

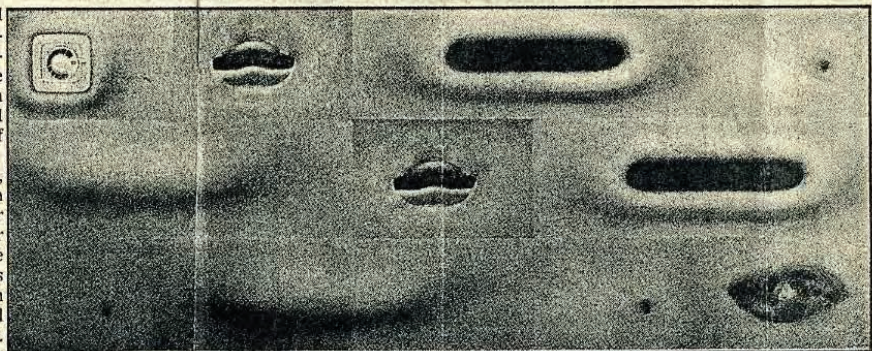
By **BILL VAN SICLEN**  
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A display case filled with giant beetles, a flock of cast-bronze fruit bats and a "painting" made with smoke and algae are among the entries in *Natural Spectacles*, a survey of the creative connections between art, nature and technology at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery.

The result is an intriguing but conceptually muddled look at how contemporary artists are using computers, video equipment and other high-tech tools to grapple with some of the oldest (and newest) questions in art. What is the relationship between man and nature? What is the

relationship between art and nature? Can the same technology-obsessed culture that produced Love Canal and Three Mile Island learn to live in harmony with the natural world? Or is technology itself inherently destructive?

The problem isn't the art, which has been selected with a keen eye by Debra Bricker Balken, a freelance curator based in Boston. Nor is the sometimes steamy, sometimes chilly *menage a trois* between nature, art and science a dull topic for an art exhibit. Indeed, given the increasing attention being paid to such things as global warming,



David Winton Bell Gallery

**NATURAL SPECTACLES**, which includes Tishan Hsu's *Natural Language*, offers an intriguing but conceptually muddled look at how artists use high-tech tools.

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**Exhibit draws on tradition, technology**

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rainforest destruction and bioengineering, the subject seems positively inspired.

The problem is the context — or, more accurately, the lack of context — in which the art is presented.

The chief culprit here is Balken's catalog essay, a virtual compendium of art-world clichés, historical half-truths and fuzzy critical thinking. For example, in trying to provide a historical context for the show, Balken says that "landscape painting made something of a comeback in the 1980s after languishing for more than a hundred years."

Even in an essay written for a general audience, that's a rather daring oversimplification. What about Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, John Marin and Charles Burchfield, to name just a few of the American artists who have explored landscape in the 20th century?

Balken also seems to think that landscape painting disappeared entirely during the abstract art boom of the 1940s and '50s. But what are paintings such as Jackson Pollock's

*Autumn Rhythm* and Willem de Kooning's famous studies of Springs, Long Island, if not attempts to translate landscape into the painted language of Abstract Expressionism?

Balken is better in her discussions of individual art works. But even here her rhetorical posturing sometimes gets in the way of her critical intelligence.

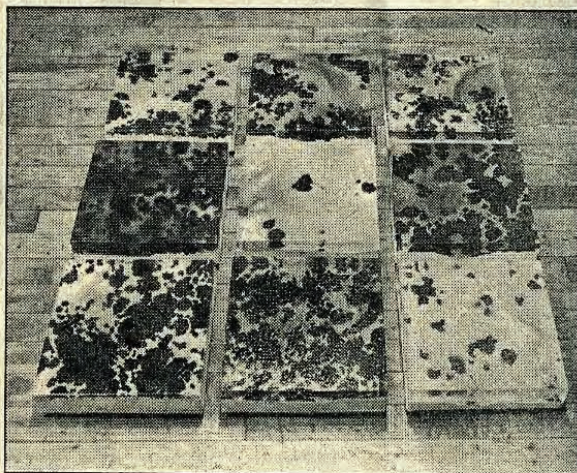
A video installation by New York artist Mary Lucier, for example, is described as challenging "our received notions of nature — that it is essentially a passive and thoroughly subdued mechanism." This may accurately reflect the feelings of Texas oil barons, logging company executives and a few troglodyte members of Congress. But it's a ludicrous description of contemporary art lovers, most of whom understand the fragility and interconnectedness of nature only too well.

**A top-notch selection**

But enough griping.

Balken deserves credit for assembling a top-notch cast of contemporary artists, including Ashley Bickerton, Rebecca Horn, Tishan Hsu and Liz Phillips.

As a group, these artists are concerned with what might be called the eco-poetics of the Information Age. For the most part, they're aware of technology's shortcomings — its history of promising more than it actually delivers and its Faustian tendency to be both destructive and cre-



David Winton Bell Gallery

**NATURAL SPECTACLES** has a top-notch cast of artists, including Ashley Bickerton, who created *Flight from Borneo to Sulawesi*.

ative. At the same time, they're fascinated by the expressive possibilities of computers, digital graphics programs, VCRs, even motion detectors.

Think of them as 21st-century prospectors, eager to stake their claims to the virtual frontier.

Richard Rosenblum and Peter Campus, for example, use sophisticated computer graphics programs to create pictures that blend the real with the surreal.

Rosenblum, in particular, seems to enjoy mixing cutting-edge technology with more traditional ideas about art and nature. Typical is *Deluge*, a computer-generated image of a huge wave crashing on an imaginary landscape. The picture's epic sweep and dramatic subject matter evoke 19th-century notions of the Romantic sublime, while the huge wave itself recalls the famous whitecap in Hokusai's *The Wave*. The title, meanwhile, invites comparison with the deluge of Genesis.

**Low-tech delights**

At the low-tech end of the spectrum are artists such as Rebecca Horn and David Nyzio. In Horn's *Nightwood-Djuna Barnes*, a metal hammer gently strikes a wire mesh ball filled with flour. This sends a ghostly puff of flour drifting down onto the open pages of a book. (The book is presumably Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, a famous experimental novel from the 1930s.)

Nyzio, meanwhile, contributes one of the show's most spectacular pieces — a huge "painting" whose sooty black and luminous green markings were made with a combination of smoke and algae. It's a wonderful work, one that looks back to the so-called "stain paintings" of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis and, more distantly, to the light-filled Hudson River School landscapes of the 19th century.

It's also fun to look at. Imagine yourself suspended over a giant petri dish and you'll just about have it.

*Natural Spectacles* continues through June 16 at the David Winton Bell Gallery, List Art Center, 64 College St. in Providence. Hours are Mon.-Fri. 11-4 and Sat.-Sun. 1-4.

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THE PROVIDENCE  
JOURNAL-BULLETIN  
FRIDAY,  
MAY 3, 1996