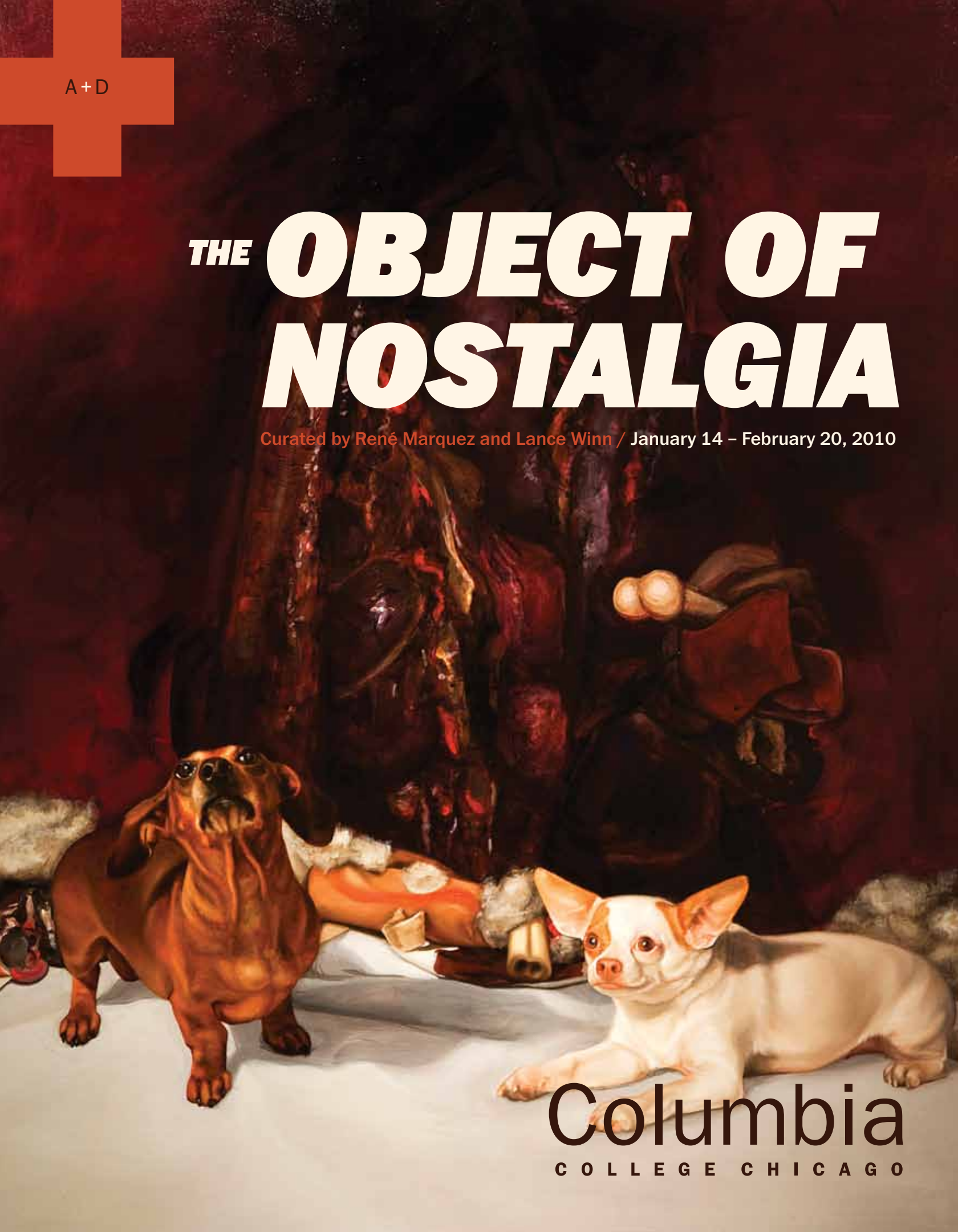


A+D

# *THE* **OBJECT OF NOSTALGIA**

Curated by René Marquez and Lance Winn / January 14 – February 20, 2010



**Columbia**  
COLLEGE CHICAGO

# THE OBJECT OF NOSTALGIA

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Marlene Alt / Brian Bishop / Pamela Fraser / Dawn Gavin /  
Kathy High / Greg Hopkins / Erika Leppmann / Julia Lothrop /  
Clayton Merrell / Elaine Rutherford / Raychael Stine

*The only occasion on which Oscar Wilde approached profundity was when he was accusing Lord Alfred Douglas, at prodigious recriminatory length, of shallowness. In the course of his bombardment, he wrote: "The fact is that you were, and are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. You think that one can have one's emotion for nothing. One cannot. Even the finest and most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely enough, that is what makes them fine. The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought—the Zeitgeist of an age that has no soul—and send them back soiled at the end of each week, so they always try to get their emotions on credit, and refuse to pay the bill when it comes in. You should pass out of that conception of life. As soon as you have to pay for an emotion you will know its quality, and be the better for such knowledge. And remember that the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism."* —Michael Tanner, *Sentimentality*<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition *The Object of Nostalgia* developed out of a panel of the same name intended to question whether, in our increasingly dematerialized digital age, the attachment to objects, art or otherwise, is automatically nostalgic and sentimental. In questioning whether the object world still has something to tell us, we hoped to consider what the goal of nostalgia might be? As Wilde demonstrates, sentimentality is fairly easy to deconstruct and to demonize, but the presumptions about what constitutes "the finest and most self-sacrificing emotions" continues to be a territory little explored, and as truth becomes understood as a chimera for power, increasingly less discussed in these "post"-squared times. The artists included in *The Object of Nostalgia* use a variety of approaches to question their relationship to the external world: how we come to the emotive in the era of emoticons, and the subtle rules that may be enforced within the language of Modernity and progress that limit the territory that artists are allowed to explore if they wish to have their work taken seriously.

As far as an object may delineate an ideological territory, artists—as makers of objects—must navigate not only acceptable territories but also acceptable objects to represent them. What to do, however, when the personal territory one has mapped out does not correspond to prevailing ideologies? In such a case, artists may find themselves deflecting charges of nostalgia or sentimentality. Ironically, demonization of sentimentality is confusing as it invokes an ostensibly already discredited modernism. The sentimental is, in fact, often characterized by modernism's "other": domestic, even feminine, and, according to Wilde,

inauthentic (reminiscent of Clement Greenberg's kitsch). In the proliferating "disease" of nostalgia (not surprising as Foucault made a career out of the specific discourse of dis-ease), we see everywhere claims to truth, whether it is the "true" paid for emotions that Wilde claims, or the "true" history that Fredric Jameson<sup>2</sup> assumes that the Moderns had access to. Meanwhile, in the twentieth century, any claim to a universal truth becomes highly suspect as a discourse to maintain control; history, as understood by Benjamin and others, "is the object of a construction."<sup>3</sup>

We understand that nostalgia may be a longing for an idealized past, devoid of the full complications of any lived moment, but is our pretense of some easily perceived historical causality not more manufacture? Who lays claim to the fact of the past? And what is it that nostalgic longing interferes with? Must this interference only be perceived against an appropriate movement towards the future—or could it be a site of resistance if progress itself becomes an ideological position? As Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, claims "Somehow progress didn't cure nostalgia but exacerbated it...Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, the past may find value in two ways: as a foundation for progress or as a haven from progress gone astray. The choice one makes depends on one's definition of progress, and, in today's economic and cultural climate, that definition rises unapologetically from a distinctly Western intellectual tradition. Whether we label that tradition as modernist *per se*, we

understand it is a tradition driven by rational thought and the need for empirical understanding. Longing finds little validation other than as foil to science and a heroic future.

With the 80s' culture wars well behind us, *The Object of Nostalgia* explores new ground relative to subjectivity, globalization, and contemporary art practice. We do not believe that any of the artists included in the exhibition are striving towards a sentimental practice, or that they work towards a "luxury of an emotion" in the viewer; we do believe that they are willing to eschew unspoken hierarchies of artistic practice in favor of working from a place that feels authentic and personal without falling back on the distancing mechanisms of irony. *The Object of Nostalgia* began with a call for papers, from which a group of four artists/scholars were selected who displayed a complex approach to the idea of nostalgia in both their creative practice and writing. They were then asked to invite other artists who they believe create work that broadens and challenges our ideas about what constitutes worthy practices of the contemporary artist. The invited artists, moreover, explore the qualities that cause art to be marginalized against the dominant discourse that must, it seems, always be that of the Avant-Garde in the movement towards the new in an art world—or, perhaps better stated, in an "art market."

Due to the way the show has developed, we have been given the creative task of piecing together a history that we have relinquished some control over. On the other hand, we have, like the historian who is able to look over a whole made of discrete parts, been given an interesting set of pieces and

<sup>1</sup>Tanner, Michael, "Sentimentality." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 77 (1976-1977), Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 1977, p.127.

<sup>2</sup>Jameson, Fredric, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. New York: Norton, 2001, pp.1960-1974.

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin, Walter, *On the Concept of History*, New York: Classic Books America, 2009, p.15.

<sup>4</sup>Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p.14.

practices that we get to try to make sense of and use as a way to continue our discussion of the relevance of objects, images, the studio, the crafting of experience, and other things that pertain to the discussion of art in the twenty-first century. What links can be made between this disparate group of artists and objects? Might the form of the work tell us something? Its scale, its relation to space, the chosen materials—the things we cannot know through representation (a key component of any thinking about nostalgia). One thing that a viewer might notice, even as some works cope with time-based media, is that they tend to be discrete objects, capable of moving to different locations, and scaled more to the proportions of the home than to the museum. This could be the nature of a group gallery show, but it must also reflect the way that these artists would like their work approached—something quite different than the monumental paintings, sculptures, and installations that seem explicitly made for museums and the plethora of biennials. It is a quality that we have referenced as the “domestic,” or works that might be lived with, that might adapt to the non-white cube of the home, and that might be apprehended more slowly than work that simply relays a message. What types of content arise as we and the other participants think about nostalgia and the things that, for good or bad, define it? One notices a return to the specifics of personal location. We see the seemingly outmoded categories of portraiture and landscape taken up in new ways. The portrait, displaced, having less to do with the character of the human face, and more with surfaces hinting at identity, or a shift in the hierarchy of things worthy of careful recording. And the landscape, no longer able to be the site for the sublime, now infused with consciousness, knowledge, and rational science, both creating new wonder *and* robbing us of a more pure relation to the senses.

Citing Boym once again, she offers that: “To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn’t depend on actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world...”<sup>5</sup> Although “home” need not be literally defined for Boym, it becomes the artist’s mandate to define it for her or himself. “Domestic,” in our use of the term, reflects Boym’s idea: these artists are putting things “in their places.” Interestingly, all the artists in the exhibition do present work that, in one way or another, references place. Whether a domestic interior, a landscape, or a psychological space, each artist offers a location from which they begin to relate to and develop a “sense of intimacy” with the world. Any nostalgia expressed is neither inauthentic nor

based in unpaid-for emotion; totally opposite, it seeks clarity.

Emblematic of this clarity, another shared element emerges—perhaps surprisingly—among many of the artists’ work: the animal. Parallels between Derrida’s “animal question” and Spivak’s subaltern point to the kind of ontological questioning encouraged by an examination of sentimentality. From the Modernists’ abject derision of sentimentality to the persistence of this derision today, we have to ask how we—in our decidedly not-yet-over-modernism cultural bias—allow for the authenticating and validating of experience? Somehow, the human-animal dichotomy allows us humans not only to consider what we are not, but also what we might be. Theorist Giorgio Agamben surmises, “The total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man.”<sup>6</sup> In this case, the object of nostalgia might be the animal itself. The function of the object presents models of alterity, reinvigorating traditional categories of “other.” In her *Companion Species* manifesto, Donna Haraway asks, “How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to taking difference seriously?” Her answer is that practices must evolve that join “disparate inherited histories” with “absolutely necessary joint futures,” a relationship she calls “significant otherness.”<sup>7</sup> In so doing, subjectivity becomes concomitant with sentimentality, as does the potential for ontological revision.

The conclusion we must inevitably come to is that charges of nostalgia and sentimentality belie an ideological position. The structures that discredit, maintain stakes in a dominant paradigm of modernism that persist despite claims to the contrary. At the same time, much literature on the topic acknowledges confusion and loss relative to time and place. Jameson describes, again and again, a postmodern pandemic of nostalgia—claiming that because we do not have contact with our true history, and because there are no original paths to follow, that the artist can only create “pastiche,” and not “parody.”<sup>8</sup> While there may be limits to how much we want to open up history as interpretation—thinking of those who claim the Holocaust as fiction—do all these claims to some sort of a formerly more universal access to the truth not begin to sound like additional modern and progress-centric beliefs? Are we so certain as to how parody will allow us to advance? And to advance towards what?

In our global context, we can view contemporary nostalgia as an expression of nomadism. Whether virtual or real there have never been more people displaced, physically and emotionally. There must be place for nostalgia, a use for looking back as a way to ground ourselves and wonder what we want

*against* the drive towards the future, increasingly defined by technology, where being “distracted from distraction by distraction”<sup>9</sup> seems to stand in as stance. To return to Boym a final time, “In its original meaning, the word *technology*, from the Greek *techne*, shares the same root with the word art. Technology is not a goal in itself but an enabling medium. While nostalgia mourns distances and disjunctures between times and spaces, never bridging them, technology offers solutions and builds bridges, saving the time that the nostalgic loves to waste.”<sup>10</sup> Art in general, and the art included in *The Object of Nostalgia*, has the ability to challenge our valuation of time. The works here reward the more time one gives to them, and finally might, in their challenge to pure spectacle, allow us to choose what we want from our lived time.

**René Marquez’s** work examines the material image and its roles in signifying place. Born in the Philippines, he explores issues of migration, travel/tourism, and domestication through drawing, painting, and video. He is particularly interested in popular culture’s constructions of ethnicity relative to immigration and colonial history. Past exhibitions include the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the International Center of Photography, University of California-Irvine, College of William and Mary, the Delaware Biennial, and the Ayala Museum in Manila, the Philippines. His forthcoming article, “The Postcolonial Sentimental: Imagining Cornelio,” will appear in the *International Journal of the Arts in Society*.

**Lance Winn** teaches at the University of Delaware. He has lectured at Universities across the US, most recently at the University of South Florida, and the University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez where he ran a workshop called “Post-Colonial Collage.” In the field of art, Winn has published catalogue articles for “Reproduction” at Lemberg Gallery; an essay for Brian Bishop’s solo show titled “Pause” at University of Delaware; and most recently, an essay for a show he curated at the University of Delaware Galleries called “InWords,” that hosted an international group of artists who work with language as material. Winn’s personal work is included in a diverse range of upcoming books including three-dimensional typography, the animal in art, and Paul Virilio’s influence on contemporary artists. His work has been shown nationally and internationally, and in 2007 was the subject of a five-year survey, titled “Trace,” at the Freedman Gallery.

<sup>5</sup> Boym, p.251.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *The Open, Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, p77.

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, Donna J., *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 1993, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> See Jameson.

<sup>9</sup> Eliot, T.S. *Four Quartets*. p.(17). Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Boym, p.346.

**Julia Lothrop**  
*Untitled*, 2009  
Oil on panel, 3" x 3"  
Courtesy of the artist



**Pamela Fraser**  
*Suffer No Fools*, 2004  
Acrylic gouache on found paper,  
12 1/4" x 14 5/8"  
Courtesy of Casey Kaplan Gallery



**Clayton Merrell**  
*Supernovaasteroidcometsun*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 40" x 52"  
Courtesy of the artist



**Greg Hopkins**  
*Sub Rosa*, 2008  
Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"  
Courtesy of the artist



**Elaine Rutherford**  
*Sojourner*, 2009  
Oil, wax and engraved aluminum foil on panel.  
Beeswax boat in insert  
Courtesy of the artist

**Marlene Alt**

*Home/Land: Moths to The Flame*, 2007

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist



**Brian Bishop**

*Untitled (Futile)*, 2009

Encaustic on panel, 72" x 72"

Courtesy of the artist



**Dawn Gavin**

*Rorschach*, 2005-2006

Paper, acrylic, metal and wood

13.25" x 19" x 1.5"

Courtesy of the artist



**Erika Leppmann**

*Let Me Count the Ways*

(with apologies to E.B. Browning), 2008 (detail)

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

create...  
change



**Kathy High**

*Skin-to-Skin Dome* prototype for lab use (part of *Petition for Lab Rat Shelter* series, 2009); Glass blower Bill Jones; video production assistance Eleanor Goldsmith, Adrian Garcia Gomez; 10" diameter x 10" high glass dome with 2.5" lcd video monitor, DVD player, DVD (2 minute loop) Courtesy of the artist

Cover:

**Raychael Stine**

*Early Darkness*, 2009  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 4' x 5'  
Courtesy of the artist

# Columbia

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A+D GALLERY  
619 SOUTH WABASH AVENUE  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60605  
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THURSDAY  
11AM - 8PM

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