



The Two of Us

James Surls and Charmaine Locke



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Mission Statements _____

CMU Art Gallery

Located in downtown Grand Junction, Colorado, 437CO is the art gallery of Colorado Mesa University's Art and Design Department. Committed to a personal approach, Colorado Mesa University is a dynamic learning environment that offers abundant opportunities for students and the larger community to grow intellectually, professionally, and personally. By celebrating exceptional teaching, academic excellence, scholarly and creative activities, and by encouraging diversity, critical thinking, and social responsibility, CMU advances the common good of Colorado and beyond.

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Figure 1



Figure 2

Both of Us:

Reconciling opposites in a divided world

Steven Bradley

One day in September, 2009, German students from Leipzig University listened to LeMoine LaPointe, Director of the American Indian Center in Minneapolis, talk about the place of Native Americans in contemporary American society. “We’re still here,” he told them.

“We still have our ceremonies and our vision for the future of our Nation still exists. That notion was once considered Romantic, but in today’s world we know that this notion is real. We know that our Mother the Earth is someone we can always depend on for nourishment and comfort. She’ll never turn her back on you. But if we start detaching ourselves from our Mother, isolating ourselves from her, then what we once thought was ours is no longer so. That’s where the world is now, separated from its source. But we indigenous peoples never forgot our relationship and our responsibility to the Earth and to the Sky. Our philosophy of life is in marked contrast to what we see

in the rest of this country. And now people are coming to us, seeking advice and new values, in order to lead a more peaceful life... And you will see us all over the world, saying just what I tell you today, in order to try to save the world.”¹

The following spring, I had those same German students in my class and we had a lively discussion about their encounter with the Native American elder. In the face of all the conflicts that assail the world every day, was this expression of a connection with the natural world and an inner reality that it reveals just a naïve attitude or an example of insight into a real solution for our troubled world? Could the exercise of these values really save the world?

I think of these conversations with my students when I listen to James Surls and Charmaine Locke talk about their art, about what concerns them, about what they are trying to accomplish. Like my former students and, frankly, like LeMoine LaPointe, James and Charmaine are keenly aware of the contrast between the superficial concerns and interests of the present day as we see them play out in daily news reports and the behaviors of others around us, and the deeper activity of seeking timeless wisdom and expressing that wisdom as a message in visual form. Both of them recognize a connection in their creative pursuit with artists from traditional cultures throughout history and James refers to that connection as “fishing from the same pond” as he explained to me.

“If you were a Navajo, Iroquois or an Aztec, any of those traditional cultures, what pond did you fish from? They didn’t have TV, they didn’t have radio, they didn’t have Jeeps or gasoline. It was foot paths, it was land travel, it was mind travel. And they looked way off, they looked to the stars. And they absorbed from their existing universe, the trees, the rocks, the rivers, the mountains, the animals. Where did they fit in relation to all these things? That was what concerned them. If that’s your food source, your psychological resource, and you make art about it, you’re going to come to the same conclusions no matter where you are on the planet.”²

For both artists the nature of their creative pursuit involves not only an implicit identification with the spiritual values of traditional cultures, but also the recognition and acceptance of dichotomies and dualities that are at the center of human experience from ancient times to the present day. The drawings of both artists often read as visual “chants” in ceremonies that narrate this spiritual journey, acknowledging opposing forces, and pointing the path toward reconciliation and acceptance of the dichotomies of existence.



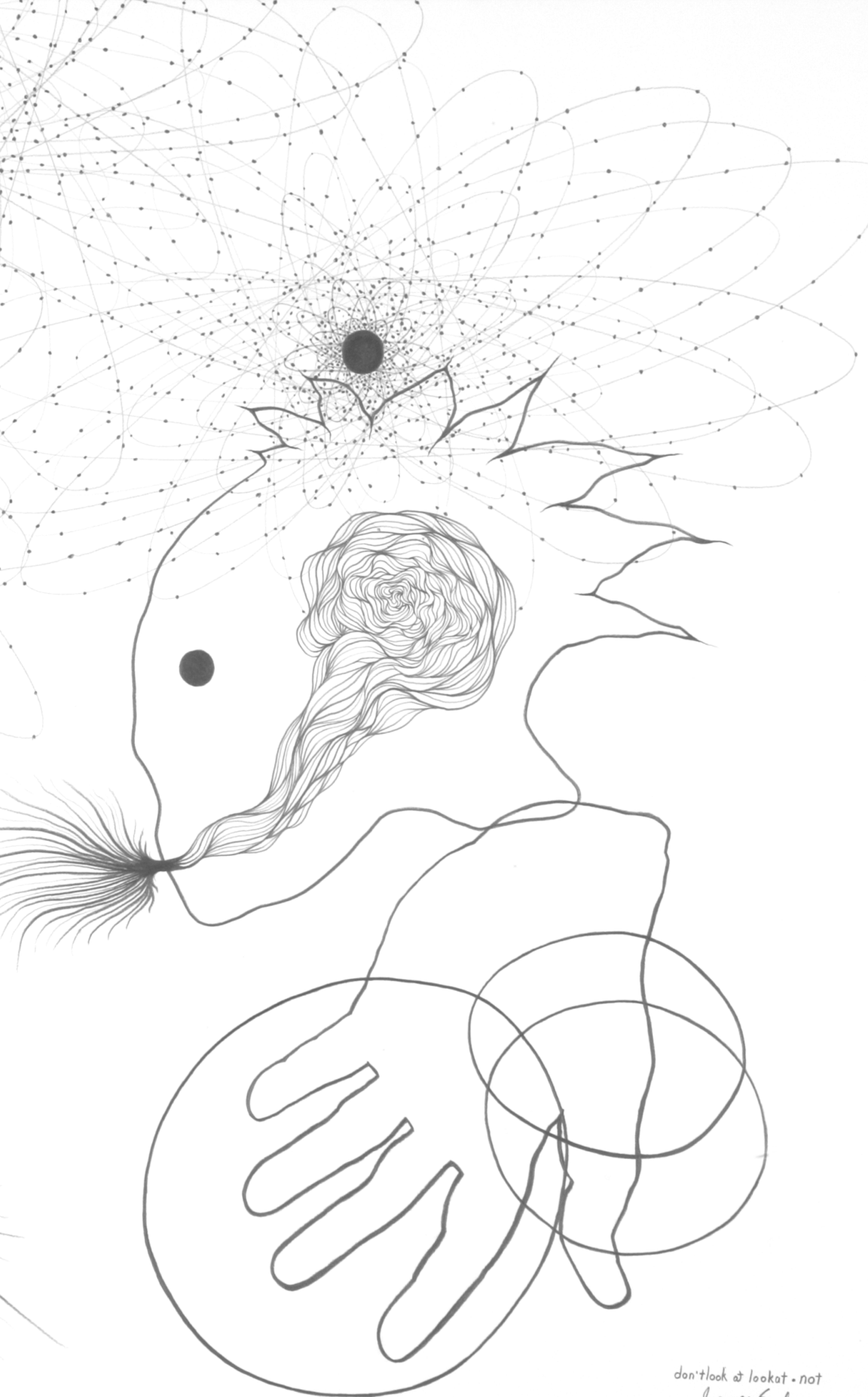


Figure 3

don't look at look at - not
James Sunka
2005

Charmaine's five Interior portrait drawings provide an example of this process. Each of the drawings represents a distinct internal state manifested externally in the portrait face. As she explained to me, "Those are about moments in time, states of being. States of distress, states of harmony, psychological states that we experience... Cavernous canyons in the heart chakra is a pretty painful state of being and feeling on fire with passion, exuberance or anger or whatever might create this is a similar painful state of being. The lotus on the other hand is a symbol of union with the Eternal Being. Tornadoes ripping through your soul is the opposite. They're pretty literal in a way. I'm pretty direct in my expression, but everyone may not see that."³

Her five female figures, which she refers to as "resources", reinforce the inspiration she draws from modern psychology combined with the insights from traditional cultures. Collectively the figures represent forces and elements of the natural and spiritual regions that both sustain and confound the human experience. An Yves Klein-blue figure sprouts long pins and symbols that recreate the traditional points of acupuncture, "points drawn into the body, then transformed and sent back out into the universe in a purified state... a very peaceful, meditative, calm personality." A pale figure holding tiny marionette-like male figures embodies *Fate*, dominated by a cold, emotionless face. "Fate is playing with you on another level that doesn't involve compassion or feeling. That very capricious red hat is like the exclamation point to emphasize that".⁴

For his part, James also introduces us to contrasts and conflicts in much of his recent sculptural work. The exhibit features an example from his *Rough God* series, a serpentine section of steel bursting with long, curving spikes suggesting an energy that is both germinating and threatening. The title is meant to hint at an intended meaning. "If you have the word "God" and the word "Rough" in front of it...to me that's a pretty significant clue. You could go off down the road for the rest of your life trying to make the distinction between the Good God and the Mean God, Demons and Angels. Religion is just chock full of these opposites and that's what I want to reference." Similarly, *Black Thorn Flower* references the dualities that we often encounter as we contemplate our surroundings—soft and graceful forms surrounded by threatening spikes, both cloaked in black.⁵

As they venture into the artistic territory of existential dichotomies and oppositions, both Charmaine and James remain securely connected to significant touchstones that are quite personal for them. The concept of home is particularly important in this respect. Two of James' carved works, *Being Home* and *On Being Home*, demonstrate the power of this concept for him which is fully



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

revealed in the installation piece *All I Ever Really Wanted Was to Go Home with You*. Home as a sustaining, protecting element is also a recurring theme in Charmaine's art. The shape of the hat worn by her figure which celebrates bees and honey is an obvious beehive, but it is also meant to recall communal ovens used by traditional societies around the world. The shape also recalls larger womb-like dwelling forms which frequently appear in her earlier work.⁶

A second touchstone for both artists is the concept of Giving and Offering. Charmaine's sculptural work often has a strongly devotional quality. That is particularly evident in the bronze figures titled *Open Book*. Like a figurative open book, the multi-armed female presents us with six objects, including an actual open book, which can sustain and guide us throughout a life journey. The giving theme shows up rather whimsically in James' drawings *The Giving of a Seed Bulb* and *On Hand*, but the underlying message is clear and the sentiment is serious.

James' colorful explanation of ancient artists "fishing from the same pond" as he and Charmaine, drawing on the same experiences of their environment that still inspire the two artists currently, also led him to an important insight into the relationship of his art to the broader world of contemporary art. He is fond of telling about his revelation in a New York gallery as he examined the simple geometric forms and machined surfaces of Minimalist art.

"You would look at the floor, you would look at the walls of the interior, they were all gridded. You go outside and look at the sidewalks. You look at the buildings. They're all gridded. The blocks are gridded. It's grid, grid, grid, etc. That's New York Regionalism at its height. Those artists have conjured meaning from their world. Okay, I'm in the woods of East Texas, I'm conjuring meaning from my environment just like they conjured meaning from theirs. That's when I began to realize that I can accept my reality and feel good in it, I don't have to aspire to make my art fit into another environment."⁷ His recognition that the artist's journey begins in his own "backyard", accepting the influence of place on his own art and acknowledging the same in others, became for him an initial exercise in reconciling opposites, in this case artistic styles that seem to emanate from opposite poles.



Figure 9





Figure 10



Their interest in the values and creative sources of artists from traditional cultures and the apparently drastic differences between the visual language of their art and the art to be found in centers like New York might suggest that James and Charmaine are working very much outside the mainstream of modern art. In fact, they are not and it is their connection with the traditions of Surrealism that help us place their art within the continuum of modern art of the past century. Surrealism was the most significant artistic movement of the last century to rely heavily on the exploration of the human psyche and the subconscious and the Surrealists developed techniques of accessing inner vision and translating the subconscious into visual imagery. With intentions no less serious than the practices of Native American ceremonies, the Surrealists believed their approach could resolve the dichotomies and contradictions of human existence and offer the modern world a path to spiritual salvation by expanding individual experience to encompass the dream world. André Breton, the chief spokesman for Surrealism, explained this motivation.



Figure 11

“If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them...Why should I not expect from the sign of the dream more than I expect from a degree of consciousness which is daily more acute? Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life?”⁸

Both James and Charmaine spent considerable time studying the works of the original Surrealists in the Menil collection during their years in Houston. The effect of that experience shows up both in their approach to creating imagery and in their fascination with themes of inner vision and dreams to which they were already predisposed. And James' drawing style is certainly indebted to the automatic drawing techniques and biomorphic shapes of Surrealism.

To conclude, let us return to the questions my students discussed several years ago. Can we really believe the prayers of the indigenous peoples to save Mother Earth are really having any effect? To look at the world today, the answer would appear to be a resounding “No”. But can we really be sure that these efforts are not working? Maybe these chants do have an effect, which we can't immediately perceive, and the world might be in even worse condition except for these collective prayers. Similarly, can the works in this exhibition by James Surls and Charmaine Locke have any effect outside the galleries where they are displayed? There's only one way to find that out. Consider their work not as firm answers to the world, but, in contemplating their messages, as opportunities to find your own position in this partisan environment and to begin your own journey of reconciliation with the world.

Steven Bradley has organized exhibitions of and written about living artists for over thirty years. In 1986 he was the founding curator of CASA (Contemporary Art for San Antonio) which inaugurated the Blue Star Contemporary Art Space in that city. He is an emeritus professor of art at Colorado Mesa University.

Notes

- 1 Video recording of LeMoine LaPointe, September 29, 2009, Immigration & Ethnicity: Study Tour to the Upper Midwest of the United States, DVD, 2010, American Studies Institutes of the University of Leipzig, Germany and the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland.
- 2 Interview with James Surls and Charmaine Locke, March 9, 2016, at their studio in Carbondale, Colorado.
- 3 Interview with Surls and Locke, March 9, 2016.
- 4 Interview with Surls and Locke, March 9, 2016.
- 5 Interview with Surls and Locke, March 9, 2016
- 6 Interview with Surls and Locke, March 9, 2016
- 7 Interview with Surls and Locke, March 9, 2016
- 8 André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, pp.10-12.



Figure 12



Figure 13





Figure 14

Inside Out: Representing Charmaine

Avery Glassman

Charmaine Locke was born in Waltham, Massachusetts, but she didn't stay long. With a father in the air force, Locke attended twelve different schools growing up and was raised in locales ranging from Okinawa to Bangkok to Washington, D.C. Her mother, a pianist and piano teacher, was encouraging of her and her siblings' artistic pursuits from an early age. As a young adult Locke moved to Texas and eventually enrolled at Southern Methodist University, where she majored in Psychology. While there Locke became involved with the art department, and at a faculty exhibition she was so struck by the work of professor James Surls that she decided to take one of his classes. The rest, is history; or, in Locke's own words: "He really liked some papers that I had written."¹



Figure 15

Since the two joined forces, Locke has made and exhibited art, curated shows (including *The Image of the House in Contemporary Art* at the Lawndale Art Center), and raised seven children. That last activity has, unsurprisingly, dominated her time. This exhibition, *The Two of Us*, comes at a turning point in her career now that the demands of parenting have relaxed. Says Locke, “I think that’s one of my weaknesses: lack of time on my practice...I’m planning on [the next few years] being the most intense work period of my life. That’s my goal.”²

To really look at Charmaine Locke’s body of work is to see an evolution of alternatives. Darkness permeates much of her early work. Found materials including burlap, bark, creosote, and scraps of cloth dictate a limited color palette of blacks and browns and are used repeatedly to create the image of a bound human figure. For example, twine is wound around itself to form one of the figures in *Beauty and the Beast* (1977). In *Behind Closed Doors*, also from 1977, a figure chiseled out of wood is sandwiched between two prickly

logs, reminiscent of a sarcophagus. At first glance these compositions seem like mummified ideas, ritualistically buried in the creative process. But when viewed in the context of Locke's more recent work, featured in *The Two of Us*, another possibility asserts itself.

The human figure is still heavily present in Locke's current work. Now, however, there are no bindings. Faces are visible and arms are often outstretched, as in *Open Book* (2004). Color has also invaded Locke's work: vibrant reds and blues have replaced the tonal hues of the 1970s and 80s. Even her black and white drawings, as in the *Interiors* series, possess a lightness of touch not previously employed. Viewed in this context, those early figures are not historic, interred beings; rather, they are actively dormant, the bindings functioning like cocoons. Indeed, *Behind Closed Doors* is just one example of a composition so tightly bound as to seem ready to burst. The works in this exhibition are some of the products of those cocoons.

In her *Resources* series, Locke uses five premade mannequins of the shopping mall variety to convey holistic yet foreboding messages. *Another Kind of Gold* references the recent drop in honey bee populations and the predicted impact on food shortages. In their original state the mannequins are signifiers of "this world that is given to us through a false source. This ideal, picture-perfect world...that is unrealistic, unachievable and then, therefore, you feel less than."³ Locke transforms them almost completely, but leaves a few subtle reminders of the artificial source. In *Heal Yourself, Heal the World*—which addresses self-preservation more than concerns about the natural environment—Locke sculpts the face using plaster, covering any trace of the original facial features. Still, the manufactured shoulder seams are left exposed. In addition, the mannequin's clavicle, face, and elbows are dotted with a darker shade of blue than what coats the rest of the figure. The dots evoke certain rites of spirituality (stigmata, for instance), to be sure, but their uniformity and even spacing also suggests something mechanical (screw points, perhaps). The result is that, while the figure is nearly unrecognizable as a commercial mannequin, there are enough hints of the initial signifier for the viewer to engage with the work on multiple levels.



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

As the mannequin's face remains underneath the layers of plaster, that plastic symbol of superficiality has been displaced inward. *Heal Yourself, Heal the World* thus reverses and challenges the trope of one's inner personality being consumed by one's outer, "fake" persona. Rather than attempting to cast it off, the inside-out structure of *Heal Yourself, Heal the World* serves to acknowledge that as products of our culture, that dichotomy between façade and authenticity, between public and private self, exists. Furthermore, in altering the mass-produced figure Locke has adapted it into something one-of-a-kind, again rerouting the pattern of commercialization.

In conversation with Locke I learned that much of her personal philosophy revolves around the balance of such dichotomies, taking the good with the bad perhaps being the most primary. This attentiveness to balance is undeniable in her recent work, so that no matter how mystical the iconography in any one piece, underpinning it is a hopeful realism. In the words of the artist, "Over the long term I am positive. I do think there will be a greater progression, a leap, in whatever's left of humanity, to make it into the next phase...it's just: how long does it take to achieve, and how dark does it have to get to get there?"⁴

Avery Glassman is the Curator of Programs and Exhibitions at the Western Colorado Center for the Arts.

Notes

- 1 Interview with the artist, April 9, 2016, at her studio in Carbondale, Colorado.
- 2 Interview with the artist, April 9, 2016.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.





Figure 20

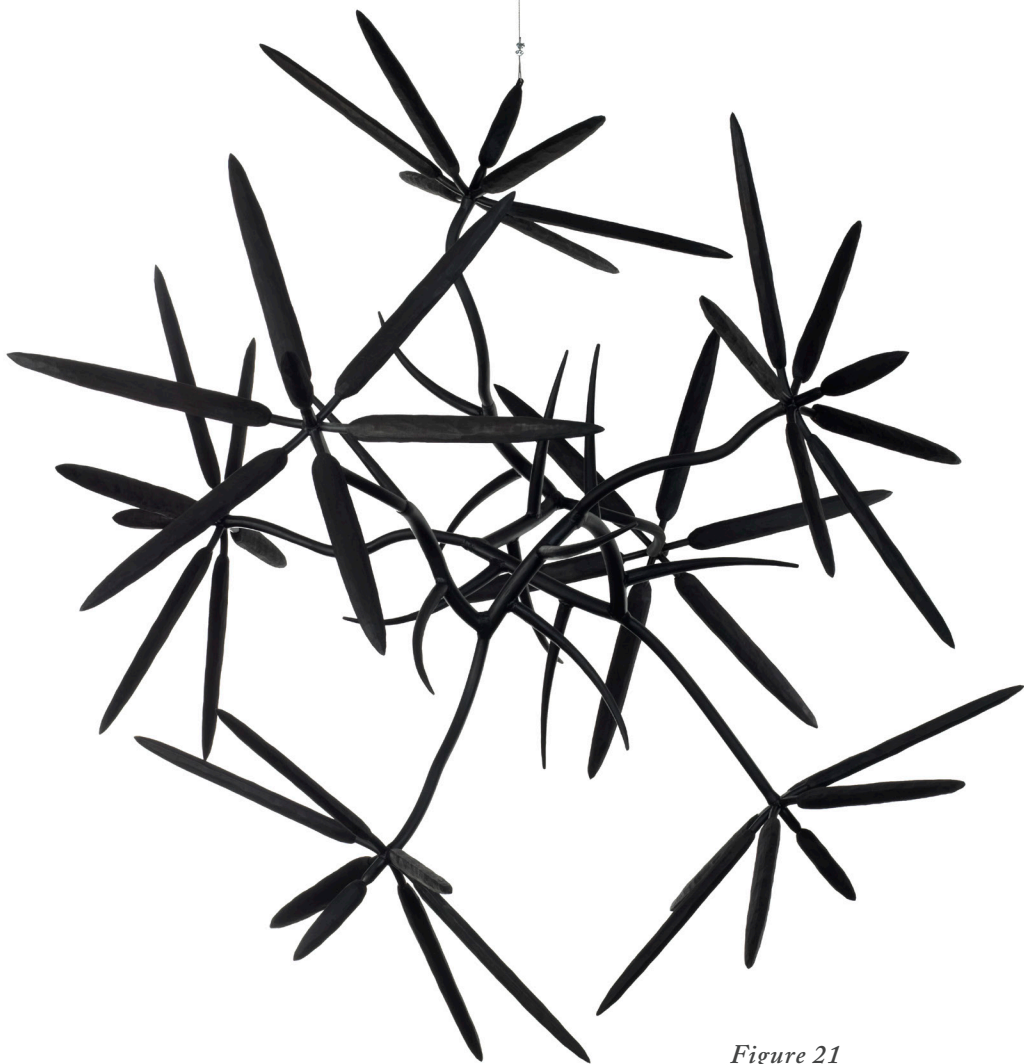


Figure 21

55 55
55 55

Publication Notes ---

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Front cover: Top: Charmaine Locke
Heal Yourself, Heal the World (2014 - 15)
Cloth, paint, stainless steel, pigment, paint on
plastic discs
85 x 50 x 37

Bottom: James Surls
Black Thorn Flower (2013)
Burned bass wood and painted steel
96 x 78 x 99

Images ---

James Surls *Figure 1*
Round Tipped Black Raw Wall Flower (2013)
Burned bass wood and raw steel
84 x 103 x 24

James Surls *Figure 2*
The Giving of a Seed Bulb (2005)
Graphite on four-ply paper
60 x 40

James Surls *Figure 3*
Don't Look at Lookat. Not (2005)
Graphite on four-ply paper
30 x 40

Charmaine Locke *Figure 4*
Interiors I (2000)
Charcoal on rice paper
34 x 24.5

Charmaine Locke *Figure 5*
Interiors II (2000)
Charcoal on rice paper
34 x 24.5

Charmaine Locke *Figure 6*
Interiors III (2000)
Charcoal on rice paper
34 x 24.5

Charmaine Locke *Figure 7*
Interiors IV (2000)
Charcoal on rice paper
34 x 24.5

Charmaine Locke *Figure 8*
Interiors V (2000)
Charcoal on rice paper
34 x 24.5

- Charmaine Locke *Figure 9*
 Fate (20014 - 15)
 Cloth, paint, stainless steel, wire, string,
 paintbrushes, wood
 78 x 38 x 20
- James Surls *Figure 10*
 Rough God 5 (2010)
 Steel
 53.5 x 84 x 48
- James Surls *Figure 11*
 On Being Home (2013)
 Red oak
 50 x 52 x 37
- James Surls *Figure 11*
 Being Home (2013)
 Red oak
 43 x 44 x 28.5
- James Surls *Figure 12*
 All I Ever Really Wanted Was To Go
 Home with You (2010)
 Live oak
 22 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 28 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 14
- Charmaine Locke *Figure 13*
 Open Book (2004)
 Bronze
 79 x 63 x 40
- Charmaine Locke *Figure 14*
 Beauty and the Beast (1977)
 Rope, paper, twine, vine, wood
 16 x 12 x 4
- Charmaine Locke *Figure 15*
 Behind Closed Doors (1977)
 Wood, rope
- Charmaine Locke *Figure 16*
 Another Kind of Gold (2014 - 15)
 Cloth, paint, stainless steel, beeswax,
 paper, wire, wood putty
 77 x 26 x 22

Charmaine Locke
Justice (2014 - 15)
Cloth, paint, stainless steel, glass, wood, wire
70 x 22 x 12

Figure 17

Charmaine Locke
The Power and Beauty of Water (2014 - 15)
Cloth, paint, stainless steel, gauze, pewter,
wax
75 x 29 x 20

Figure 18

Charmaine Locke
Heal Yourself, Heal the World (2014 - 15)
Cloth, paint, stainless steel, pigment, paint
on plastic discs
85 x 50 x 37

Figure 19

James Surls
On Hand (2003)
Graphite on four-ply paper
40 x 60

Figure 20

James Surls
Black Thorn Flower (2013)
Burned bass wood and painted steel
96 x 78 x 99

Figure 21

