Deep time and the unsettling bite of impermanence

Jonathan Latiano

From an early age, I have been both captivated and unnerved by the complexity and scope of our natural world. This fascination has shaped my artistic practice, which centers around the perception of time, space, and scale, and our ability to abstractly place ourselves within the larger universe around us.

I am drawn to how our relatively short life spans affect the way we perceive time, and how the context of the present shapes how we interpret the past and predict the future. Environmentalism, ecology, and the natural sciences are a constant in my work, and fields such as geology, taxonomy, paleontology, and evolutionary biology are commonly employed as catalysts in my practice. My artwork (Figures 1-5) weaves between science-fact and science-fiction, alluding to the more elusive qualities of our environment, and our own uncertain future on this planet.

In Figures 3, 5, I created landscapes and paleolithic structures out of petroleum-based materials such as reclaimed asphalt and color-shifting automotive paint.

My installations explore labor, impermanence, and fragility. Site-respondiveness and architectural-integration are vital to my practice, appropriating the pre-existing structure of the site as part of the artwork. I strategically focus on the physical boundaries of my artwork, challenging the lines between where the art ends and the exhibition space begins. The act of building is central to both the final work and my creative process, and much of my artistic practice is dedicated to methodical material manipulation. In Figure 1, I created a geological formation that appears to have physically erupted out of the exhibition space. This false floor was built over the existing gallery floor, which the viewer may walk directly onto. The physical integration into the exhibition space heightens both the geological qualities of the artwork as well as the viewers’ acute spatial awareness within the installation.

Although my artwork requires a large physical presence in its construction, conceptually, the works hinge on fragility and impermanence. The life cycles of my individual works have become crucial to my practice. The art exists for the duration of its exhibition, and then it does not. This is particularly evident in Figures 2, 4. Figure 2 is a memorial to the recently extinct Baiji river dolphin. This work is created from personally gathered freshwater driftwood, which was then bleached and hand-carved into 12 distinct Baiji skeletons of varying completeness. The installation depicts these skeletons emerging out into the air from a pile of driftwood in one corner of the gallery, soaring through the exhibition space, and then dissolving into a glowing dome at the opposite end of the gallery. Figure 4 is created largely from evaporated salt and depicts a crystalline structure that appeared to be both fixed and sweeping. All figures referenced were created specifically for the spaces they were exhibited in. After the run of each exhibition, the artworks were meticulously disassembled, and their materials were recycled back into my studio practice. There is an unsettling bite to that impermanence, but also intense weight and beauty.

About the artist

Jonathan Latiano (born 1982) received his BA in Studio Art from Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and his MFA from the Mount Royal School of Interdisciplinary Art at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Jonathan’s artistic practice is rooted in the study of time, the natural sciences, and the viewer’s own spatial...

Figure 3 “Existence and Properties are Inferred”. Year: 2016. Material: asphalt, river stones, foam, joint compound, and color-shifting automotive paint. Dimensions: height 12 ft., width 35 ft., depth 22 ft. Medium: installation. Description: site-responsive installation sculpture about the new geological record being left by human’s infatuation with petroleum. Photo Credit: Kim Llerena.

awareness within the immersive installations he creates. His artwork has been exhibited in numerous solo and group public art exhibitions in cities including New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington DC, and London, and his work has been featured in local, national, and international art publications. Jonathan was the recipient of the 2013 Mary Sawyers Baker Prize in Art, Moravian College’s Outstanding Young Alumni Award, and the Bunting Teaching Fellowship in Fine Arts at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Jonathan resides and works in Boston, Massachusetts and serves as the Director of the Visual Arts Program at Merrimack College.

Jonathan Latiano’s full portfolio can be found at www.jonathanlatiano.com.

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None.

**Footnote**

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