

Creations of biodiversity

Whimsical and surreal works of art aim to explore interdependence in nature



Nature's Toolbox: Biodiversity, Art and Invention, The Field Museum, Chicago, until 2 December

Reviewed by Christopher Bentley

THE giant bat heads look like idols that might line the walls of a macabre cathedral. Yet at the same time, these dark, mottled sculptures by long-time collaborators Richard Selesnick and Nicholas Kahn are cute. The effect is simultaneously charming and troubling.

That's a fitting first impression of the Nature's Toolbox exhibition now showing at The Field Museum in Chicago. More than a year in the making, the show features works of art by 30 artists, each exploring the interdependence of nature – and in particular the way humans affect biodiversity. "There's an implicit call to action," says Alesha Martinez of Art Works for Change, the group, based in Oakland, California, that curated the exhibition.

Take Donna Ozawa's installation, part of her Waribashi Project. Since 1999, Ozawa has created several sculptures using a

fraction of the hundreds of billions of single-use chopsticks, or waribashi, discarded every year. She works wonders with this waste, crafting striking sculptures held together by only gravity and friction.

Each new iteration employs some 90,000 chopsticks and takes shape in situ, evolving with each additional handful. Anemones and other organic forms are recurring motifs. "I'm sort of playing with that while I'm working on it," Ozawa says.

Ozawa's construction for Nature's Toolbox looks like a 2-metre-high tornado unravelling as it touches the ground, its swirl tapering off into the installation platform. In one sense the medium is the message: sushi enthusiasts might feel they have created a monster.

From real to imagined disaster; Lori Nix evokes a grim future in her gorgeous photographs depicting miniature dioramas that create scenes from post-apocalyptic cities. In one, shown above, a natural history museum's own showcases remain intact while the surrounding

walls crumble. The exhibit is surreal, yet urgently relatable in its overall message.

Suzanne Anker's *Biota* has a similar haunting quality as Ozawa's and Nix's work. Anker dips sea sponges in porcelain, uses an air hose to refine details, and then burns off the organic material. She then adorns the resulting "ghost of sponge" casts with 3D printed silver-leaf figurines modelled on neurons and animal brains.

Anker's artistic interests follow her intellectual curiosity.

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"Science is in the databank of art," she says. "Ecology especially is no longer just in the textbook. It's in the public domain."

Biota, which debuted last year in Istanbul, Turkey, reflects on the relationship between sponges and neuroscience. It's a stroke of biological irony that organisms with no nervous system resemble that pinnacle of neurological

In *Natural History* artist Lori Nix creates a post-apocalyptic scene

evolution, the human brain.

Some artists take a different tack and use humour in their work. Isabella Rossellini's *Green Porno* films delve amusingly into the sex lives of insects, while Lucy and Jorge Orta capture our conflicting veneration and destruction of nature with brightly painted casts of dinosaur bones – a whimsical nod to evolution's morbid engines: extinction and death.

"[Our work] is a way of talking about our own fears and plagues" says Kahn, peering into a porthole in the back of one of his bat heads. Inside, moths dangle daintily from strings – a vignette of the animal's dreams. "It's beautiful and ugly at the same time."

The black humour in Kahn and Selesnick's works provides a bridge to the guilty admiration with which we approach the natural world. Their exhibit reminds us not only of our outsized environmental impact, but also our subservience to the world that sustains us. ■