



So Close to the Glass and Shivering

Melody Owen

February 21 - April 9, 2010

The Art Gym

Marylhurst University

This publication accompanies *So Close to the Glass and Shivering*, a major exhibition of the art of Portland-based Melody Owen. Author Jon Raymond discusses Owen's work in an elegant essay for this catalogue, and we are grateful to him for his contribution to the understanding of her art.

Since 1980, The Art Gym has published close to sixty exhibition catalogues; it is always a community effort. *So Close to the Glass and Shivering* was made possible through an Artist Project Grant from the Regional Arts & Culture Council, support from the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, and The Art Gym's Northwest Art Publications Fund. We acknowledge The Harold & Arlene Schnitzer CARE Foundation and Linda Hutchins for their continuing support of that fund.

Finally, we thank Melody Owen for her art, for the time and dedication it represents, and for allowing Marylhurst University to share it with the public.

Terri M. Hopkins
Director and Curator, The Art Gym

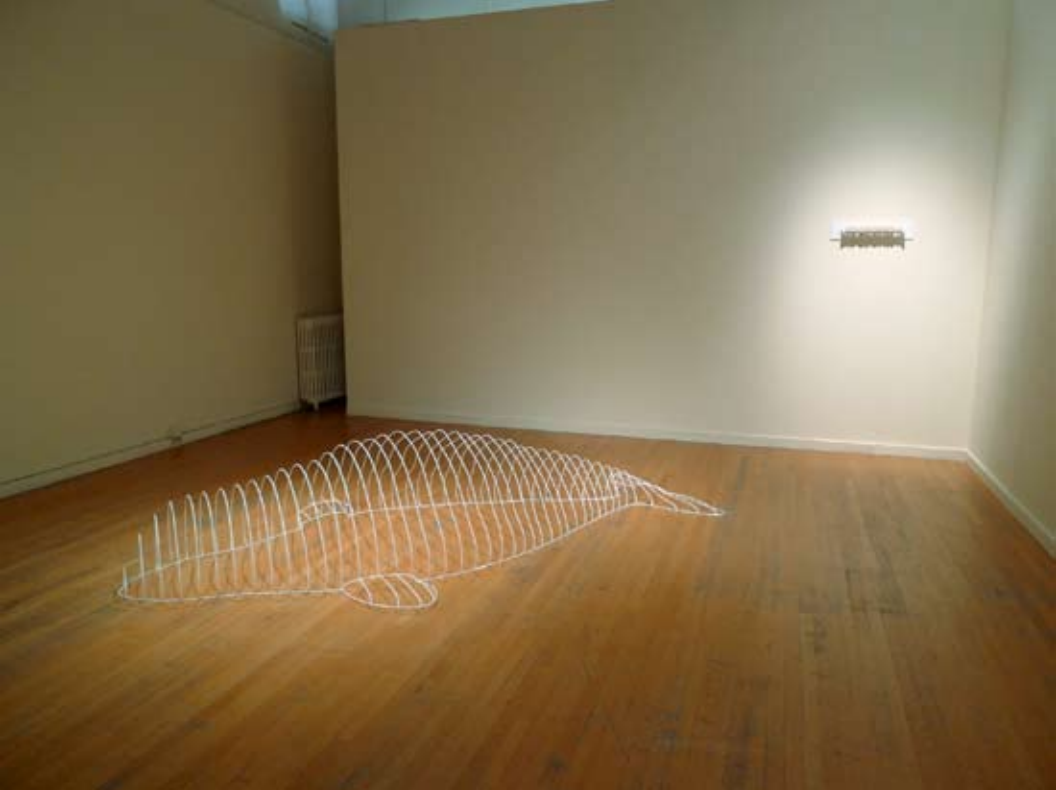


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Melody Owen — *So Close to the Glass and Shivering*
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Useless, Incorruptible, Secret
library catalog cards, 2010



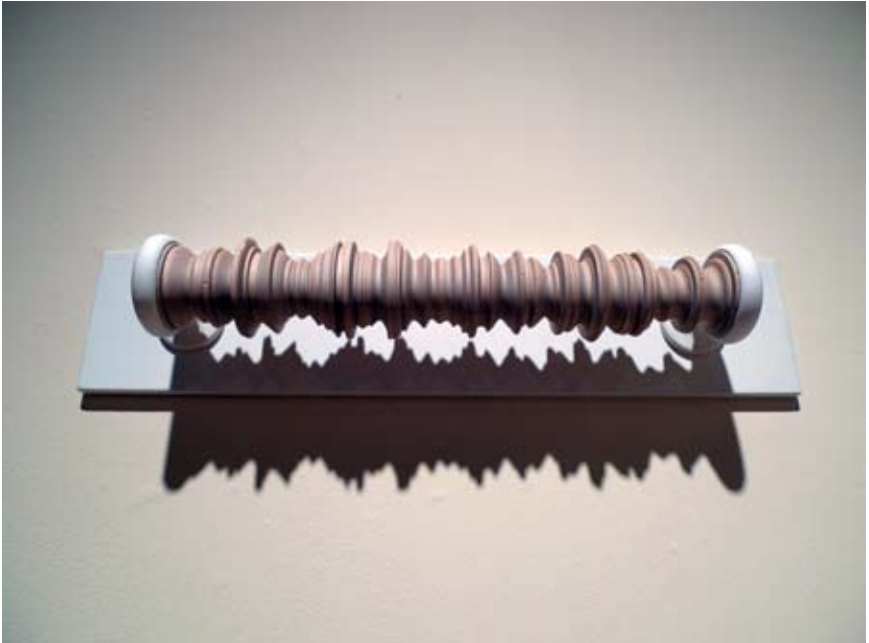
Stranded Whale
stainless steel wire and paint, 2010

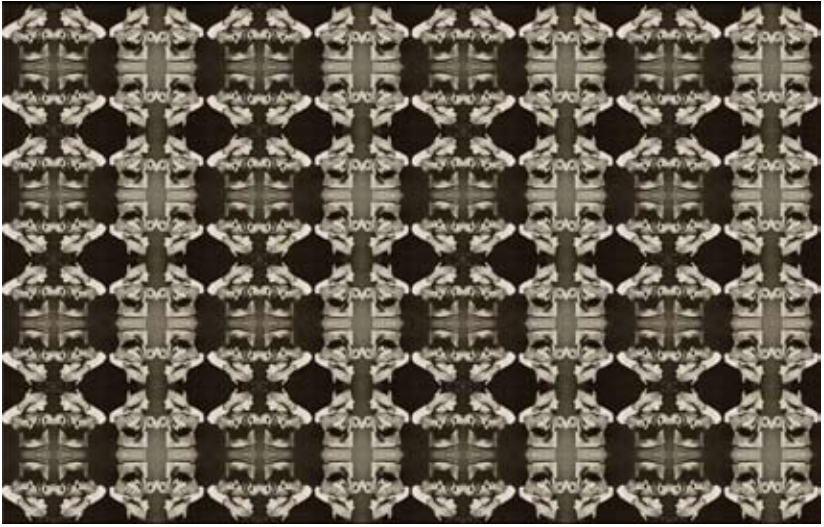
The Animal Question

One of the great tragedies of human existence is the fact that we can't talk to animals. What are the birds singing about? we have to wonder. What do the dolphins know? What is the cat thinking while she sits there on the ottoman, staring at us for hours? Even as our animal colleagues have accompanied us through every stage of social development, acting as our totems, familiars, messengers, and signs, serving as pets, livestock, and surrogate family, they have always, also, remained cloaked in their own adamant mystery, unable — or maybe just unwilling — to bridge the ultimate gap of linguistic connection.

It is this ancient problem, cast in thoroughly contemporary and ruefully romantic light, that stands at the center of much of Melody Owen's recent work. *So Close to the Glass and Shivering* is a suite of conceptually-driven, emotionally searching pieces addressing the question of animal consciousness and taking on feelingly the issues of bondage and extinction that lie beneath the surface of the enduring animal/human relationship.

Beluga Sound Wave
turned wood, 2007





Double-Screen Method
interior and exterior, 2001

The animal question has been a primary concern in Owen's work for at least the last decade. Often using found materials, and working in collage, drawing, sculpture, video, and print, with occasional forays into areas of collaboration and curation, Owen has fleshed out a conceptual realm wherein humans and animals cohabit the same plane of meaning, serving as mutual metaphors and occasional substitutes, and generally trying, with rare success, to break through their respective mirrors of the Self. In the 2001 piece *Double-Screen Method*, for instance, Owen placed photographs of women inside beehive boxes to create surreal dioramas fusing the insectile and the human. In 2004's *Empathy Series*, she crafted simple, schematic line drawings of human hands cradling cute animals that manage to confuse the difference between holder and holdee. In 2009, she edited a small book of art and writing on the theme of animal extinction (*The Disappearing Book*), introducing a quixotic intervention into a global atrocity-in-progress. In every case, the hope, the sign, of interspecies communication — if not transubstantiation — is presented with great sincerity, only to slip away or become overwhelmed or bump into some kind of invisible wall.



Empathy Series: Snake
pencil drawing, 2004



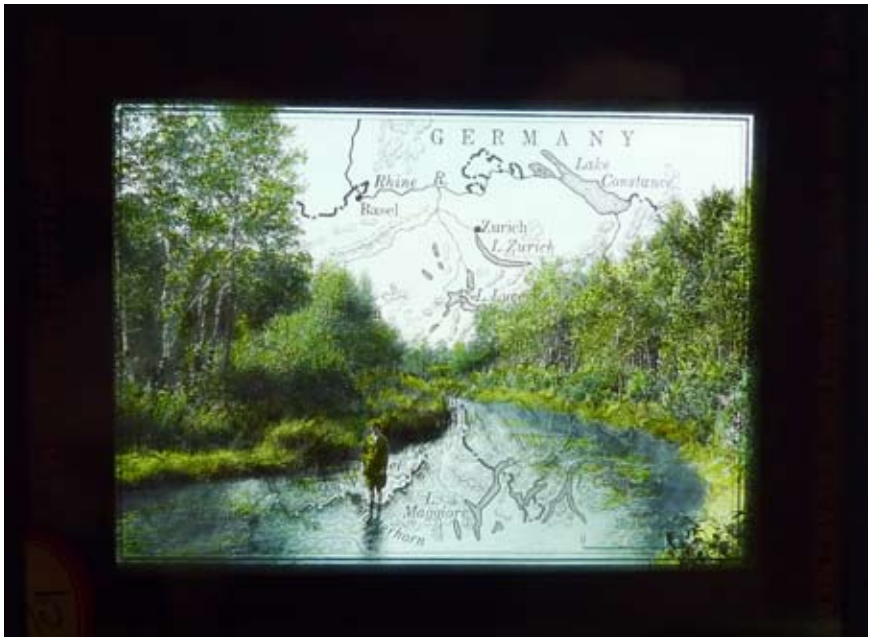
Love Letter to an Ocean Creature
jungle vine, 2010

In The Art Gym exhibition, in pieces such as *Love Letter to an Ocean Creature* (2010) — a carved jungle vine from Borneo resembling a narwhal tusk, inscribed with a message in Morse code — or *Beluga Sound Wave* (2007) — a wood sculpture representing a sound wave emitted by a beluga whale — Owen delivers elegant, elliptical thought experiments that again proffer the intention of speech, but quickly fall victim to strong undertows of translation. In transferring the beluga's sound wave from the aural to the visual register, for instance, Owen comes out with an interesting, even lovely object: a ruffled, cylindrical span of peaks and valleys, but one that remains a frozen shadow of the living frequencies pulsing inside the ocean's waters. And as for the Morse code, would any ocean creature understand the signal? Will most viewers?

White Bull (Dream)
bull horns with string, 2010

Crushed by Small Stars
crushed charcoal in ampoules, 2003





Behind the Mountains was Empty Space
collaged glass slides, 2010

Yellow Spine
National Geographic magazines, 2010



Owen's animaloid associations assume a more elegiac tone in the oddly affecting *Yellow Spine* (2010), a simple stack of National Geographic magazines piled against the wall, whose titular yellow spines, dated from 1976 to 1989, rise to form a golden column memorializing a double tragedy: the passing not only of the flora and fauna depicted in the magazines' pages, but also of the very pages themselves, the lone documents of a lost world's existence. A similar death-knell sounds in *Useless, Incorruptible, Secret* (2007), also a tower, this one a kind of double helix fashioned from discarded library catalogue cards, standing as a desiccated remnant of a once-fertile ecology of words.

Owen's voice is not entirely frustrated or sad, though. Her concerns take on a nearly cosmic hue with *Weight of a Tiny Bird* (2007) — a video projection of naked trees beamed through and refracted by an empty plastic case and hazily reflected onto the wall — whose lattice of light rays assumes a nearly retinal architecture, and whose delicate engagement with such big metaphysical concepts as consciousness and memory are no less effective for their modesty.

The show's largest sculptural piece, *Stranded Whale* (2010), a stainless steel armature in the shape of a beached whale, also sends us to deep phenomenological waters. As the skeletal ghost image hulks spectrally, half-submerged in the floor, the viewer is led to reflect on the literal shapes of life itself — whale, bird, dog, worm — and to momentarily consider these forms as so much vibrational illusion, mere phantoms emerging from the morass of undifferentiated energy that binds all matter, and at the bottom of which all images and sounds, all life itself, ultimately become music.





Weight of a Tiny Bird
video projection, 2007



Untitled (Hands)
porcelain, 2007

It's a fleeting glimpse into the boiling cauldron, though. The prevailing perceptual experience of this show is, more often than not, one of facing a blank, unreadable slate, presented vividly in two brief, single-shot videos played back-to-back on a shared screen. *Kayavak* (2006) consists of a slow-motion image of a beluga whale emerging from the water, its smiling, inscrutable, almost fetal face holding the camera's gaze for a few dilated seconds. A flash flares on the wet torso, and all too soon the glistening tail exits the frame, leaving a final glimmer of light on water. *Petite Chat* (2008) comes next, presenting a handsome leopard, with flattened ears, long, sensing whiskers, and thinking eyes, watching the camera through the glass wall of its zoo habitat. Voices murmur in French, but as the shot unfolds the thoughts of the caged animal remain wholly unknown. There is no way we can truly access what these creatures are feeling, staring into the camera's lens.

But we can guess.

Jon Raymond is the author of the novel, *The Half-Life*, and the story collection, *Livability*. He lives in Portland, Oregon.



Empathy Series: Bird
pencil drawing, 2004



The Long Goodbye
hand-cut collage, 2009



Elephants Walking on Sticks
hand-cut collage, 2009

