

WASTE LAND

A Survey of Works by Brandon Ballengée, 1996 – 2016



UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING ART MUSEUM

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INTRODUCTION

BRANDON BALLENGÉE: AMPHIBIOUS

By Suzaan Boettger

Brandon Ballengée is amphibious. It is not just that once you know his deep connection to frogs, you begin to see their characteristic wide cheeks, broad chest and long legs in his own physiognomy and tall physique. More directly, like the habitats of those agile semiaquatics, Ballengée’s energies encompass two domains. Earth and water? Yes, the commingling of the two is where this professional herpetologist (scientific expert in amphibians and reptiles) looks to find specimens studied for anatomical deformities and species waning. And wetlands, as well as air, are also the spheres of the terrestrial and avian beings he incorporates, preserved or pictured, as a prolific artist. It is this hybrid identity that is the most prominent source of Ballengée’s expanding recognition, deriving from his lifelong commitments to fields traditionally characterized as disparate: science and art. But these dualities encircling his art are set in motion by yet another. Ballengée’s background and dedication to vulnerable animals are impressive, but in assessing works of art, ultimately it is our – the viewers’ – experience in front of them that matters. There we see the most crucial convergence galvanizing his engaged art: his attention to both ethics and aesthetics. The environmentalist spirit is actualized through visual acuity and vigorous creativity.

In multiple interviews, Ballengée has recounted his childhood joy in the discovery of salamanders, toads, and other small wild things found in the creek and grove the edge of his family’s property in rural Ohio. These explorations prompted study, breeding, and preservation in aquariums in his improvised basement laboratory, and stimulated him to extend his examinations through drawing and painting.¹ His father was a physician and his mother displayed creative artistry in many areas. As an adult, he pursued both approaches to natural matter, propelling him into the integration of scientific data collection and analysis and creative imaging. After years of education and development in Brooklyn, New York, a hotbed of artistic innovation, he and his own family settled in a region of Louisiana countryside that he terms a “hotspot of biodiversity,” with more species of amphibians in their locale than elsewhere in the country.² Because of its tropical ecozone, diversity, and heavy precipitation, some of the land was not clear-cut for development as extensively as in northeastern, midwestern, or other southern areas of the United States.

Ballengée’s work is inspired by a goal of promoting a sympathetic understanding of the natural world and our complex relations to it. He believes in the “absolute complementarity” of scientific research and artistic expression. “It’s important that we have a really rational and systematic

1. The most substantial interview published to date is Roel Arkesteijn and Brandon Ballengée, “Mapping Purgatory: Brandon Ballengée in Conversation with Roel Arkesteijn.” In *From Scales to Feathers*, Easton, PA: Lafayette College Art Gallery, and Shropshire, England: Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, 2015, 53-86.

2. This and other unattributed quotations are from the author’s conversations with Ballengée during fall 2016 and January 2017.

understanding of the way things work. . . . At the same time, we're emotional creatures. . . . The arts side allows for reflection, thinking, and feeling what the world around us means."³ Over the last two decades, he has conducted his research-based syntheses at distant ponds, science halls, and exhibition venues, and most recently in the dramatically lit, very affecting installation of *WASTE LAND: A Survey of Works by Brandon Ballengée, 1996 – 2016* at the University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie. As is common at his research and exhibition sites, programs included local community participation as both contributions to his data collection and public environmental education, what he calls "citizen science." The extent of Ballengée's professional dualism – a Ph.D. in Transdisciplinary Art and Science – as well as his leadership in group "ecosystem activism," calls up the ancient trope of a leader powerful in two spheres. For example, Roman emperors gradually adopted the Hellenistic practice of a monarchy worshiped by cults as divine.

Among Mesoamerican deities, the Aztec's Quetzalcoatl and the Yucatec Mayans' Kukulcan was a feathered serpent, a supernatural being with the divine capability of flying as well as the ability to traverse the water and earth with terrestrial species. The closest parallel is the 16th century characterizations of the Benin culture's Oba. On bronze plaques, a powerful male in royal ceremonial attire stands frontally. Each raised hand swings a leopard by the tail, displaying



Benin Plaque (Nigerian), 16th century – 17th century, brass, 15 1/8 x 12 5/8 x 1 5/8 inches, image courtesy of the British Museum

the Oba's mastery over instinctual energy. Yet he is also *of* the animal kingdom. His ambidexterity extends to the overall corporeal as his feet are fin-like and curve upward – they are generically described as "mudfish." Part human, part amphibian, the African tribal king's semi-divine status is played out in his mediation between two realms.

It could plausibly be claimed that contemporary artists' interest in science is common. Vanguard artist Hans Haacke did so fifty years ago, noting that "In the mind of the public and some artists, the border between art and science has become fluid. . . scientific terminology has entered the jargon of artists. . . partly because of its precision (an unusual quality in art-talk) and partly because it implies a contemporary mystique."⁴ Haacke's comments contextualized his own *Condensation Boxes*, the sealed Plexiglas cubes demonstrating an aqueous thermal process circulating between liquidity and steam, but also spoke to shared values. The same year Haacke wrote those lines, 1967, the group Experiments in Art

and Technology formed in New York City, uniting artists and engineers in incorporating new technology in theatrical performances. Also in 1967 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art launched its Arts and Technology Program, bringing together artists and technology corporations to produce innovative projects. Two years later Joseph Beuys, who had studied biology and mathematics and would become a founder of Germany's Green Party, attributed the source of his shamanistic performance art and mystical/

3. Anne Minoff, "SciArts Spotlight: Brandon Ballengée, *Science Friday*, April 4, 2014. <http://www.sciencefriday.com/blogs/04/04/2014/sciarts-spotlight-brandon-balleng-e.html?series=20>

4. All Haacke statements are from this source, written in September 1967, first published and translated into German in Edward Fry and Hans Haacke, *Werkmonographie* (Cologne: DeMont Schauberg, 1972, 34), as noted in Alexander Alberto, Ed, *Working Conditions, The Writings of Hans Haacke*, Cambridge, MA and London, England, The MIT Press, 2016, 12-13.

symbolic sculpture not to “the official development of art but [to] scientific concepts.”⁵

Among land artists of the 1970s, Robert Smithson also had a childhood natural science lab and developed a wide interest in science, and Nancy Holt had majored in biology as an undergraduate, learning scientific procedures which may have facilitated her later use of astronomical alignments in orienting outdoor constructions. Ballengée’s antecedent environmentalist artists Helen and Newton Harrison, Patricia Johanson, Mel Chin, and Maya Lin, as well as numerous contemporaries who identify with eco-art and bio-art, derive subjects of their work and data from science and by collaborating with scientists, learn procedures and receive guidance. But Haacke’s observations and most artists’ affiliation with science elide distinctions between originating systematic experiments and artists’ use of technology to enact scientific principles. Their approach is less scientific than scientific: science-like.

Yet it is no longer remarkable that an artist incorporates ideas, procedures, subject matter and materials from another discipline. Since the 1980s, artists have applied data-based and intellectualized representations addressing topical topics such as social identities (gender, race, ethnicity) or environmental degradation (carbon pollution, melting glaciers, environmental justice for less industrialized nations). And in the twenty-first century, everyone is enmeshed in technology, which both displays and drives innovation.

More relevant than Haacke’s assertion of advanced artists’ affiliation with technology-as-science is his description of the new way they were handling it – with “detached methodical and analytical working habits.” This statement conveys the American artists of the 1960s’ increasingly sober professionalization. Countering the physicality of Abstract Expressionism’s gestural bravado and Pop Art’s principle of pleasure in the commonplace, the very *anti-emptiveness* of scientific methodology was the more radical move in the mid-late 1960s, producing research-as-art, a form that became known as dematerialized “Conceptual Art.” When Sol LeWitt introduced that des-

ignation into art discourse in *Artforum*, again in 1967, he emphasized, “The idea [as the] most important aspect of the work” and a methodical investigatory process in which “All of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution [as] a perfunctory affair.”⁶ That statement points to Ballengée’s radicality as a progressive 21st century artist: not only is he a genuine, practicing scientist as well as an artist, but his art displays a sensitive balance between conceptual/scientific and sensory/expressive aspects.

One more observation by Haacke illuminates both his own and Ballengée’s intentions. “In fact, the artist’s sensitivity to all information about his environment (of which science is a part) is likely to have a bearing on the ideological foundation of his work.” For Ballengée, more significant than his particular use of science and all the dualities around his subject matter is the lens through which they are viewed. Paralleling humans’ binocular vision, he directs the two disciplines of art and science toward depth perception of a single focal point: species degradation and extinctions. Ballengée’s consistent subject matter of animals under threatened conditions shows his work’s foundation in the ethics of humans’ responsibilities toward nonhuman beings and the environmental universe.

Consider the position of the frog. It’s much more than the lowly object of high school biology dissections. Amphibians are sensitive indicators of the health of the environment. They live in two environments, land and water, and have thin skin through which they sometimes breathe which can also absorb toxic chemicals, radiation, and diseases. About forty percent of seven thousand known amphibian species are endangered or have become extinct, an aspect of the intensifying global declines being termed the Sixth Extinction.⁷⁷ Like the average global temperature, the number of nonhuman extinctions annually rises. Scientific research has demonstrated that both are consequences of anthropogenically generated climate change. While pollution runoff has been considered a source of the amphibians’ loss or excess of hind legs, the warming temperatures promote the proliferation of parasites and predators, who either

5 5. “Interview with Willoughby Sharp.” In Carin Kuoni, *Joseph Beuys in America: Energy Plan for the Western Man*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990, 90.

6 6. Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10, (Summer 1967), 80.

7 7. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction an Unnatural History*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

infect or directly dine on frogs' legs, which sometimes grow back in multiples, or not at all.

Spotlighting a species' degradation, Ballengée's method isn't to bluntly display the bad news and expect the facts to speak for themselves. As the satirical novelist Samuel Butler (1835-1902) famously quipped, "Any fool can tell the truth, but it requires a man of some sense to know how to lie well." Or more pertinently, to know how to tell the truth effectively. For factual information on environmental catastrophes, we can read reputable publications and websites. Direct remediation of damaged soil, water or air are best undertaken by or with environmental scientists. But to change attitudes toward those conditions, more effective than rational argument or straightforward evidence are visual representations displaying sensitivity to form and materiality. In his presentation of scientific data Ballengée's utilizes imaginative strategies for persuasive effect. This is evident in his evolving representation of frogs.

Ballengée's first substantial body of work, *Malamp* (an acronym for "malformed amphibian project") began in the mid-1990s. Initially, he painted their forms realistically at the site of the habitats he studied. Using the media at hand – polluted pond water, coffee, diluted cigarette ashes – was expedient, and their hues conjured the murk of disease. But the most direct approach, of depicting the frogs at little more than their life size on large white sheets of paper repurposed from the artist's earlier works, made them appear as tiny generalized beings lost in space, and thwarted viewers' attentive connection.

He then moved from painting images of the frogs to representing them photographically. Use of photographic media is a major tendency



Masaccio (Italian, 1401-1428), *Holy Trinity*, c. 1426-1428, fresco, 263 x 125 inches, image courtesy of the Wikipedia Commons and photographer John T. Spike

in contemporary art, but for Ballengée the change turned the emphasis from direct documentation, historically associated with illusionistic botanical drawings and with photography, to more expressive depiction customarily achieved in painting but here accomplished through manipulated digital photography. First he prepared the terminally deformed frogs, found dead or euthanized, by chemically clearing their bodies of flesh and staining the bones and cartilage contrasting hues, predominantly turquoise, red, and yellow. Posed prone, they were scanned, enlarged, visually clarified, and printed on 46" sheets with translucent watercolor ink. Seen against pure cotton suggesting fluffy white clouds or a black field with grayish vapors like atmospheric gases and spotted with white bubbles as if stars, these vivid skeletons became luminous beauties. Once deformed mini-beings, they display monumental presences. The strategy is akin to the Russian Formalist one of "ostranenie," which means deliberately making the familiar "strange," a process of "defamiliarization" to concentrate attention on oddities of the commonplace or aspects not usually apprehended. Robert Smithson noted this paradox when he observed, "The more you start thinking in terms of the physical, the more abstract things seem to get."⁸ With Ballengée's maneuver, the effect also goes in the other direction.

While the size of the amphibian body is pictured many times over actual life size, it is not so huge as to loom over the viewer like the monstrous insect that Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa became (*Metamorphosis*, 1915). Rather, Ballengée conceptualizes it as the size as that of a human toddler, *familiarizing* it to engender the appeal of an innocent to whom one would be drawn to play with or to care for.

8 Robert Smithson interviewed by Willoughby Sharp, undated audiotape (November 1968?) in Willoughby Sharp Archives, transcribed by Suzaan Boettger.

Thus Ballengée's presentation of frogs is as both strangely *other* – a turquoise skeleton with just too many legs – and in basic anatomy – head, torso, roughly four limbs – akin to us. The anatomical parallels promote a shared sensibility – we recognize ourselves in them, producing an empathetic resonance. His beings are both vivaciously florid and when seen splayed out as if fallen or crucified, shadowed with the specter of death – simultaneously topically engaging and strikingly evocative. As skeletons, they invoke the historical European practice of depicting them in paintings for allegorical purposes. In Masaccio's fresco *Holy Trinity with the Virgin and St. John* (1427-28, in Florence), below Christ's crucifixion, a skeleton lying on a sarcophagus declares to the viewer (with words painted in Italian), "What you are, I once was; what I am, you will become." The skeleton – or more often, a skull – serves as a *memento mori* – reminder of death – urging the viewer to do good in this life to ensure a rewarding hereafter. In Ballengée's *Malamp* prints, the frog is both skeleton and crucified, distinctly amphibian and posed as a human. Yet with the prominence of the large, central frog Ballengée challenges the historical – social – anthropomorphic preeminence of human beings. His manner of presentation also reflects a cultural consciousness increasingly attuned to zoologists' and cognitive scientists' revelations about animals' abilities in cognition and communication (and our social reticence about eating them).

Ballengée considers the *Malamp* pictures to be portraits and as respect for each subject, makes only a single print. Each one is titled with a name of a venerated figure in Greco-Roman mythology, the association exalting it with the authority of the ancients. As skeletons and in those supine poses, the figures are definitely posthumous, but glow as if a martyr spiritually risen. Ballengée refers to all of the *Malamp* bodies of works as reliquaries, the



Constantin Brancusi (French, 1876-1957), *Bird in Space*, 1941, bronze, 54 x 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches, image courtesy of Art Resource

term for a receptacle for relics associated in the Medieval period with the fragments of bone and clothing of martyred saints, which then became objects of adoration. The structure of Ballengée's *Malamp* installation *Styx* (from 2007) most resembles reliquaries, as it consists of shallow circular covered glass dishes, each holding a single frog that has been cleared of flesh and stained. Presented in a single row on a long narrow base with the top surface illuminated from below, the glass encased tiny translucent anatomies become radiant. *Styx* is the river in Greek mythology that formed the boundary between the earth and the underworld, which one crossed in the process of dying. The dark base itself could represent the river; Ballengée likens it to a fallen obelisk. Egyptian obelisks, tall, slim four-sided carved columns pointed at the top, represented a ray of the sun and by extension the fertility bestowed by the sun god. Its prostate orientation in *Styx* echoes that of the beings it supports and underscores an evocation of destruction.

As an artist-in-residence at the Natural History Museum in London in 2003, Ballengée had the opportunity to work with the avian order. Charles Darwin's collection in the museum of the common rock pigeons, which he had selectively bred and preserved as part of his work on evolution, offered a rich visual treasure. The collective title of Ballengée's 39 prints, *A Habit of Deciding Influence: Pigeons from Charles Darwin's Breeding Experiments*, refers to breeders' amplifying selective aspects in the process of propagation. Again, Ballengée presents each as a portrait of an individual. Wings folded, each pigeon is vertically positioned in the center. He slightly enriched their coloration, enlarged them to a little over life size, and again positioned them against a cotton background to suggest the ethereal. But comparing the pictures' composition of centered single birds vertically oriented to those

of Constantin Brancusi's streamlined abstractions is revealing. In contrast to Brancusi's numerous *Bird in Flight* carvings, pared to elegant arcs, the pigeons' flattened forms do not convey the muscular tension of ascendance or, for that matter, the symphonic ecstasy of Ralph Vaughn Williams' *The Lark Ascending*. Rather, the plumage's nuanced coloration is on slack bodies, weighed by the very absence of what philosopher Henri Bergson called one's *elan vital* or life force. These handsome portraits are distinctly post-mortem. They juxtapose another duality frequent in Ballengée's work, that between death and beauty.

Turning from making corpses strikingly present, Ballengée inverted his representation of nonhuman mortality in biodiversity loss by emphasizing vacancies. He purchased historical prints and publications illustrating naturalists' botanical and zoological renderings whose publication dates approximate that of the extinction of an animal species it depicted. The American ornithologist, naturalist, and painter John James Audubon (1785–1851), who produced lyrical images of birds in graciously composed foliage habitats, is the most revered of these and the most represented in his prints. Then Ballengée excised the species that had become extinct, materializing the losses by leaving holes among the foliage in the shape of their silhouettes; the series is entitled *Frameworks of Absence* (from 2006). The removed animal images are burned; the ashes have been displayed on shelves of individual urns etched with the names of missing species. The prints are presented in contemporaneous historical period wood and gold frames. Often, as in the dramatic installation at Laramie, the voids are intensified by being hung against walls painted in the hue complementary to the foliage, a brilliant red. The loss is doubled: the pain of the gaping hole of the missing beings exacerbated by the iconoclasm of taking a knife to a rare and historical print by one of America's venerated artists. The violations penetrate the viewer, propelling attention to conservation and environmentalism to forestall future extinctions.

As a forceful enactment of depletion, *Frameworks of Absence* illustrates

an observation by Verlyn Klinkenborg, "As species crash and vanish, the world loses diversity, something it's been doing for centuries. But the loss of abundance is even more startling. Nature is simply not as full as it once was."⁹ That sparsity is powerfully conveyed in Ballengée's monumental (12 x 15 x 15 feet) quadrilateral pyramid *Collapse*, 2012. Taking its form from a tropic pyramid, an ecosystem food chain from simple producers to complex predator consumers, the one-gallon jars stacked on stepped shelves contain specimens in clear preservative sequenced from the simplest life forms such as purple barnacle, through Mackerel Scad, culminating in a juvenile Blackfin Shark. The species refer most specifically to ecosystem destruction in the Gulf of Mexico following the 2010 explosion of a BP drilling rig and the eventual release of over four million barrels of oil. The bottom corner jars contain materials from the 2010 spill, mixed crude oil and Corexit, the toxic solvent used as a dispersant to break an oil slick into sub-surface globules, which hides them from view but also accelerates the oil's detrimental consumption by marine life. The gigantic pyramid calls up the association with ancient Egyptian pyramidal tombs. The allusion reinforces the impact of the interspersed empty jars which represent extinct species due to habitat degradation, over-fishing, and the warming seas due to climate change. Towering over the viewer on a high platform, the pyramid of glass containers and shelves between them sparkle with bright reflections; the empty ones, which increase in rate toward the top, puncture the assemblage and catch the eye as gaping voids in the ecosystem. At the apex, the glistening empty one resembles the radiant "Eye of Providence" atop the unfinished pyramid on the one dollar bill, further linking the pyramid-death theme to commerce, the stimulus of oil drilling, and ensuing ecological and economic devastation.

During the exhibition *WASTE LAND: A Survey of Works by Brandon Ballengée, 1996 - 2016* The Denver Post headlined on its front page "Farm turned wasteland – Tainted water cancels harvest sales at Iconic Venetucci Farm, frightens residents."¹⁰ The concurrence shows the timeliness of Ballengée's subject matter and its relevance. Working in the volatile social,

9 Verlyn Klinkenborg, "What's Happening to the Bees and the Butterflies?" Review of Michael McCarthy, *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy*, in *New York Review of Books*, December 22, 2016, 68.

10 Bruce Findley, "Farm turned Wasteland," *The Denver Post*, September 24, 2016, 1A, 4A

political, and atmospheric climate of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Ballengée has been impelled by his personal history and sense of bioethics to protect the amphibians with which he is closely affiliated, and by implication to urge rebalancing humans' relations to other living things.

Yet when we shift attention from the manifold dyads generating Ballengée's activities and subject matter to the creations issuing from their collective syntheses, his most extraordinary hybridity as an artist is his mutual attention to not just ethical issues but affective aesthetics. It's easy to take up a cause; more difficult to materialize it in a form that is neither stridently reductive nor an anachronous romance of a "lost" Eden that never was. The losses are now, and demand forms that render science and ethics in artistically distinctive visualizations. As the painter David Salle put it, "The most convincing works tend to be those in which the thinking is inseparable from

the doing. . . . To make something that really holds our attention, especially over repeated viewing, requires levels of integration – intellectual, visual, cultural – expressed with a unique physicality.¹¹ Amphibiously, Ballengée's "thinking and doing" has created a body of work that rewards sustained attention by both doing good and looking good. In his elegies for lost species, the awful truths become visually awesome. And move us, doubly.

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11 David Salle, *How to See*, New York, London: Norton & Co., 2016, 3, 232.