

# RUSSO ▲ LEE GALLERY

## Artist Statement

This work contemplates the intersection of humanity and the natural world and the chaos that surrounds us. Humans are constantly trying to wrangle order out of this chaos. We face the challenge of balancing our desire to dominate our surroundings with the need to maintain the balance that makes all life on earth possible. We struggle to predict the impacts of our technological advances and the abuses that result from unscrupulous uses of them. How has the past brought us to where we are today? What can we do to maintain ecological balance and harmony while living our best human lives? As much as we like to pretend that we have control of our fate, chaos reigns supreme, and no one can predict the future. And yet within the chaos is so much everyday beauty. I hope this work wrangles the chaos in a way that can bring some of that unpredictable beauty to everyone.

I created several book excavations from bound copies of *Fortune* magazines from 1945 and 1946 that were originally in the collection of the Library at the University of Washington in Seattle. They provide a window into the postwar world of the United States in the Atomic Age. We see the idealized happiness of the suburban nuclear family with its beautiful cars for happy families who can enjoy cocktails after work. Another facet shows the industrial power of a postwar world that will enrich the capitalists who have funded and profited from the war. Mostly what is on display is the military dominance that made all of this abundance possible. Will history repeat itself? Are we at the brink of World War Three? As we look back into history, we seem to repeat the same mistakes with tragic results. The cycle of violence is inevitable. The fear of nuclear destruction and apocalypse looms over us. Yet this ultimate evil is a great unifier so far. We can all come together to agree that avoiding the fate of nuclear apocalypse is of utmost importance.

Other book excavations display the beauty and diversity of nature. The *Snakes* book excavation features several snake eyes that illustrate the various pupils that different species have. Some have vertical pupils, similar to cats or other carnivores, which aid in the ability to hunt in a wide spectrum of light from darkness and to bright sun. Others have horizontal pupils, like goats and other ruminants, to maximize their panoramic range of vision to avoid predators. Lastly, some snakes have round pupils, similar to humans and other predators who are mostly actively hunting during the day. I love to observe other creatures and imagine seeing the world as they do. It's humbling to think of all the different ways that other lifeforms observe our world.

Another excavation, *Bees*, sits at the intersection of nature and humanity. Humans rely on bees to pollinate the plants we cultivate for food. Beekeepers raise them to aid in pollination and to harvest the honey and beeswax they create. The ancient Egyptians kept stacked bee hives on special rafts and floated them up and down the river to

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pollinate whatever flowers were in bloom. The bee was a symbol of royalty in ancient Egypt. Other groups, like the Free Masons and Mormons, continue to embrace the bee hive as a symbol of social structure as a form of empowerment. Bees feed the queen royal jelly to transform her into a “super bee”. Is there a royal jelly I can feed to my queen bee that will unleash her super powers. So far no, but the bees still do inspire.

My collage work makes use of the cut away pages from my book excavations alongside other found images. While the backgrounds are based on found flags. I embrace using recycled materials to reduce my own waste stream in my artistic practice. The themes of the collages emerge by chance as I build up the layers. I'm obsessed with making patterns that have a floating psychedelic feel. The backgrounds are based on found flags. We fly flags to show unity with our people. Many of us fly multiple flags. I like this sense of unity and use flags of communities that I have become part of to symbolize this.

*Bugs In the Machine* consists mainly of old engineering and insect imagery in the foreground, and background colors based on the Tennessee state flag. I have always loved the precision and detail of mechanical drawings. While insects are fascinating to look at, they can be a constant nuisance in the form of stinging and biting insects like ticks, fleas, and mosquitos. When looked at together I find myself contemplating the problems that our current technology creates with its burdensome flow of information, junk mail, and solicitations full of lies and deceptions that seem to multiply like fruit flies in the summer. Perhaps we are the bugs in the machine, or maybe the politicians here in Tennessee are the bugs in the machine dividing the common masses with petty arguments while their corrupt system fills their pockets with ill-gotten gains. But, of course, the bugs themselves are fascinating to look at with their many colors and shapes. Tennessee is also full of great people who are just trying to find a life worth living like everyone else and every insect buzzing and crawling around.

*Come Fly with Me* combines images of birds, knives, sculptures, and comic book characters atop a background based on the pride flag. I put a bird on it because birds are infinitely fascinating. As a city dweller they are one of the most common animals I encounter. Their flight and songs represent freedom and hope for me. The knives seemed to echo their wings and contrast their pleasant nature. Ironically, I have a fear of knives even though a knife, in the form of a scalpel, serves as my main art making tool.

*Reliable Cure for the Opium and Heroin Habit* is a reworked collage made from the scraps of an excavation of Oregonian newspapers from 1914. I finished and framed the work years ago only to look at it recently and decide that it was not finished. It needed more layers, and so I added them in the form of illustrations from nature books and Sears Roebuck catalogues. I found myself musing at the many products deemed safe for use, including: lead white paint available in 50 and 100 pound wooden barrels, arsenic wafers and arsenic face cream to maintain that pale complexion, and electric shock rings for rheumatism. The work has a whimsical feel with a dark side. While I wish there were

actually a reliable cure for the opium and heroin habit, for many there is not. So it goes and so it is a memento mori to my brother John who died of a heroin overdose.

*Rainy Day Dreaming* is also a reworked collage with old 1914 Oregonian newspaper images creating a maze of frames that hold various nature, comic book, and Sears catalogue images. The large eye is an ostrich eye. I am jealous of their incredible vision. They have the largest eyes of any land animal. It is not only beautiful it also allows them to track movements of an object the size of a dingo at a distance of almost 2 miles away. They can practically see into the future. In my dreams I can see into the future and the past at the same time, but I can rarely make sense of any of it. This work reminds me of a chaotic dreamscape adventure.

*Trilogy* started out as a wall hanging quadriptych but ended up being a free-standing sculptural triptych. They are made from part of a set of *Book of Knowledge* children's encyclopedia. Layers of fairy tales are mixed in with historical illustrations. The books demanded to be deconstructed extensively. Many works come together easily, but this was not one of them. Like a bad set of triplet children, they needed constant attention and some time to sit in the corner and think about what they had done. But in the end, they grew up into a handsome sculpture that still has the whimsical nature of its childhood.

On the other hand, *Priests of the Flowers* was the blessed child of a sculpture basically sculpted itself. It was excavated from an old Nation Graphic book. Natty G has always been known for great visuals and this volume was no exception. The colors and forms of the insects are exquisite and the bits of descriptive wording just fell right into place. Champagne for my real insect friends and real pain for my sham insect friends.

I spent several weeks finishing this work with a torn rotator cuff, which for some brief moments was the most intense pain I have ever experienced and it forced me to do much of this art with my left hand. The injury can take months to heal. As I continue to recover, I feel grateful and blessed that I was able to finish the show with help from my family. I hope the *Human/Nature* show helps you enjoy the nature around you, grapple with your existential inquiries, conquer the challenges you face and inspire some creativity to take seed.

James Allen, July 2023