

Remains of Our Days

Bones, shells, eyes and ears at DIVA

Back in high school, my best friend loved to joke about humans “having a hundred percent mortality rate.” Perhaps he said it dryly when we read *Red Sky at Dawn* and the main character fell face-first into a decaying horse; perhaps he said it triumphantly when Hamlet went on for a bit too long about Yorick. We would raise our eyebrows and give a little nod of appreciation at his wry yet plain statement.

Then, we rarely had to deal with death or even reminders of our own mortality. I’d like to take him to DIVA now to see two of the shows: “Sight and Sound” by Sara Smith Spahn and Kevin Spahn, and “Thrown Before,” by Jonathan Smith, in which bodies meet art, and what lies beneath the skin emerges as hauntingly attractive.

First, the Spahns. Sara works with ceramics, some of which come off as a bit too precious (*Big River* or *Tracks*, for instance), but most of which mix ephemeral lightness with the strength and vulnerability of fired clay to create wonderfully allusive images. *Sundance* and *Dreams That Almost Existed* nudge at the brain to consider bones — tossed bones, perhaps, or an animal’s ribs in *Sundance* and broken, reknit, stripped and scrimshaw-carved bones in *Dreams*.

To Hear and See You combines elements on the wall and hanging from the ceiling. The hanging pieces call up bones, too, but also pork rinds, tiny bee’s nests, wrapped bandages, strips of skin or bark — and the interaction of their shadows with the white wall elicits a pleasing visual complexity. Kevin Spahn’s sound design also alludes to other things — outdoor noises, or maybe the sound of breath from



To Hear and See You,
by Sara Smith Spahn

the inside of the lungs. The visual and aural work together well; each lends more weight to the other’s art.

In the next room, Jonathan Smith’s “Thrown Before” monumentalizes objects even as the photography reveals its own process. One piece focuses on a pine cone stripped by squirrels (“They eat it like an artichoke,” Smith says); one an egg that Smith shot in several different exposures and printed, leaving his tracks clear. Because I’m lightly acquainted with him, I’m not going to review the show (though if I didn’t know Smith, I’d be writing my approval of these moving, lovely pieces that both turn away and confront). Instead, he and I talked about the show. Here’s an excerpt from the longer interview, available at blogs.eugeneweekly.com

EW: Jonathan, how did you get interested in remains?

JS: We were on a hike with a bunch of friends,

039_33-37,
by Jonathan Smith

and someone found a deer skull. Bones specifically are so close to what we are, and to see a bone photographed speaks to us. Something has died; something has passed on; this remains. We can easily make a jump from a deer to our own mortality.

Why make the photos of bones so consciously beautiful?

Art has to be beautiful in order to be viewable. I don’t necessarily agree with art that shocks. I think even some of the most controversial art out there is beautiful in the end, like [Andres Serrano’s] *Piss Christ*. Even a gruesome project can be viewed in a beautiful way. It’s like sugarcoating in a way — it goes down a little easier, but the fact is that it goes down.

EW

Both shows run through Saturday, Aug. 30, at DIVA, 110 W. Broadway. Summer hours are 10 am-6 pm Tues.-Sat.



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