

ISBN-13: 9780888717238

Ray Cronin: "Domesticate" (ex. Catalogue) Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2002.

Domesticate

David Diviney, Erik Edson, Alexander Graham, Shelly Rahme, Lyla Rye
by Ray Cronin

The artists in *Domesticate* have made works that deal, in various ways and in varying degrees, with human separation from the natural world. Whether they address the chasm between humans and animals, the various systems humans need in order to physically survive in the world, or with the way that we try to remake the world in our own image, these artists can't forget that we are, in large part, as much products of our technology as we are of our biology.

We live in the world but we aren't *of* it. This paradox has informed Western culture since its inception – even our original myth, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, is a tale of losing connection, of trading harmony for the knowledge of good and evil, gaining individuality at the cost of the inevitability of death. Human evolution also tells a story of separation, of growing away from nature towards culture. Where would one look to find the natural habitat of a human? Is there anything *natural* about humans at all? Bataille says *non*, and I tend to agree with him. Our habitat is our culture, and our culture is manifested in the world through technology.

Technology allows its wielders the illusory comfort of creating new worlds, but this comfort comes at a price. We need money in order to access the technologies through which we define ourselves as human; somehow we in the West have allowed ourselves to be defined by our access to things. We have traded the individual freedom of agency for the illusory freedom of consumerism.

Western culture is the extreme case, but all human cultures have evolved away from nature, it's just that some have retained more of a memory of what it was like before the Fall. In these other origin stories, although difference is assumed, the worlds of humans and animals are still parallel, lacking the near total disconnection from the earth characteristic of urban life.

What is the natural habitat of a human? Much like the animals that we have domesticated, our natural environment is a place of our own construction. The natural habitat of cattle is a farm, the natural habitat of a house cat is a house, and the natural habitat of a human is a culture. Bataille was right: *we train ourselves*.

Image: Lyla Rye, *Dome*, 1999.

Invisible Cities

Technology has made us nomads and tourists by giving us access to the entire planet. Our experience of each culture is interpreted through the thought structures that we carry around with us. I envision my structures and places where an individual can see the external world and contemplate the mental frameworks that we have constructed. –Lyla Rye¹⁰

As our natural habitat is culture, we no longer have roots. As Rye points out, technology has made us nomads. *Nomadic Architecture* shares with the other works in this exhibition a sense of creating a vantage point. The viewer is invited to engage with this work, to stand inside, to pass through, and otherwise be contained within the sculpture. Their portability lends them a certain seeming fragility, but it is belied by the obvious tensile strength of the objects. Like a cross between a building and an exoskeleton, one of these sculptures offers the illusion of shelter for the body without seeming to separate that body from the world. Like clothing, these objects are meant to travel with us on our journeys. Their evident portability – their nylon carrying sacks ready to hand, the way that Rye has sanded the joints so that the objects seams are readily visible – suggests that these objects have utility, that they collapse easily for our convenience. But it is just a suggestion – any journey that the viewer takes with these works is a mental one. These sculptures look like tools (like tents and like architecture), but they resist being used. That looking like is important here – these works seem familiar, seem as if one should understand their function, but it is an understanding that slips away as one engages with the work. “As my structures are made up of many identical elements, the final forms have an optical quality that is both mesmerizing and physically unsettling.”¹¹ That unsettling feeling is like the tingling as the feeling returns to a foot that was ‘asleep,’ it’s not exactly a pleasant sensation, but you can’t walk otherwise.

As nomads we pick and choose from whatever cultures we happen upon. Rye’s sculptures mimic this wandering with their mélange of architectural styles: a latticework trellis echoes a column and a yurt, a Greek temple and a Mongolian tent. “My tents merge many traditional strategies and forms with contemporary materials and Western architectural history to create composite structures that come from an indeterminate place and time.”¹²

We are urban nomads, wanderers in our self-styled ‘virtual’ worlds. Rye’s structures for viewing lack anything to make them work as shelters – in them we are always exposed, and never quite comfortable. “We wander in the frame, the absence of the frame, in our bodies, in space... Art is wandering par excellence...”¹³

Back to the Garden?

So we are domesticated – culture – broken, as it were. Technology, the sum of the tools and techniques with which we manipulate things, has allowed us to disconnect from the natural world. However, that separation is based in wishful thinking, for

while we live in our heads, and while we all create our own worlds, our bodies are still dependent upon this same earth.

The challenge then, is how to reconnect, all the while recognizing that we are *unnatural*, that we will continue to live in our own, all too human, worlds. This gap between nature and culture is a lack that defines us as human. We have indeed been cast out of the garden, but we did it to ourselves. Whether the taste of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil is bitter or sweet is a personal call.