EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Biological Regionalism:
Bonefish, Los Jardines de la Reina
(The Queen's Gardens), Cuba
Oils on plaster
33" x 48"
Collection of the Art Museum
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

Biological Regionalism:
Los Jardines de la Reina
(The Queen's Gardens), Cuba
Oils on plaster
33" x 48"
Collection of the Art Museum
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

Los Jardines de la Reina
(The Queen's Gardens), Cuba
July 10th, 2004
Video
5:40 minutes
Collection of the Art Museum
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

Biological Regionalism:
Brook Trout,
Big Mary's Creek
Vesuvius, Virginia, United States
Oils on plaster
42"x 63"

Biological Regionalism:
Big Mary's Creek
Vesuvius, Virginia, United States
Oils on plaster
33"x 48"

Biological Regionalism:
Big Mary's Creek
Vesuvius, Virginia, United States
May 8th, 2008
Video
5:30 minutes

Aesthetics of Death: VII
Oils on plaster
72" x 120"

Aesthetics of Death: VIII
Oils on plaster
72" x 120"

Aesthetics of Death: IX
Oils on plaster
72" x 120"

Aesthetics of Death: X
Oils on plaster
72" x 120"
Collection of the Burchfield-Penney Art Center
Buffalo, NY

cover art: "Biological Regionalism: Brook Trout, Big Mary's Creek, Vesuvius, Virginia," oils on plaster, 42" x 63"

WASHINGTON AND LEE
UNIVERSITY

STANIAR GALLERY
LEXINGTON, VA 24450

ALBERTO REY

Life, Death and Beauty

OCTOBER 13–NOVEMBER 5, 2008
STANIAR GALLERY, WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

DRIFTING SIDEWAYS AND UP

BY DINAH RYAN

Big Mary's Creek flows down from the St. Mary's watershed in the George Washington National Forest, its banks bowled between slopes of poplar, sycamore, pine, and hemlock. Late in the afternoon on a day near the end of the last spring term, Alberto Rey, a group of W&L art students, and I arrive to make studies of the creek, the woods, and of fish. Three biologists meet us. Alberto hasn't met any of them but they are all fishermen and there is instant camaraderie. When one of the biologists opens a case of fly fishing lures, as tidily arranged as a woman's jewelry box brimming with gaudy, dainty things, the students and I are dazzled but the four fishermen are matter-of-fact, conversant.

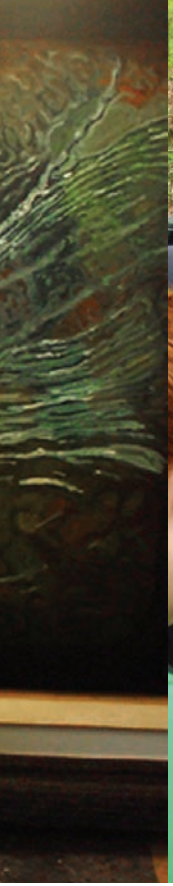
We have arranged for the biologists to shock some brook trout to the surface of the creek, along with whatever other life resides in the eddying pools below the rapids that fishermen call "the big blue" or "the boil." Trout feed in the rapids but prefer the big blue. Our guides shock one of these rippling pools and small brook trout, parr, suckers, and a soft-shelled crayfish float stunned towards the surface. They are collected in a bucket and some of them, including the largest brook trout, are transferred to a glass aquarium filled with creek water. The electro-shock, which biologists use to collect samples, is not without strain for the fish. They will be loosed again into the creek, but they struggle visibly. The smallest – the ones who won't make it – list in the fish's version of falling, drifting sideways and up.

To draw and photograph the fish, Alberto and the biologists scoop them from the tank one at a time and lay them on a piece of cloth on the ground. As their "gills…[breath] in / the terrible oxygen" (Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish"), their colors grow more brilliant. The brook trout's greenish blush deepens to absinthe, its rose spots like scarlet pox on a child's smooth face. Watching, we experience one of the themes in Alberto Rey's paintings: we see their mortality, their fleshliness. Alberto Rey is a painter, a fisherman, a teacher, a fly fishing guide, a man with deep connections to family and several communities. Faced with recent "family deaths and serious illnesses," he has been "intrigued by the thought of reintroducing piscatorial

art…into a contemporary aesthetic…while creating a venue to investigate our own mortality."

Fishing is localized, not generalized or abstract. It's about a particular habitat, a particular population, an entanglement for the fisherman with this place, this water, these fish. A thread that runs through all of Alberto Rey's work, particularly his "Biological Regionalism" and "Aesthetics of Death" series, is the attempt to see a place, a family, or a community as a piece within a whole and to see the relation of these constituents. Whether the pursuit is within a human family or for what the Greek writer Oppian called "the tribes of the sea," this inquiry is not exactly the same thing as studying an ecosystem. It is more closely related to an ontological query into systems of organism and essence, linked and localized in time and space — not a grand ontology but a small and particularized one.

To do this requires attention, and fishing is a type of noticing Close observation has its attendant delights,



accuracies, inaccuracies, myths, and mysteries. In *Halieutica*, his long poem about "the crafty devises of the fisher's art — even all that men have devised against the baffling fishes," Oppian also says that, "…for the toilsome fishermen their labors are uncertain, and unstable as a dream is the hope that flatters their hearts. For not upon moveless land do they labor, but always they have to encounter the chill and wildly raging water…" Finding the substratum that's obscured by the shadowy or turbulent surface requires a contemplative mind accompanied by a contemplative act. This is just what fishing is.

The literature of fishing abounds with ideas about fishing as contemplation, from Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* to Hemingway's Nick Adams seeking solace by fishing the Big Two-Hearted after his return from World War I to Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* to James Barilla's more recent account of the solitary fly fishing trip that was his means of both running from hard choices and facing them. Maclean says it: "hope and fear [are] combined in fishing."

How possible is it to "investigate our own mortality"? We can only observe the death of another, or imagine our own, tense with dread and fascination. Alberto Rey's gargantuan paintings of fish, based on material that he has gathered at Big Mary's Creek and other locales, are unnaturally still, lush, sleek, and luminous. He shows us a way to glimpse the living and at-some-time-dying thing: hold it steady, still it, lay it out flat. Clutch at its vitality. It's catch-and-release, like all of the mysterious things that finally exceed our grasp. The processes of painting, teaching, fishing, guiding, and conservation — the projects of a man securely tied to the human tribe — are all the same acts. They place hope above fear, love before desolation, struggle before lassitude: a shimmering, gargantuan project, big fish that will, inevitably, get away.

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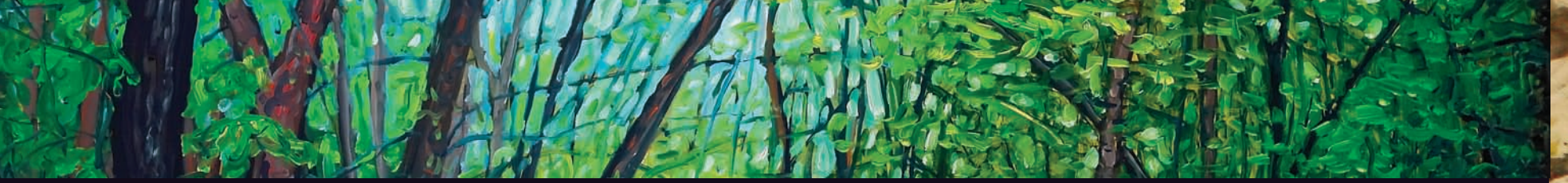

Biological Regionalism
ARTIST STATEMENT

As our cultures become more homogenized by mass media and consumerism, the one element that remains true to a region is its nature. Although we try to manipulate it to fit our needs, the landscape and the biological inhabitants characterize a region's nature. It has been an omnipresent influence that has affected a region's people and the culture. The knowledge describing a region's distinguishing natural elements is being lost as generations become continually disconnected from a lifestyle that relies on the landscape for survival."Biological Regionalism" is a series of paintings and videos that identify the landscape and the fish that are distinctive to a region. I envision the project creating indigenous symbols of a culture.

For the past 15 years, I have lived in western New York and have worked on several series of paintings that investigated Cuban and American culture. Many years ago, I began reading about local history and began researching local entomology, biological cycles of regional salmonids (trout) and the role of local rivers on culture. As I acquired more information about the region, I found myself being seduced by the angling art of Henry Inman, Thomas Doughty, Winslow Homer and Thomas Cole; the fish still life of Gustave Courbet, William Chase and Emil Carlsen ; the landscape work of Martin Johnson Heade, Jose Maria Velasco and the early work of Alexis Rockman. The devotional painting approach that I incorporated in my earlier series has continued through to the present series. While the past work concentrated on issues relating to art history and elements of Cuban/American culture, the recent work continues the focus on art history while incorporating biological regionalism.

While piscatorial art and nature painting was considered a form of high art during the early 19th century, it no longer seems innovative in our contemporary art landscape. The connection between nature and culture seems to have been lost, as most of our social and economic reliance has moved to an urban setting. This project tries to reaffirm the lost connection by reintroducing the fish and landscape that are characteristic to a region through the use of traditional and contemporary mediums. While the regions are specific the issues raised are universal.

left: "Biological Regionalism: Big Mary's Creek, Vesuvius, Virginia," oils on plaster, 33" x 48"
right: Studio: palette and brushes - July, 2008


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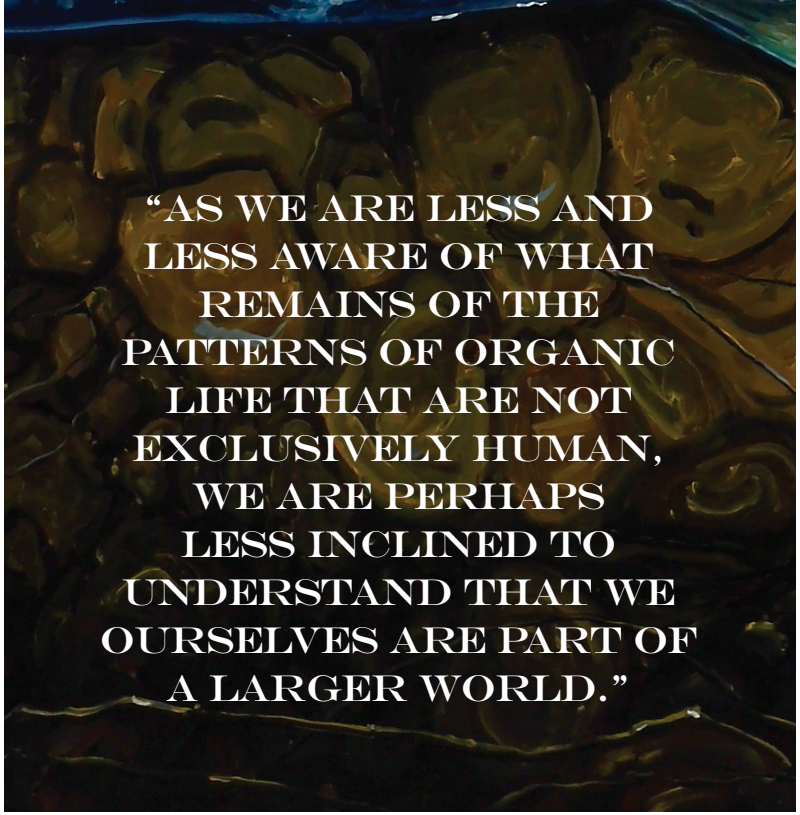
left: "Biological Regionalism: Los Jardines de la Reina (The Queen's Gardens), Cuba," oils on plaster, 33" x 48", COLLECTION OF THE ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA
right: "Biological Regionalism: Bonefish, Los Jardines de la Reina (The Queen's Gardens), Cuba," oils on plaster, 33" x 48", COLLECTION OF THE ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

A NEW NATURALISM:
BIOLOGICAL REGIONALISM AND THE WORK OF ALBERTO REY

BY JOHANNA DRUCKER

The natural world once appeared to be a vast domain of uncategorized and unknown phenomena. In those ages of discovery, the explorer set out to map uncharted territory accompanied by an artist, notebook and specimen press in hand. Physical adventure had its counterpoint in the naturalist's careful annotations in watercolor sketches, pen and ink notes, and graphite drawings. The shape of natural things was conscientiously recorded, from its minutiae to the grandest vistas of unfamiliar climes gaping open to the uncharted horizon of discovery. The literal forms, but also the conceptual outline of the larger idea of "Nature" emerged from such an inventory.

This visual record now reads as the expression of another era's self-styled innocence, combined in some inevitable way with the teleology of conquest and colonization. But these early images of so-called virgin wilderness



(when such terms were both permissible and — perhaps — applicable) were not merely used to claim land in the name of some authority or for some purpose. They were conceived within the larger plan of a modern urge toward knowledge as classification and study. Observation forms the core of the empiricist's skill set, and the urge to classify has both a noble purpose of understanding and a more dubious one, the impulse to control. The enlightenment project of conquering nature with reason, of subduing the natural world to human purpose, involved the grand domestication of the unruly forces and forms of organicism under a rule of law. That, too, is part of the tradition from which the naturalist draws — in both literal and metaphoric senses of that term.

Thus, a long history of documentation of the natural world exists, to which Alberto Rey's "Biological Regionalism" belongs. Pre-modern precedents for this lineage include medieval herbals and bestiaries, the fine anatomical works of Arabic scholars and the medical treatises of classical China, conceived as instruments of knowledge in which aesthetics were the handmaid to another discipline. The art of drawing nature, celebratory and exploratory, has other roots within indigenous and traditional cultures. The finely wrought carp, cranes, cherry blossoms and a myriad of other natural objects in Japanese painting emphasize them as the source of aesthetic value. The elaborate motifs of native Americans exhibit a respectful mythology in which the figures of natural forms are imbued with animate spirit. The Western traditions intellectualize their representation of nature, ordering and organizing perception to align with a rational system of morphology and typology.

Perception of the natural world always occurs within a larger understanding. In modern development, urban centers increasingly absorb once-distributed populations. A complicated separation of natural and cultural spheres becomes reinforced within patterns of production. Nature becomes the raw stuff, supposedly available for use, on which culture is built. But the success of such machinations conceals its artifice. The sense of entitlement that puts humans in opposition to nature, first world to third, developed to developing nation, all maps onto diabolical binarisms. We forget we are the authors of these distinctions and that nature is a product of shifting debate whose meaning isn't given a priori. As we are less and less aware of what remains of the patterns of organic life that are not exclusively human, we are perhaps less inclined to understand that we ourselves are part of a larger world.

What remains of nature now? This is the late era of globally networked ecosystems, all painfully sensitive to the least degree of climatic transformations caused in the massive systems of exploitative use (even as these are denied and trivialized in too many official circles). We witness daily the exploitation of the natural resources of the planet at a scale un-dreamt of in earlier mythology. The sources of change are many, and notions of regional identity falter under the influence of so many agents affecting contemporary existence. The history of organic life is filled with mutations, migrations, and peculiar residual backwaters where species continue unaware of the very improbability of their survival. Statistical sciences map the flux, charting those changes that lend themselves to quantitative metrics. The grim predictions for the rate at which species

"Los Jardines de la Reina (The Queen's Gardens), Cuba, July 10th, 2004," video still, COLLECTION OF THE ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

will vanish in the decades to come is hardly balanced by the shrugging realization that now, as always, these violent vicissitudes argue only more strongly for the effect of humankind as an opportunistic species.

Science eschews expressive forms, with their taint of subjectivity. But the arts embrace this mode as theirs, and rightly use its rhetoric to great advantage. Rey is certainly a rhetorical draftsman, and his fish imagery, with specimens poised in a suspended watery animation, fading at the edges to a strangely isolated vignette, creates a curious sense of nostalgia. The present is already vanishing. Are these icons of memory? Acts of preservation? Or a record of what is and may be still kept alive? Rey's are graphic arguments, suggestive rather than prescriptive. He researches the biological cycles of local fish and studies the ecological life of the streams and rivers where he lives in upstate New York. But he travels as well, seeking to identify the distinguishing elements of the areas he visits to create a symbolic connection to each place and among the creatures and sites he observes.

The romantic image of nature as wilderness, a concept and term both unknown in European vocabulary, opened the vistas of the Americas through paintings that promised as much to the spirit as to the eye. From the late 18th century through the great romantic period of the 19th, a soaring sense of optimism, vast as those horizons of space, seemed fostered by the dazzling light of Frederick Church, the mythologizing scale of Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole and others of their ilk. Europeans, or East Coast born, their eyes and visual sense of scale were altered profoundly by their confrontation with the heretofore unimagined grandeur of the West and South. From the Rockies, to the Andes, in the jungles of Central America, and the vividly painted deserts and abundant plains, across the sweeping prairies and around the boiling sulphurous stinkpots with their shooting geysers, the artist naturalists found an inexhaustible variety of forms. Some, like John James Audubon, tasked intently to chronicle the creatures they encountered in context. Drawing their landscapes and habitats as well as their finely made forms, he provided glimpses of whole worlds, not merely the birds, rodents, and other quadrapeds that presented themselves to his eye.

But naturalism is no pure pursuit and the 19th century naturalist, like those great canonical painters of Nature, was often an instrument (wittingly or not) of some larger purpose. Nationalism lurks as the ideological subtext of the Hudson River school painters. Their visual conquest of the land practically authorizes the course of a conquering empire. The destiny manifest in these picturings suggests a narrative trajectory in which the land is already American, and in which territories are available for settlement, statehood, and other forms of subjugation to a larger will. What remains after is not the same as the world which beckoned, with its fecund abundance. Those very regions that seduced the painters into producing such fantastical images of an equally magical place became the site of disputed claims over who controlled their fates. Huge flocks of birds, such as pigeons, darkened the sky. Whole masses of ducks, geese, wild turkeys, pheasants, quail and other game birds took flight before his eyes as Audubon arrived in the early 1800s to chronicle the birds of America. This abundance is gone, just as the wild reaches of Central and South America, of the great western United States, Yosemite and the Tetons, the Sierras and the great Grand Canyon, are no longer wonders of nature but contested sites.

We can't have Nature back again the way it was, and cannot even reengage with imagining it as we might have. Nostalgia serves no purpose, especially if it means pursuing a chimera of another era's imagined Arcadia. We must look around us, here and now, if we are to see beyond those lost illusions. Everywhere in our current lives we see the vanishing of animals and plants, the disappearance of regional differences and cultural specificity in the wash of monoculture. A fierce set of ongoing struggles engages us at every turn. Traditions come to be the stuff of tourism. "Indigenous" is a term often used to cover artificially preserved anachronisms — as "authentic" creates a fiction of unspoiled and intact continuity. But such definitions don't reflect the dialectical character of definitions. A region is defined in relation to how its boundaries are set as much as where and by the terms of difference according to which they are maintained. What constitutes an edge, a region's border, its essential character, its distinctive particulars? In a global context in which all produced value is consumed in the terms of an omnivorous economy of desire, the manufacture of an image of regional identity lays itself open to the charge of mere branding, of identity formation for the sake of a market share. Local becomes a sign of distinction, a niche in the larger economy.

On the other hand, the observation of what constitutes the local from within asserts a counter-current to that commodifying gaze that objectifies it from without. What defines a region? Self-identification rather than reification turns the tables. The phenomenological sense of place is constituted in an ongoing relation to lived experience,

social and sensorial. How to find those particulars? Register them? The artist-naturalist is now an artist-ecologist, eager to record those species whose sheer existence confers beauty on their form. What rare privilege to be an artist who travels to see the mute and wondrous creatures of the earth, to see the spirit of life in a myriad of forms all infinitely varied, moment to moment, one to another. The hovering fish, hanging suspended in their strangely dislocated vignettes, hark back to the devotional imagery of Rey's earlier work. They are icons, but like the surrealistically painted close-ups of rare orchids, hummingbirds and insects in the work of Martin Johnson Heade, they seem uncannily aware of being observed in all of their otherness.

Not the science, but the art of life is the driving theme in Alberto Rey's ongoing project. His painting of fish in their living form is an act of observation as preservation. An act of reverence stresses the realization that life is the organized intelligence of matter, aware and sentient, active, sensate, and replete with coordination. Grace and beauty are mere words. But graphing the arch of a jaw, the set of a spine, the quick silvery movement of a dorsal fin or the spines in a tail — these are visual signs of an existence designed to meet the exigencies of environment. They are also incredibly beautiful forms, or so we are shown to believe. Rey confers aesthetic value on the engineered adaptations of aquatic species and surprises us into appreciating the elegance of all creation. Thick lips, bulging eyes, shiny scales and odd arrangements of color, form and size are all simply evidence of the diversity of shapes that organic life can assume. Rey's appreciation of this fact is clear in every work, the watery light and luminous medium in which he finds his fish marks a shift from landscape to seascape, providing a view of a subaqueous world inhabited by creatures beautifully unaware of their own mortality and divinity. For they are both, these fabulous things, alive and ephemeral, imbued with the most sublime spirit of existence, as beings and entities, existent and transient.

Rey catches them in his glazes, preserving the regional fish for posterity. Who are they? Who are we? What do we know of the world if these strange and sometimes familiar looking creatures are its inhabitants, alongside and within the zones we occupy? Might we learn something from their locatedness, their habitual relation to specific places? Does the concept of region belong as much to the future, ready for reinvention by placing a premium on immediacy and presentness, as antidotes to those long standing teleologies of progress that have so ravaged our cultural and natural landscapes? Rey is hardly moralizing in these images, nor is he performing sly anthropomorphism in the expressive force of his paintings. Quite the contrary.

In his engagement with these places and their creatures, Rey seems intent on absorbing the particular otherness of each as if to show how knowing is always about that edge of awareness beyond which is the infinite and inexhaustible domain of ignorance. The line between nature and culture has always been along that hard to discern but definitive edge. A Nature invented for Culture's pleasures risks being contained by the power of the latter. Nature swells within the human perception, sometimes conceived as a province of divine intention, sometimes as a raw force of cosmic energy taking shape and form. At other moments, Nature figures the promise of salvific grace, or unfettered abandon or a lost paradise. Every age and era imagines Nature in its own image, and in these days, Rey's apperception of the regional diversity of life forms, each needing to be reverenced, has the force of a global vision that does not conquer what it sees and names, but rather respects and preserves it.

The lessons to be learned are those of seeing and appreciating, after which the question of destruction might become moot. If we could see all of the world as Rey sees these fish, then what new ecology of aesthetic appreciation might come into being? Ideas are not different from other living things, a few seeds of diversity can preserve an entire species. Regions of thought are like physical locales, capable of serving by example rather than exhaustion. Rey's models of seeing are not exhortations to action. Nor are they prescriptive judgments. They are demonstratives of principles of engaged observation, evidence that seeing and drawing are modes of transforming perception into sentience. From that awareness, anything may follow.

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Aesthetics of Death
ARTIST STATEMENT

I began to conceptualize this series about 10 years ago when I started collecting images of dead steelhead without knowing why until a year ago when recent family deaths and serious illnesses had sensitized me to the fragility and richness of life. By the time I started the eight- to 10-foot paintings, I had spent countless hours researching the biological cycle of this migratory species and the history of its introduction into the Great Lakes from the West coast. With each lifeless body, I tried to estimate its age, genetic background and the life led over the past few years. As I looked more closely at the remains, I would search for details that would indicate what had led to its demise. I often saw these deserted or discarded bodies as metaphors for my own life. The majestic creatures had, at one time, led noble battles in their attempts to survive and prosper. They now had become silent still-lifes that were slowly being broken-down by the same elements that had supported them. There seemed to be a sad irony and elegance to the cycle.

Along with the extensive background information on steelhead, I had also been researching the angling art of Henry Inman, Thomas Doughty, Winslow Homer and Thomas Cole; the fish still life of Gustave Courbet, William Chase and Emil Carlsen; the landscape work of Martin Johnson Heade and Jose Maria Velasco; the contemporary paintings of Walton Ford and the early work of Alexis Rockman. While piscatorial art and nature painting was considered a form of high art during the 19th century, it no longer seemed innovative although reconnecting society to nature and painting as art form still seem relevant in our society. I was intrigued by the thought of reintroducing piscatorial art back into a contemporary aesthetic dialogue and creating a venue to investigate our own mortality.

right: "Aesthetics of Death: X," oils on plaster, 72" x 120", COLLECTION OF THE BURCHFIELD-PENNEY ART CENTER, BUFFALO, NY

ENGAGING AMBIVALENCE:
ALBERTO REY'S "THE AESTHETICS OF DEATH"

BY MARK DENACI, PH. D.

In choosing the title "The Aesthetics of Death," Alberto Rey invites us to consider his recent series of paintings not only as meditations on life and death, but also as participants in a philosophical dialogue on the nature of aesthetics. Initially, the title seems like an odd fit for these relatively naturalistic representations of steelhead trout in varying states of decay. Since the series is not called something like "The Aesthetics of Dead Trout," viewers are encouraged to see the steelhead as broader metaphors, not merely for death in general, but for the aesthetics of death in general. But what exactly does that mean? Does it simply suggest an attempt to find beauty in death? Or might it also imply some characteristic of aesthetics related to death?

Few terms are as widely debated in art criticism as "aesthetics"; many postmodernist critics associate the term pejoratively with conceptions of art as an autonomous sphere of human activity, detached from material, social, and political concerns.[1] Rey's title, then, enters his series into a minefield of contested territory, all the more provocatively so because of some pointed allusions to a major target of anti-aesthetic criticism, Clement Greenberg. Because both the shapes of the fish and the point of view from which they are depicted, the paintings literally foreground the

left: "Aesthetics of Death: VII," oils on plaster, 72" x 120"

very qualities that Greenberg emphasized in his formalist readings of abstract expressionist canvases: flatness, allover composition and the reinforcement of the shape of the support.[2] Ironically, Rey's illusionistic technique depicts not three-dimensional spaces, but flat objects spread out against equally, even insistently, flat backgrounds. We view the lifeless fish as if from directly above; their flat bodies perfectly framed by their rectangular supports and pressed flush against the picture plane. Although the trout form figures against a background, their flatness in conjunction with the equally flattened stones and sandy areas simultaneously resists the illusion of three-dimensionality. In the third version, markings on the steelhead mimic both the shape and color of the flat stones, further deemphasizing foreground-background contrast, while in the fourth version, the broken-up fish corpse wraps around the loosely arranged stones to the point of becoming nearly indistinguishable from them. In versions one and two, the fishes' tails blend in perfectly with the background colors, adding to the conflation of figure and ground. The stones in the second version, moreover, make up the entirety of its background, extending beyond the frame in all directions. This hints at the allover form of composition that Greenberg recognized in both Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and the late works of Claude Monet, whereby the entire surface of the canvas becomes an evenly spread out foreground with little or no sense of contrasting background.[3]

These remarkably Greenbergian formal strategies, however, do not return uncritically to a Greenbergian model of painting. In fact, Rey's paintings contradict Greenberg's conception in two key ways: one involves their framing support, and the other involves their intertextual relationships with other artworks and aspects of Rey's biography. In terms of framing, these works are not painted on canvas, but instead on special plaster supports. In that sense, the paintings are singular, three-dimensional objects that could not be reframed. This element of objecthood characterizes several of Rey's previous series, most notably the "Madonnas of Western New York" (1991-93) and "Las Balsas (The Rafts)" (1995-99), both of which took the forms of altarpieces. About the "Madonnas," Rey describes one of their sources as Mexican and Italian *retablos*:

> These folk paintings were visual prayers made for specific saints or religious figures. I was intrigued by how the artists managed to create a relationship between their everyday lives and a sense of spirituality through their art. I wanted to create my own series of work that brought this sense of spirituality into my everyday life.[4]

Although Rey's references to relationships between art and everyday life hint at additional anti-Greenbergian aspects of the series, my point here involves the objecthood of the altarpiece, its literal presence in the world as an object as opposed to an image or representation. This aspect also characterized the "Balsas" series, which Rey described as "minimal altarpieces."[5] Now, if the words "objecthood," "presence," and "minimal" bring to mind Michael Fried's classic 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood," this is not accidental. In a notably influential articulation of Greenbergian principles, Fried attacked the then-burgeoning minimalist movement for what he called the "objecthood" and "presence" of its works.[6] According to Fried, minimalism was "theatrical" because it called attention to the viewer's experience of the work in a specific space, for a specific duration of time, thus contradicting the idealist conception of art as spaceless and timeless. Fried referred to this timeless quality as "presentness," as opposed to the more phenomenological "presence," memorably declaring, in the essay's final sentence, "presentness is grace."

The physical presence that ironically would disqualify an altarpiece from Fried's resolutely idealist grace is precisely what Rey foregrounds through his structured supports. Both this presence of the art object and its potential references to altarpieces, moreover, begin to call attention to the multiple paradoxes of Rey's title, "The Aesthetics of Death." In painting, the steelhead are made present, but their presence *in painting* implies their absence in the phenomenal world; representing dead creatures rather than living ones, Rey engages this representational ambivalence directly. He brings the dead back to life, but only in that odd eternal life of painted objects. As uncanny as this aspect of representation may be in the genre of portraiture, these paintings actually reference the even more uncanny form of the mounted trophy fish, forever hanging on the wall as a frozen monument to the fisherman's skill, luck, and bravery — and possibly, perversely, to the life of the fish itself: life and vitality, celebrated with a dead body kept eternally alive as a flat and lifeless object.

When I asked earlier whether Rey's title suggested aspects of aesthetics related to death, the type of oscillation between life and death brought into play by these fishing trophies is mainly what I had in mind. But such memorials are not normally considered works of art, and one might wonder whether their effects could be possible in art, in the absence of the actual, once-living bodies forming the mounted displays. As my earlier reference to portraiture might suggest, most works of representational art engage in a similar, if less striking, phenomenological back-and-forth movement. This play of life and death, presence and absence, has been the subject of much psychoanalytically informed art criticism. Paraphrasing Jacques Lacan, Steven Levine describes this characteristic succinctly: "The affirmation of a negation, art represents the Thing's presence … *in* the very phenomenality of its absence, *as* its absence."[7] Through their oscillation

"Aesthetics of Death: VIII," oils on plaster, 72" x 120"

between three-dimensional illusionism, formal intimations of flatness and the three-dimensional objecthood of their altarpiece-like supports, Rey's works emphasize this aesthetic paradox.

I suggested earlier that Rey's paintings also resist a Greenbergian interpretation through their lack of aesthetic autonomy. While the paintings' insistent flatness evoke the Greenbergian notion of a painting whose subject is mainly the formal properties of painting — art about art — Rey's artist's statement frames these works within a variety of contexts external to art's formal properties:

> Over the past decade, I started to analyze why these lifeless forms affected me. With each body I documented, I tried to estimate its age, genetic background and the life it led over the past few years. As I looked more closely at the remains, I would search for details that would indicate what had led to its demise. I often saw these deserted or discarded bodies as metaphors for my own life. The majestic creatures that had, at one time, led noble battles in their attempts to survive and prosper. They now had become silent still-lives that were slowly being broken down by the same elements that had supported them. There seemed to be a sad irony and elegance to the cycle. [8]

While Rey's references here to "still lives" and even "elegance" may suggest

"Aesthetics of Death: IX," oils on plaster, 72" x 120"

a potential formalist reading of the steelheads' decaying bodies as abstract shapes in a carefully arranged composition, his emphasis on their previously lived existence and relevance as metaphors for his own life experience complicates such a reading. Certainly, Rey's experience of his own work does not even come close to meeting Immanuel Kant's primary condition for purely aesthetic judgment: disinterest on the part of the observer. For Kant, the actual existence in the world of an object — let alone the existence of something represented on or by such an object — should have absolutely no relevance to any judgment of its aesthetic merits.[9] For Rey, on the other hand, the fact that these corpses once lived is crucial: he identifies with the fish and relates them to his own life. Rey's interest in the life and death of steelhead trout, moreover, extends well beyond subjective reflection: his website contains a link to the youth fly-fishing program in which he participates.[10] Not only does Rey involve himself directly in the life cycles of the fish he represents, but this very involvement also connects him to his community and to the lives of its children.

The "Aesthetics of Death" series also relates to a very different set of connections — or perhaps disconnections — between Rey and his world. Commenting on the closely related "Biological Realism" series, Rey explains that his turn to depicting the natural environment came in the wake of a recent visit to his native Cuba:

> In 1998, I returned to Cuba for the first time in 36 years. I experienced the real difference between "nostalgia" and "reality". Apart from the Balsas series, my work of the last 15 years had dealt with a romantic vision of the past and the present. … After that trip to Cuba, I saw everything around me quite differently. … The new work would combine my interest in biology, the lost artistic notion of realism and fish. … As most of our social and economic reliance had moved to an urban setting, the connection between nature and culture in contemporary society seemed to have been lost over the last few generations. This series would try to mend the lost connection by presenting painting of fish and landscapes that were characteristic to a specific region.[11]

Rey's comments suggest that his sense of lost connections to nature relates in some way to the loss of the Cuba that he had imagined for 36 years. Likewise, his focus on the grim realities of the "Aesthetics of Death" series may reflect the replacement of his romantic vision of Cuba with that of a more sobering reality. Even in being excised from the literal subject matter of his recent work, the memory of Cuba and its connection to and disconnection from the artist seem to haunt these works in subtle ways.

While I claimed earlier that the "Aesthetics of Death" series evokes a formalist aesthetic in its flatness and careful orientation to the picture plane, the paintings nevertheless cannot be understood as self-contained exercises in form; instead, they connect to a range of external contexts, from the impact of human society on nature, to the artist's ambivalent relationship to his homeland, to the 19th-century American tradition of rugged marinescapes; and to contemporary debates on the nature and status of painting. In this context, I cannot help but think of these multiple, sometimes barely visible connections as fishing lines. Fly fishing, after all, involves an aesthetics — indeed, an aesthetics of death — but its aesthetics of death is simultaneously one of connection and engagement. Like a back-and-forth battle between fisher and prey, Rey's aesthetics oscillate between autonomy and involvement, absence and presence, death and life. And if the "Aesthetics of Death" presents death not as a definitive ending, but as part of a cyclical pattern of life, then these works should give much comfort to those who may be concerned about what sometimes appears to be the death of aesthetics in contemporary art critical discourse.

Mark Denaci, Ph. D.
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[1] For some early and canonical articulations of this critical position, see the anthologies The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983) and Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984).

[2] See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in Howard Risatti, ed., Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 12-19.

[3] See Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," in Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 93-103.

[4] http://www.albertorey.com/madonnas-western-new-york

[5] http://www.albertorey.com/las-balsas-rafts

[6] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Minimal Art: A Critical Introduction, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 116-47.

[7] Steven Z. Levine, "Between Art History and Psychoanalysis: I/Eye-ing Monet with Freud and Lacan" in The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 197-212; 204 (emphasis original).

[8] http://www.albertorey.com/aesthetics-death-artist-statement

[9] Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Beautiful," in The Critique of Judgment (1790), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 41-89. See especially p. 42.

[10] http://www.albertorey.com/s-r-e-p-youth-fly-fishing-program

[11] http://www.albertorey.com/shift-direction