

DIANA DOPSON

---

BIOTA



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

---

AUGUST 7 - SEPTEMBER 13, 2003

AUSTIN, TEXAS

## DIANA DOPSON

### BIOTA

The luminous color photographs of Diana Dopson conjure up the sort of day when the sky is an impossible shade of blue and the buzz of bees in the foxgloves is a call to prayer. In her bemused renderings, which hover effortlessly between the mediums of painting and photography, Diana operates as a harvester of sensory experience. Looking for allusions, she refrains from simple description. An ordinary suburban garden is captured at the moment it heaves with fecundity, and is sealed in wax to protect the fantasy of comfort found there. Saturated hues reverberate underneath a varnish of stasis that simultaneously reveals and conceals a dream of plenitude. The viewer, upon encountering this work, pokes through the hazy veneer of expectation and finds that the world within vacillates between poetic whimsy and pathos.

Using a process that includes binding her photographs to boards and fixing them beneath several layers of encaustic, Diana veils each visual meditation with tactile experience. The adherence of an organic substance such as beeswax to the slick surface of the color photograph acts to ritualize the preservation of the small epiphanies attained on a walk in May. Functioning, in a sense, as a quest to embalm physical reverie and keep it from dissipating into memory. The illusion of three-dimensionality inherent in this method also serves to remind us of the discrepancy between object and image, between experience and art.

The work is primarily photographic but the easy details commonly associated with the medium are rendered obscure by the wax surface and the use of blur. Tactics apparently employed to diffuse meaning and to demote the primacy of vision as a tool for interpretation. Other formal strategies include the

avoidance of conventional photographic representation and framing. What is viewed in this repertoire is an infusion of tumbling, swirling, swaying colors that often permeate beyond the borders of the photograph. The absence of a dominant site within the composition to rest our eyes reinforces the idea that nothing is emphasized. Light and air become the primary subject matter and we are inclined to fill the space with memories of our own experience; to spiral into a voyage of self-discovery along with the artist. Like Narcissus, we are lured into observing the world through a shimmering pool.

The entrapment suggested by encasing the images in wax goes beyond the usual distillation of time and space implicit in a photograph. Lack of focus and the use of blur evoke a sense of the fleeting and the transitory. The wax helps to metaphorically withhold its passing. In one image, the camera is focused on a chromatic awning of leaves scattered across a turquoise



*Biota, Box 30.* 2003, Archival inkjet prints on Somerset velvet with mixed media 24" x 10"

substrate in the foreground, leaving the rest of the picture plane vacant, save for a hint of sky. The leaves undulate in form and meaning, almost taking on the appearance of stars. Thus, we are deposited at the portal where day and night converge. The point of view and use of negative space empties the image of the weight of obvious articulation; what remains is wonder. Space replaces the human element, triggering in the viewer the sensual pleasure of walking beneath a kaleidoscopic canopy. Fragments of flora and insects in flight woven throughout this work seem to exist not as they are, but by virtue of the conditions in which they are found. It is in this manner, that Diana extends an invitation to dismiss our habitual responses and participate in an ethereal rhapsody. For these lyrical depictions seem destined to perform as a sigh or an utterance would, defying language and other classifying tools used to hew our perception of the world. In each child-like isolated moment offered, joy precedes analytical thinking.

In a piece from the series entitled *Emerald and Other Avenues* executed while the artist was living in Oregon, the vernacular regularity of a roof peak reaches up toward a cloudless sky. The formal abstraction of a white triangle contrasted against a pair of conical trees lull us into believing that nature may be reduced to a cultural artifact. In the verdant neighborhoods where Diana has ambled with her camera, nature is encoded; it exists as the manufactured product of reality and myth. Here lies the borderland between society and spectacle where plants are

coifed into submission and insects become iridescent soothsayers. Yet, despite our most earnest efforts to control and dominate, the natural world lays claim to flux. These sites vibrate beneath their orderly facades. The blackberries continue to clamor over the fence. An ancient roar can be heard beneath the carefully arranged stones.

Upon moving back to her home state of Texas, Diana found the landscape remarkably different from what had surrounded her in the Pacific Northwest. Equally as beautiful but more austere, the muted palette of Austin allowed her room to breathe, and an opportunity to reconsider her content. This shift in her environment prompted an obvious change in the work, as evidenced by her latest series, *Biota*, in which she continues to explore the uneasy alliance between nature and culture but in a more critical way. Delving into the methods that inform and sustain our perception of the cosmos, Diana appropriates the form of the triptych to imply an equal measure of reverence (or irreverence) for the ways that science and religion have historically attempted to suppress the natural world. It is apparent with this investigative approach, her focus has expanded from the genre of landscape and now includes the field of entomology and its role in the conservation of the microcosm.

A variety of insect species begin to infiltrate the images. Often photographed within the confining structure of a natural history museum, there is an element of contrivance and theatricality to these studies. Butterflies that once whirled like dervishes through

the pollen infused air are laid out on a white table, while a chorus of vegetation looms in the periphery. Fashioned after an altarpiece typically depicting the Crucifixion, the insects are splayed out for visual inspection in the center of each triptych. Reduced to mere specimens or bourgeois trophies, a giant pin quells their journey. The implication is clear; the simple act of encasing the image in wax is not enough to hold back the entropy inherent in the natural world. Culture demands that a sacrifice be made for the sake of knowledge. Bugs are gleaned from their environment and preserved before they disappear from the earth all together. They are pinned to cases and submitted to the scrutinizing light of the laboratory. Labels identify them as official subjects and offer the location of their demise. These slips of paper exhibiting boldfaced information provide the setting for the fallen creatures and we find that we long for the return of the vibrant mantle of nature where they were previously viewed. It appears that language has entered the realm of the senses and left it bereft.

Yet, there is beauty to be found even in these conditions. Diana's use of hyper-real color creates an illusion of abundance within the restrained institutional atmosphere. Glittering aqua beetles march across the frame in defiant animation. The metallic blue bodies of flies perform a cryptic dance on the sterile platform. And it becomes evident that Diana senses what other

artists have known for centuries, that there is honor and romance to be found in ruins.

In both style and content, Diana's compelling collections inherited from the natural world reflect her affinity for nineteenth-century thinkers such as William Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau, the latter whose quote she sent to me one cloudy Oregon day;

"...but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things."

Diana Dopson is creating, with this body of work, a philosophy of spring. A world on the threshold of sunlight and rain, a world that exists in that uncanny space between what is real and what is imagined, what is desired and what *is*. We are made dizzy first by the brilliance and then by its diffusion. Her inquisitive nature leads us to a place where the residue of color trailing a butterfly's navigation through the summer twilight becomes the iconography of desire. We run our hands through the pool and find the sandy bottom. It is a gentle indictment, a call to arms to aid in the protection of this fragile world.

Essay by

*Colleen Choquette-Raphael*

*Adjunct Professor of Art*

*University of Oregon*

*Summer 2003*

---

**Diana Dopson** resides in Austin, Texas. She received her M.F.A. in photography (2001) and her M.A. in art history (1997) from the University of Oregon. She also completed undergraduate degrees from the University of Texas at Austin, where she was valedictorian and an All-American tennis player. She was awarded the Edilia and François Auguste de Montêquin Fellowship by the Society of Architectural Historians in 1997 for her research on the Puebloan architecture of the American Southwest. In 1998, she completed the Corso Internazionale sull'Architettura di Andrea Palladio in Vicenza, Italy. For the past six years, she has led walking tours in Italy and Texas for Butterfield and Robinson. She is also an Austin board member of the Nature Conservancy.



*Emerald and Other Avenues 13*. 2001, Chromogenic color prints on board with wax 24" x 20"



This Panel: *Biota, Box 23*. 2003, Archival inkjet prints on Somerset velvet with mixed media 24" x 10"

Color Cover Panel: *Biota, Box 17*. Detail 2003, Archival inkjet prints on Somerset velvet with mixed media 24" x 10"

Color Back Panel: *Emerald and Other Avenues 6*. 2001, Chromogenic color prints on board with wax 24" x 20"





## W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**Stephanie Barko**, *President*

**Laura Bailie**

**Judy Birdsong**

**Laura Pickett Calfee**

**Diane Carter**

**Julie Churchill**

**Fern Santini**

**Jane Lilly Schotz**

**Patricia Shipton**

**Maury Sullivan**

**Natalie Thomas**

**Alexandra Wettlaufer**

### STAFF

**Chris Cowden**, *Executive Director*

**Kathryn Davidson**, *Associate Director*

**Lee Bickerstaff**, *Operations Manager*

**Katherine McQueen**, *Assistant*

**Debe Bentley**, *Gift Shop Manager*

**Lynn Boland**, *Preparator*

This publication has been made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts. Special thanks to BAH! Design.

Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,706 artists in 217 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 272 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to

receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

1710 LAVACA ST.

AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701

(512) 477-1064

wtw@texas.net

www.womenandtheirwork.org