

## **Bruce Conkle and Marne Lucas — Eco-Baroque**

By Ryan Pierce

“Eco-Baroque,” the term coined by Marne Lucas and Bruce Conkle to describe the aesthetic trajectory of this exhibition, makes a compelling title because, like much of the artists’ work, it walks a fine line between being contradictory, redundant, or confusing, and emerges as appropriately inappropriate and unique. At the core of this show is the historical futility of man’s imitation of nature — in decorum and device — at the expense of the world’s wildness and natural integrity.

“Warlord Sun King: The Genesis of Eco-Baroque” is inspired largely by the mythical extravagance of King Louis XIV of France and the culture of decadence and hubris that flourished under his rule. Lucas and Conkle have hijacked formal details from the Palace of Versailles, the converted hunting lodge that served as Louis’s showcase, and supplanted them with a mixture of mirth and mayhem to create a commentary on the endurance of societal negligence and pomposity. The result is something that more closely resembles the original hunting lodge than a palace: organic materials and gathered rubbish, a tanning bed from Craigslist, and some specimens from a rock hound’s collection set the stage for the inevitable erosion of modern luxury.

I associate the word Baroque with effusive ornament and gaudy color. Excessive gesture. Grandiose settings. Heart-on-sleeve-and-head-in-hands displays of earnest expression. Today we might call it Emo. Many of the stylistic characteristics of the Baroque movement emerged as the Catholic Church, rebounding from the Reformation, sought a populist accessibility in the arts.<sup>1</sup> Although the Papacy and religious patrons dictated most of the imagery,<sup>2</sup> many Baroque artists found something that resonated beyond the Christian spiritual experience by developing a new formal articulation of human emotion

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Hyde Minor, *Baroque & Rococo Art & Culture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999) 42.

<sup>2</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, *The Baroque Age* (Geneva: Rizzoli, Inc, 1989) 9.

that surpassed Renaissance art in terms of narrative complexity and spatial illusion.<sup>3</sup> The Church's control was a given, and I tend to evaluate artists of the time in relation to what degree of ingenuity or technical genius they brought to the same recurring biblical themes. As a painter I am alternately drawn (to the dark drama of Caravaggio) and repelled (from Rubens's marshmallowy heavens) by Baroque compositions, but I have to admit a taste for the spectacular in art.

This is where the "Eco" comes in. I have been moved by works of human expression, particularly art and literature, but never as much as by the splendor of the natural world. Think of propping Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* against a rock above the actual panorama of, say, the Columbia River Gorge or Hell's Canyon. No contest. You need only see a peacock's fanned parade or the unfettered floridity of a coral reef to know that nature is unmatched in extravagant displays. The gaudiness of human ornament is pathetic, though somehow inevitable. Do we crave the built-in failure of the replica over the real thing? Is it an assurance of our humanity? Or perhaps our most successful imitations allow us to believe we are closer to the complexity of the world's natural state.

The Eco-Baroque art form divests itself of the task of imitating nature. Conkle and Lucas give us the man-made in the form of the scavenged, the reused, the broken, and the crappy. Against that they put objects directly from nature: sparkling crystals and palm fronds, wood and soil. It is a reminder that there exists mazelike complexity in lichens and singular compositions in the movement of clouds. It jars us, this contrast. It is painful to be reminded of what we all know deep down: nature does not need us.

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For Conkle and Lucas, two Oregon-raised artists who have built international careers on regionalist sensibilities, Eco-Baroque is an apt name for a hybrid creative practice that incorporates a wide range of media and methods to address the grim circus of society's

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<sup>3</sup> Minor, 20–29.

consumption. These artists approach the subject with characteristic humor. In other hands, the gravity of themes such as global warming or deforestation would be handled with self-righteousness or Al Gore-like pedantry, but Conkle and Lucas leave it open-ended and free of direct judgment.

Conkle has earned notoriety for installation art that usurps images from popular and folk culture (Mickey Mouse, Bigfoot, snowmen) and recasts them in discomfiting and ridiculous tableaux. Conkle can sew and sculpt and is a proficient digital designer, but his work betrays an impulsiveness and disregard for high craft that sets it apart from the quietude of the Pacific Northwest look. He might situate a meticulously stitched soft sculpture against the most abject and awkward of objects, an amalgam of litter and glitter that befits the fallout from the American dream. I'll never forget a conversation we had at another artist's opening some years back:

Me: So what are you working on?

Bruce: I'm making a fountain.

Me: Oh?

Bruce: It's a garden gnome, made out of tinfoil. He pukes Pepto-Bismol into his wheelbarrow.

Right.

Moving around Conkle's home studio, which Lucas shares when she is in Portland (she spends part of the year living and working in New York), I can start to recognize elements of their individual practices. Here are Lucas's twin self-portraits, readying to punch the camera with a sneer and the words "blow" and "hole" inked on the knuckles of opposing fists. Elsewhere hangs a chandelier Conkle made for his installation *Sasquatch Feng Shui*. Golden squirrels sewn from tube socks scamper at the feet of a white-pelted, yowling, unidentifiable stuffed beast. I can also start to pick out the ways their creative visions have begun, in the last five years of close collaboration, to invade and influence each other. With their newest body of work Lucas and Conkle isolate common strengths

and steer their bizarre craft with newfound intention.

Marne Lucas is a self-taught photographer known for nuanced pinup style portraits of strippers, friends, local artists, and herself. The photographs display an affinity for staging that functions as an extension of her sitter's personality as well as an emotional accessibility (a very Baroque quality) and an enticing sex positivism. The hints of debauchery in Lucas's world are all celebration and no shame. Her subjects emit personalities that surpass the objectivity of the traditional pinup genre and are that much more sexy because of their common humanity. From 1997 to 2005 Lucas was a volunteer archivist and advisory board member for *Danzine*, a groundbreaking nonprofit organization and publication supporting Portland-area sex workers through health education and harm-reduction. This activist ethos ties her pinup photos to her current work with Conkle.

American filmmaker John Cameron Mitchell has lamented the absence in popular culture of sexually explicit imagery without accompanying violence or guilt.<sup>4</sup> When one considers the oeuvre of established contemporary artists making work about sex — Tracey Emin, John Currin, Andrea Fraser — it seems that few are willing to portray sex in a positive light (and artists such as Annie Sprinkle are rarely given mainstream credit). Call it backlash from the “body beautiful” work of the 1970s, but I suspect that Third Wave Feminism may have been largely rejected by the artists who are now midcareer and is only now finding exposure: Danica Phelps, Pipilotti Rist, and Ghada Amer come to mind. This puts Lucas in good company.

*MLSP Lichen Anklepanties*, a photograph from 2005, provides a bridge between Lucas's pinup portraits and her ecologically minded collaborations with Conkle, bodies of work that otherwise might seem too distant from each other for one artist. This photo (“MLSP” stands for “Marne Lucas Self-Portrait”) is shot from the mossy ground of a mature forest.

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Marks, “Take a Ride on SHORTBUS: An interview with John Cameron Mitchell,” October 21, 2007

<http://www.emulsioncompulsion.com/2007/10/26/interviews/take-a-ride-on-the-shortbus-an-interview-with-director-john-cameron-mitchell> (January 9, 2009).

Lucas's naked legs direct our view to an ancient, rotting stump. Her ankles are wrapped with soft yarn, a visual hint at lingerie or maybe bondage, but more akin in material to the feathery green floor she rests on. The photo's innocent directness suggests the nearness of our bodies to the natural world. It doesn't seem kinky, just playful and sincere. It is a good reminder that the earth is right there under us. Just take your clothes off and lie down.

In *When the Forest Isn't Looking*, another photo Lucas took in the Olympic rain forest, we are witness to a remarkable forked spruce tree so deformed by burls that it resembles nothing so much as two bulbous wooden snowmen locked in coitus (wooden snowmen just happen to be a Conkle standby). The surface-level humor and absence of Freudian baggage is a refreshing trait (the simplicity of the image resists that kind of unpacking). Like Conkle, Lucas is able to move between images (and objects) that merit a quick laugh and those that demand a deeper reading. Set beside each other, these fluctuations create a sense of pacing that subtly commands and rewards an audience's experience of the work.

Lucas is also engaged in an ongoing series of portraits of artists. "Sitting City," 2006, captured representatives of the Portland area's creative class in settings that alluded to their personal quirks and artistic output. "My secret weapon is an ability to make subjects comfortable while coaxing them to open up to my process,"<sup>5</sup> said the artist. "A decade of nude photography absolutely informed the essential relaxed atmosphere and confidence needed in making 'Sitting City.'" In *MK Guth, Ice Fishing*, we see the Wisconsin transplant huddled in a hockey rink, looking a bit disgruntled over a fake fishing hole. It's a fitting pose for a workaholic artist who is in for the long haul.

Both artists share an affinity for the ways humans imitate nature or replace a denuded environment with tame versions of what's gone. Lucas's portfolio is rife with plastic animals and miniature landscape models. Conkle is obsessed with snowmen, rock gardens, and bonsai trees. But their relationship to kitsch in nature seems to be more

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<sup>5</sup> Author's conversation with Marne Lucas, January 4, 2009.

about wonderment than scorn: The artists celebrate the folkloric resonance of their objects and images as much as they ridicule it. They're laughing first at themselves, and then at us, and our collective weirdness and weakness and nostalgia.

Much of Bruce Conkle's past work stems from the conflict between artifice and actuality, which is a thread that continues in the Eco-Baroque series. *Trophy Case* (2002) is an industrial ice freezer containing a forlorn-looking snowman (of real snow) and a fir sapling. The effect is like a life-size snow globe crossed with a taxidermy exhibit. The snowman serves as another example of our strange anthropomorphism of the natural world, one that can fill a variety of roles: canary in the coal mine of climate change, apologist to the animal kingdom, or stooge emissary from the human experiment.

Conkle's particular aesthetic program — what Portland photographer and curator Terry Toedtemeier termed “Conkleian resonance”<sup>6</sup> — is a pastiche of the found and fabricated, slick and sloppy, crass and considered. In a breakthrough solo exhibition, “The Lala Zone Expedition” at Portland's Haze Gallery in 2004, one could see both ends of the spectrum. A series of austere landscape photographs turned out to be edited screen shots from video games. Conkle removed all characters and left behind snow-dusted trees or geometrical icebergs. *Root Beer Sky* reveals a tidy array of photorealistic flora in a setting that is just symmetrical enough to be suspect. Step up close and the illusion is lost. Just feet away from the photos, Conkle had displayed an army of handmade figurines. These snowmen, yeti, and mutant tinfoil trees looked naïve and decrepit next to the pixel blizzards behind them. This imbalance, however, was no accident or product of haste.

A 2008 drawing, *Rainbow Puff Happy Tube*, reiterates Conkle's affinity for a lowbrow approach. This colored pencil and paint composition, one of an extended series from his recent show “Friendlier Fire,” depicts, in a shaky but vivid color sketch, a tree forming a garden of crystals, ringed by a hoop of pink light and a larger rainbow halo. The form is suggestive of a mushroom cloud, but one must navigate the stoner-tourist visual vernacular before even processing the more distant associations. The centerpiece of

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<sup>6</sup> Author's conversation with Bruce Conkle, January 4, 2009.

“Friendlier Fire,” shown at Rocks Box Fine Art, was *TGI Doomsday*, in which Conkle projected a full-scale drawing of the Oval Office’s hearth on the gallery wall. A propane-fueled ceramic log was burning, suspended between the projector and the image, creating a soft silhouette on the imaginary fireplace. The effect is disorienting due to the absence of any of the warm, homey feelings we associate with a fireside experience. It’s a thin charade, and chilling beyond its implausibility.

Materials and methods of execution merit some consideration in the artists’ collaborative works as well. *Crystal City*, a recent photo-based collage, depicts Conkle blowing a massive, frosted-looking alphorn before the New York skyline. The backdrop is pastel clouds and giant crystals. Crystals, incense, and coconuts all figure prominently in Conkle’s recent visual pantheon. He associates coconuts with “flying saucers” — exploratory pods that act as agents of dispersion for their species. The predilection toward alphorns can be tied to Conkle’s family (he’s half-Swiss), but also to the presence of the Swiss Alps as a transcultural icon — a romantic idea of wilderness —and a symbol of unreachable summits.

Blinglab is the artists collective that Conkle and Lucas created for their initial collaborative efforts, intending to establish definition between their solo careers and their work together. Blinglab has included a shifting roster of collaborators and is credited with a handful of installations and performances. Its most elaborate project was *The Untold Misadventures of Lewis and Clark*, an epic puppet show performed at Portland Institute for Contemporary Art’s Time-Based Art Festival in 2006. The “homoerotic, Bollywood-style musical romp” employed live-action puppets and voice-overs in a raunchy retelling of the famed explorers’ journals. As the two artists have worked and lived together, their practices have merged in arguably more natural ways. Each points out the other’s influences in his or her “own” work, and their artistic partnership, further honed by their own directives toward the Eco-Baroque, has nestled into a logical extension of two creative lives.

The artists also use their own relationship as a starting point. Lucas, while working in

New York, noticed an uncanny resemblance between Bruce and a certain mannequin at the American Museum of Natural History. When homesick she would frequent the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians and the Hall of Gems. “It’s my version of a church,” Lucas said. “It’s dark inside, with glowing windows of colorful rocks, and the melancholy of waxy, anthropologic portrayals of our past neatly encased in glass.”<sup>7</sup> Increasingly intrigued with “visiting Bruce,” as she puts it, the artists played off this inside joke until it became the starting point for the video component of *Vision Pond*, a multimedia installation from “Warlord Sun King.” Lucas renamed these two characters in the accompanying photograph, *Sleepwalking Salmon Woman and Primitive Artist*.

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If “Eco-Baroque” names an intended course for Lucas and Conkle, it is perhaps also a clarification of existing formal principles. The duo’s current work still has the vein of absurdity that was rampant in the Blinglab puppet performances, but it is refined by a more direct critique of human excess through the lens of historical appropriation.

For “Warlord Sun King: The Genesis of Eco-Baroque,” Conkle and Lucas have made a downscaled Hall of Mirrors, using recycled paint and panels of found aluminum foil. The reflective panels allude to the opulence of Versailles, but any aura of rarity is undermined by their humble composition: Some of the tinfoil is still crusted with strands of pizza cheese.

Louis XIV’s reign is notable not only for its nauseating excess but also for the fact that it lasted longer — seventy-two years— than that of any other major European monarch. And yet it was almost another eighty years after Louis XIV’s death before the French Revolution put an end to his brand of absolutist monarchy.<sup>8</sup> Conkle and Lucas have captured the spirit of gilded waste with *Warlock Spritz Bath*, a geode converted into a fountain, very much resembling a bidet. Another, later version of this piece will circulate

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<sup>7</sup> Author’s conversation with Marne Lucas, January 4, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Minor, 43.

champagne, a worthy rinse for a king's nether parts.

King Louis XIV was nicknamed the Sun King because he likened himself to Earth's star in his role as center of the (French) universe.<sup>9</sup> His 7,000 courtesans reinforced this notion. Louis considered himself closer to God than any mortal (except the Pope), and Conkle and Lucas have used his nickname to begin a tangential critique of humanity's relationship with the power of the sun. Louis's many elaborate chandeliers inspired *Warlord Sun King*, a hanging installation incorporating a tanning bed as a system of grow lights. The artists have replaced cut crystal with natural ones, and ornate metalwork with an Eco-Baroque constellation of plants and rocks. Like many of their more developed pieces, *Warlord Sun King* invites interpretations on a number of levels. Beyond the initial impact of a suspended clamshell tanning bed, hinged open to become a working grow lamp, the work presents a host of farcical allusions to humanity's misguided attempts to harness or re-create the power of the sun, from growing sprouts under fluorescent lights in the kitchen to nuclear fusion and atomic weaponry.

*Vision Pond*, a softly burbling fountain onto which the previously mentioned video is projected, is a liturgy for one of the world's most precious and squandered resources: oil. The black puddle is the viewing arena for a slow-motion image of Conkle and Lucas, made up as primitive Pacific Northwest Natives, possibly representing future inhabitants of a world that has overshot industry and returned again to hunter-gatherer technologies. In the video Conkle's character inscribes a ritualistic symbol much like the modern Target logo, invoking the cyclical trends of history, as well as pop art, commercial exploitation, and sheer nonsense.

Photographs and found objects decorate the walls of the "Warlord Sun King" installation. *Marne Lucas Self Portrait (MLSP) as Portrait of Reputation Holding a Portrait of the Warlord Sun King, as played by Bruce Conkle* is the protracted title of a 2009 photo based on a portion of the painting *Fame Presenting a Portrait of Louis XIV to France* by Jean Nocret. Here Lucas casts herself as the personification of Reputation (Fame's

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<sup>9</sup> Minor, 60.

equivalent), holding aloft a portrait she has taken of Conkle. For artists who have built their careers in the relatively regional, sometimes insular, Portland art scene, playing Reputation is a rich gibe. Part of Conkle's curiosity on the subject of Louis XIV also has to do with a personal investigation into his father's original surname: LeBrun. Charles LeBrun was court painter for Louis XIV, the president of the French Royal Academy, and a passionate proponent of emotional expression in painting.<sup>10</sup>

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Lucas and Conkle's new Eco-Baroque art form reminds us of the inherent complexity and fragility of the natural world with the gentleness and non-judgmental attitude we have come to expect from them. Other, more polemical, modes of expression offer finger-pointing or proselytizing, but these two rely on visual pranks and the unexpected relationships of everyday materials. The success of the work is in its ability to fly under the radar. You might dismiss it as mere mischief (and it's that, too), but every punch line shelters additional puns and propositions for the imagination, and these will emerge after you have seen the show and walked on. The generosity of the work lies in its invitation for the audience to share the joke. Ultimately, Bruce Conkle and Marne Lucas are getting away with something all too rare in contemporary art: They're having fun.

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<sup>10</sup> Minor, 65, 100.