Correlation Collection Essay

Naming of the World

Exposure

The skin mask,
underneath it
the flesh mask,
underneath it the
skull-bones, and
the black spaces
between galaxies.

-Dan Pagis (1930-1986)

There is a long history of artists wishing to explore their relationship to nature by journeying through a wilderness. One of the earliest individuals to do this in America was English naturalist and artist Mark Catesby (1682-1749). For Catesby this was a true immersion into the eastern seaboard of North America in areas still all but unknown to Western European eyes, and more importantly, still in the wilderness or a near wilderness state. The America Catesby began recording in 1712 had not yet suffered the social and natural disintegration that would be visited on it on a vast scale in later centuries. Many of the new species he documented for the first time are now extinct. The artist as explorer and scientist has a long tradition in the history of American art. Karl Bodmer, John James Audubon, Albert Bierstadt, and others represent the boundless enthusiasm of artists to venture into lands unknown and find in those places a source of astonishment and opportunity. Tracy Hicks' joint venture in Guatemala with the Biology Department at the

University of Texas at Arlington during the summer of 1998 brought him face to face with a place strange to him, a "once" wilderness now suffering almost unimaginable stress from human intervention. In stark contrast to the experience of Catesby some 300 hundred years earlier, Hicks has returned home with more questions than answers. Although Hicks' works communicate the same palpable sense of wonder as a Catesby drawing, they are perhaps more mixed with a sense of grief than could ever have been possible for Catesby.

Hicks has described himself as "a visual artist . . . a collector of images and objects, an assemblage artist, a sculptor, and a photographer whose work uses preservation as a medium." He produced these new works after spending six weeks in Guatemala with a group of herpetologists and parasitologists who were collecting reptiles and amphibians to determine how the tiny creatures fit into the ecosystem (or what is left of it) from which they evolved. Hicks purposely left behind his camera and relied almost entirely on memory, journals, and Internet communiqués to the outside world. On the eve of the CRCA exhibition he briefly comments that "My task now is to take these experiences and interpret them with preservation as the medium." There is perhaps more to it than his simple explanation would suggest. The work we now see is evidence of his encounter that serves, to borrow poet Stephen Mitchell's words, "as a reminder to acknowledge that once upon a time he had stopped at the crossroads of the horrible and the sacred."

The configurations Hicks' work takes serve as meditations on his (and ultimately our) relationship with the earth, on troubled borders between nature and culture, and on his personal and deeply felt experience of place. Hicks searches for large meanings in small things. He has a long history of finding significance lodged in the cracks between civilization and wilderness. With this current body of work he presents a

vision of nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed, more so than he had perhaps expected (or feared) to find. The work in this exhibition poses two questions. One is more or less imaginary (how to make meaningful works of art) and in the realm of the artist and the other is insistently, even uncomfortably, real (how to live in the world). For Hicks the terrain between the two is a dim boundary. In these first major installations since the trip we see his struggle to bring the two questions more closely into alignment. Mixed in with his motives are childhood memories of a neighborhood environment much less degraded than it is now, and of objects that often trigger those memories. Pulled loose from any original intent or meaning, such memories acquire their own radiance from the imaginative role of art and its capacity for double meaning and metaphor. Hicks sets in motion a gentle impulse that in turn moves us along with him to an imaginary place of imaginary images with their own fertility and life. To loosen the gates of imagination we as viewers must abandon what we think we see for what we imagine we see. This transfiguration was best described by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard when he wrote, "Imagination is always considered to be the faculty of forming images. But it is rather the faculty of deforming the images offered by perception, of freeing ourselves from the immediate images; it is especially the faculty of changing images." For Bachelard, "True poetry is the function of awakening."

Troubled by, and possibly ill-prepared psychologically for, the awakening the Guatemala trip fostered in him, Hicks' whole romantic view of nature, inherited from American Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, is at odds with the rapaciously altered environment he encountered. Hicks, who had understood the satisfaction of nature, now had the unsettling experience of beholding its fragility under the onslaught of man. His romantic notions have perhaps left him feeling guilty about

what he has seen. The contradictions so starkly apparent in Guatemala between man's need to survive and nature's prerogatives leave Hicks at an unlikely crossroads. Can his response as an artist to what he has seen communicate the conundrum he has witnessed between the needs and desires of people and a diminished, very nearly destroyed natural landscape? Until recently, the environmental movement in America has seen nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed. For Hicks to find some middle ground he must look for answers to those questions, and his, in an unlikely place-not in the landscape he traversed but in his art that grew out of that experience. For him this may result in a long-running conversation with himself that may never be entirely settled to his liking. The end product may result in an art that is as much a journey in discovery as it is truth telling-a story of his education through his unfolding day by day experiences. The English 19th-century gardener Capability Brown maintained that the best form for a garden is an itinerary. The American garden writer Michael Pollan suggests that for Brown this journey "unfold[ed] gradually toward [Brown's] narrative by passing through a succession of smaller ones: mystery, melancholy, romance, humor, and even sublime terror, all linked by the . . . path." Another critical dimension to all of this was beautifully articulated by the German writer Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). Benjamin's writings are not easily classifiable, but the meaning in this passage is clearly troubling.

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

For Hicks the "path" these works of art make in the face of "progress" becomes both a real and a metaphorical place where nature and culture can intertwine in a manner they never could in life. He seems to long for a certain state of grace in this recent work-a balance between the optimism he wants desperately to feel and the gathering sense of doom he experienced in Guatemala. We have more evidence for this than just the works of art, for Hicks maintained a written record of each day's occurrences, thoughts, and asides that are best described as musings. For him writing sufficed for making on this trip. In the aftermath writing and making seem to have merged, allowing him two ways of grasping the significance of his journey. The writings blend meditation on life with social and scientific history. In a sense Guatemala became a sort of reverse "Walden" for Hicks-a journey away from conventional wisdom toward an uneasy truth. His growing interest in writing as a communicative tool is long in coming and is hinted at in a comment made by former Dallas Museum of Art Associate Curator of Contemporary Art Annegreth Nill in her 1994 essay that accompanied Hicks' DMA exhibition; Nill wrote that the artist attempts "to render some evidence of a life lived." His interest is perhaps as much in his life as it is in the life of others. Such an interest brings to mind German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's contention that "in order to write a single verse, one must see many cities, and men and things; one must get to know animals, and the flight of birds, and the gestures that the little flowers make when they open in the morning." Underneath the surface of the new work is the underlying suspicion that Hicks might think that art is not as

interesting as daily life. As he turns his attention outward on the world there is the nagging suggestion that he might be finding less satisfaction in creating works of art in the context of fixed, unchanging objects. The slow chemical reactions he induced in sealed glass jars in previous works have for years produced the side effect of beautiful visual phenomena. Hicks has never felt completely at home with such phenomena alone. Artist Robert Rauschenberg touched upon the same unease when he offered that art for him "means to function thoroughly and passionately in a world that has a lot more to it than paint."

In the new work Hicks does not so much give meaning to and interpret reality by imposing his order on it; instead he enters into an unsure collaboration with time, space, and history. Perhaps it is the nature of all such collaborations to possess some degree of unsuredness, even awkwardness. He recognizes that his emotions and memories might be a barrier of sorts to allowing the emotions and memories of others to speak. Individuals and communities render their places meaningful and endow them with their histories. These histories can be shared to some extent, but to a large degree human attachment to place remains an enigma. Hicks' art has a considerable fascination for enigma, and enigma may even be what it is in the end most deeply concerned about. In these new installation works the place created retains that same fascination while simultaneously projecting all the riches of imagination the artist once mustered around a singular object or glass jar environment. One might suggest that for Hicks the object/place loosens the gates of his imagination. The French poet and essayist Benjamin Fondane suggested, "At first, the object is not real, but a good conductor of reality." The object can be another world-a vehicle to go beyond thought. Thomas Moore fervently wrote, "We can't begin to live a more artful life, which is the avenue to the soul, if in public life around us, and in everything we see and inhabit, art is invisible."

In his new works Hicks coveys that human presence, while often brutish, is paradoxically a thing of incomparable (for Hicks even inconsolable) beauty. In this presence he searches for meaning and purpose in a world increasingly disconnected to the natural world and filled with untold destruction. The Guatemala communiqués provide firsthand knowledge of the terrible and catastrophic consequences of a way of life severely out of balance with the animal and plant species that unfortunately share its time and space. How to be with nature and not diminish it through that encounter is a conversation that he believes must be held. He leaves it to us to take part in the interchange even though for him the hoped for (maybe even longed for) reconciliation may never occur. One gets a sense that he would rather the conversation remain a story in these works and not a mere description of lives and landscape. Breaking down barriers of understanding between life and art and art and science is but part of his intention. Hicks may even long for that state Rauschenberg described as where "the artist could be just another kind of material in the [work], working in collaboration with all the other materials." Or as critic Calvin Tomkins perceived, "why worry about art when life is what matters."

Not particularly interested in images as symbols, Hicks is a kind of grand facilitator, allowing fragments of life to speak of their brokenness on their own terms, little altered by him. He mostly accepts the commonplace on its terms. Of course by using the past histories of objects and people he allows himself to deal with the present. Hicks understands better than most of us that every object of the past lives in the present as well. It is a present that creates a mode of thought in him that can best described as serious and possessing a certain moral gravity. Even so, these current pieces do not fit neatly into the current flood of ideologically and politically based art. His work avoids the intellectual arrogance and spiritual impoverishment so often prevalent in

the latest widely heralded tendencies in late 20th-century art. A clue to how Hicks avoids these predicaments can be found in the words of professor and literary critic Lionel Trilling. Trilling wrote, "Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion." In these new constructions Hicks reaches deeply into another cultural sphere informed largely by bodies of knowledge different from his own. In the end it is people, not cultures, that sense places. In a landscape of uprooted values and extensive diasporas, sensing the true nature of a place is increasingly difficult. Wisdom might still triumph, but Hicks tends to put his trust in love, not pity, and certainly not coercion. Perhaps it would be too much to hope for to suggest that love's triumph might make the difference between life and death not only in Guatemala but everywhere else as well. In Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache, anthropologist Keith H. Basso wrote that it is "when individuals step back from the flow of everyday experiences and attend self-consciously to places-when, we might say, they pause to actively sense them-that their relationships to geographical space are most richly lived and surely felt." Basso suggests that is where those relationships are, in the view of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, "most fully brought into being."

Hicks' true concern is that places of historical attachments, and the people who made those attachments, are increasingly dislocated in surroundings utterly alien and unfamiliar to them as we leave the world behind us in our mad race into the future, and that the inhabitants of these "lost" landscapes will not comprehend, care for, or even be able to love the place that is their legacy. Performance artist Laurie Anderson dedicated one of her songs from her 1989 recording Strange Angels to Walter Benjamin. Her lyrics

borrow heavily from Benjamin's words except that where Benjamin writes, "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," Anderson sings, "The Angel wants to go back and fix things, to repair things that have been broken." Nobel Prize winner in literature Czeslaw Milosz wrote recently, "Yes, I was often in love with something or someone. Yet falling in love is not the same as being able to love. That is something different." I think Hicks also desperately "wants to go back and fix things, to repair things that have been broken." Because he is able to love, the process he devises to make works of art is partially able to accomplish this task metaphorically. There might very well be no other way to do it-not for him anyway. What perhaps matters most to Hicks during the creative process is that he speak with some urgency, bringing his aesthetic sensibility and moral imagination together hand in hand, and in doing so continue the legacy of those before him who attempted the naming of the world through exploration and, in the words of poet Marvin Bell, "left or returned and have not been deserted, whether or not they know."

Place may be the first of all concepts; it may be the oldest of all words.

-N. Scott Momaday

Philip Van Keuren February 1999