

Eden's Edge: Fifteen LA Artists, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA 2007

written by Gary Garrels

Rebecca Morales crafts astonishing drawings in gouache and watercolor on vellum—semitransparent, luminous sheets of specially treated calfskin. This is an ancient material on which manuscripts were written, and often illuminated with extremely detailed decorations or illustrations that were in themselves fully rendered paintings to accompany the texts. Morales's drawings are of botanical subjects—plants, grasses, lichens, mosses, molds, fungi, sometimes with flowerlike spores sprouting—surmounting fragmented images of long twisted braids of hair or strange, knitted objects. The botanical subjects are field samples and photographs from the forests of California, the Pacific Northwest, Vermont, and Maine; the braided hair is a synthetic purchased at shops; the knitted objects are odd things Morales has found, been intrigued by, and brought back to the studio, where they become props for her work. Fused in the drawings, these subjects and their renderings evoke details from Renaissance oil paintings by Albrecht Dürer with a tinge of surrealist sculptures by Meret Oppenheim or Louise Bourgeois.

These are not simply fantastic, private caprices, but rather are meditations on our perceptions of nature and humanity's relationship with the natural environment. Morales reads widely and deeply from

philosophical, historical, and scientific texts about environment and culture. She quotes the English writer Raymond Williams, who wrote that "the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history." Morales also has noted a Native American, Chief Standing Bear of the Oglala Lakota, who explained "that by tradition his people 'did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills and winding streams with their tangled growth as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness.'"¹

So the questions of what is nature, what is natural, and what is our conceptual and practical relationship to the environment are posed. Morales describes her drawings as "the symbiosis between nature and humanity represented in a false union of synthetics and parasitic flora...the unreal collaboration between the man-made detritus of modern life and nature's primordial soup of regeneration.... I am conjuring small utopian visions while thinking of a particular edge; a point where a new equilibrium emerges in the world with the advent of humanity and nature absorbing one into the other."²

As humanity teeters on the brink of potentially vast climate change brought about by our naïve and hubristic relationship with nature, the current

natural world seems Edenic compared to what may soon be upon us. Certainly nature will survive, transform, and remain astonishing, particularly among its most fundamental life forms. The looming issue is in what form humanity and culture may remain. Morales's drawings suggest the complex weave of nature and civilization—the fragile, tenuous, and ineluctable relationship in which humanity and nature are intertwined.

1. Morales in *Landscape, Theme and Variations*, exh. cat. (Ashland: Schneider Museum of Art, Southern Oregon University, 2005), p. 6, quoting Raymond Williams in his "Ideas of Nature" (1972); Morales noting Roderick Frazier Nash, "Introduction," *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967; 4th ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), where the Chief Standing Bear quote is on p. xiii.

2. Morales in *Landscape*.

Rebecca Morales