

STRANGE COMPANY:
A CREATIVE RESPONSE TO “GIVE AND TAKE”
by Glori Simmons

1.

In a group exhibition, individual artworks find themselves in strange company. In a certain sense, each speaks its own language and has been separated from its pack, so that I, as a viewer with my own set of references, find myself struggling with the desire to link them, make sense of their unions, while honoring their own particular projects.

When contemplating the six sculptures and installations that make up “Give and Take,” I discovered an interesting chronology, an order in which to encounter the individual works as if each had evolved from the other organically. It suggests a weird Darwinian progression in the subjects from the abstract or pre-human (Childress, Weber, Coon) to the figurative or human (Caulfield, Ivey) to the object or human-made (Eller) and back around again. This will be my map.

And the land will be the exhibition’s title, “Give and Take.” Taken from the everyday idiom and given to this collection of disparate artworks as a way to bring them together, it is another compromise, yet one way to shape the journey.

When originally thinking about ‘give and take’ I isolated the two verbs, letting their union be irony. As opposites, they suggest a pull—a tug-of-war, a generosity and a greed—that viewers will see again and again in these works. Yet, as I studied the artworks and thought more about them as a group, here and now in this historical moment, I appreciate more than ever the compromise and flexibility that the term ‘give and take’ ultimately means. The tug-of-war becomes a handshake. *To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it*, writes John Berger.¹ In the desire to touch, is the desire for intimacy, a willingness to listen as well as speak.

2.

At first sight, it is frightening, familiarly foreign. Primordial, primitive, extra-terrestrial, sinister even. It has what we have: a spine, a chest cavity, and veins, but even as it mirrors life, it reminds us of death—the crucifix, the altar, the warrior’s armor, and remains.

Set into the hedge, the worked clay of “Plate VI” is a gray ruin, something there all along that has finally revealed itself and for a moment, we are its discoverers. Our first desire is to touch it. *To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it*. This is the essence of Deborah Childress’s work.

A re-visionary, she teaches us to see the same old world anew. She does not take nature for granted. When Childress looks, she sees patterns and textures: ups and downs, ridges and scallops, pocks and veins. The leafless branch holds just as much possibility as the full leaf of spring and her studio is filled with discards: shells and bones.

Cast-offs are her tools and she uses them to work the negative. Unlike the traditional sculptor, Childress does not create a model in the positive; rather she presses her mold directly, losing the pattern, allowing chaos to play its role. After years of smooth surfaces and control, Childress likes to lose it. The clay mold is her canvas, and her brushes are castaway things—the top of chopsticks and pens, coral and cat skulls. From the bones of others, new shells.

She sees in opposites when she's lucky; the deeper the impression, the higher the rise. When I consider her process, I think of lifting a rock to discover insect tunnels. I think of burial, a naked body rising from wet sand. She calls her sculptures plates because she thinks of them as illustrations, studies found in scientific textbooks. Again, she teaches us to see.

As an art student, Childress dug holes, working the dirt into sculpture molds. *To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it.* I am reminded of the handprints of ash and animal fat pressed into cave walls along the Dordogne, this possibly the first artistic impulse: to get one's hands dirty.

3.

Like Childress, Cheryl Coon scavenges from nature for shapes, colors and materials. What she most admires: nature's prickly surfaces and gauzy skeletons.

Coon states: *the water gave me grounding.* To make her sculpture, she had to get her feet wet and step into the cold water.

Taking us to the wind-whipped fountain, she presents her "Organism"—part rising bubbles, Portuguese man-of-war, water lily, floating debris. Think fungus growing along a downed tree, the kelp reefs of Baja, garbage brought in by the tide. It is as much decay as breath, fermentation.

What she admires: the hunter's grace, its patient waiting and quiet study, the ability to merge with nature in order to take from it. She constructs her creature with fishing tackle: floats, lines, weights, and netting.

Made of tulle—veil and crinoline, Ophelia's skirting—the organism is a musty bride, waltzing on water. Sinking and rising, drifting toward and away. Like the tide, the tendrils generously shares what they will soon steal, acting as if they have a choice in things. In actuality it is anchored down, the connection also a tether.

What she admires: nature's adaptations. Nature is no silent partner; it does not allow simplifications. Instead, it takes what we give it and surprises us with its assimilations. Watching the organisms' coy dancing, we almost forget that we are not entirely in nature. We are at a fountain in the coiffed lawns of the University and "Organism" is artist-made, breathless, an empty skin, as much hunter's prize as invention.

4.

In this world, the cardboard box is removed from the square and the sculptor no longer wed to clay. It seems all the artists are breaking their rules. Ann Weber's work—its shapes—tells a story about the artist's space and how environment shapes its inhabitants, teaching them the work around.

Imagine how a potter, when given the chance, smashes her cups and bowls. Call it: release from repetition.

Imagine her first art studio, sunny and large, several flights up, empty boxes broken down in the corner. Considering the stairs, her old medium, clay, is now heavy and burdensome; she seeks a new material and sees it there, in the corner, already schlepped. Imagine this studio burns and everything is lost, except the chance to start over, concentrate.

The new studio has low-ceilings. The new work made sideways, long, in order to be tall. Like goldfish, the works grow in proportion to the space they are given. In this way, the space defines the pieces.

Imagine finally, an improvement, independence of all sorts. Height and width, limitless possibilities, even some storage, but there is still the limit of the stapler's reach. Considering Weber's experience with workspaces, it is no surprise that she describes her artworks as on the verge of breaking open.

Artists are scavengers and makeshift and unromantic about their gleanings, how they salvage and recycle, how their artworks give new life to materials. *I can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear*, Weber tells me. Like any creative survivor, she is scrappy. She, too, visits nature for shapes, strange seeds, then dumpsters for materials.

Piecing together cardboard, her surfaces are patchworks staple-stitched into taught, curvy skins. I think of grafting, and in the areas of crazy-quilt irregularity, I see compelling scars, a signature, beauty derived from the mundane.

Breaking away from the repetition of ceramics, the artist finds new ones—the hunt for cardboard, the cut and staple, and an obsession with basic forms. Here, two glossy shapes meet, opposites attracting. Circle and cylinder: finger inside ring, axle to wheel, earth on axis.

Slow: the wheel cannot turn. The cylinder acts as a brake, a kickstand, a support. Together the two separate shapes create a balance, a give and take. They rest, hold each other up, cleave each other, procreate.

Life: they are pods, seeds, smooth and round as ripe fruit, a womb, ready to burst.

5.

The question has always been: what will we do with what we know?

The back-story. At the beginning of the 20th century's last decade, Gail Caulfield shaped from clay a man and a woman, returning humanity to the earth and ocean. "Rhea and the

Heart of the World” and “Millennium Man” were formed in anticipation in 1990, before the worries of the millennium actually took shape. From broken rock and water, two new figures of clay, and the artist’s own questions about the future.

When looking at the two figures, we are momentarily relieved. We are on familiar ground. This couple is human, an Adam and Eve. Then we realize that something has happened.

The couple hedges a path, back to back, in opposition. Who has turned away from whom? What transaction has occurred? Perhaps they have yet to discover each other. We immediately desire a story, a narrative for this couple that will explain.

Our contemporary kouros wears the earth’s surface: the continents, the seas. Africa on his loins, Asia on his shoulder. At the brink of life, his chest thrust outward, he is prepared. His eyes are fixed on the horizon, but he does not seem aware of the ways in which he is the horizon. We are, according to the artist, in his hands. The question is clearly: what will he do next?

“Rhea” is an athletic goddess. Her bangs no-nonsense, her hair in a ponytail, she, too, is prepared. Pre or post-Pandora, she has something to offer that may not in the end, be all that bad. She embodies land, is grounded, so to speak, and has something to give—the world in heart-shape, tucked inside a metal box. She studies her possession.

Something is about to happen. Is that the man’s heart in Rhea’s box? Will she free the beating earth as if it were a bird? Who has power here?

The 21st century is yours, viewer, and you can tell this story however you like.

6.

As if to suggest an ending, there she is: Eve, standing next to a tree, a single figure in a minimalist landscape.

In “Distance,” Bill Ivey takes the narrative in a new direction. In this highly conceptual, two-part installation, his elements are simple: cement, pre-existing trees, figurine, and scope.

In the nook of two trees, he reenacts the sidewalk with a new cement foundation. Here, the elements co-exist, make do. The edges are sharp, the scale extreme.

The tiny figure, locked in cement, is tucked into the shadow of the tree which has been made larger by this moment. In the vast emptiness of its lot, the figure seems protected by the tree, yet a long way from home.

This sculpture needs us to a certain degree. Standing there before the scene, we become a part of its world: mirror and intruder. Another reenactment. But that is only the half of it. A ways off, a scope aimed at the scene is in need of an eye to look through it in order to capture the moment. We are the connection.

Hunched over the viewing scope, caught in the *serious act of seeing*,² the viewer creates yet another tableau. What does it mean for the person on the mound to be looking; is it simple voyeurism or an attempt to connect, the performer's desire to be seen?

There are those who believe that they are always being watched—by God, Allah, a guardian angel, or Big Brother. And there are those who feel invisible, non-existent. To see and be seen has always been linked with power and shame, Adam and Eve covering their bodies. Here, alienation and connection co-exist just as sometimes the word 'look' means 'listen.'

7.

Peter Eller's "suitcases" are loaded. *All art is at once surface and symbol*, wrote Oscar Wilde,³ and I think Eller would agree. He is interested in the power of the image, the many ways in which a single object can be read. And the suitcase *is* evocative.

I think of Jewish families, sitting on stuffed suitcases. Eventually the cases' contents filled museums as the families' only remaining mementos.

I think of a refugee whose luggage has been washed away.

I think of a soldier humping his pack and *all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight.*⁶

Hump, lug, drag, transport. So many words for "to carry."

Cast in cement, Eller's suitcases are heavy and burdensome as the clay that Weber forsook. X-ray proof, they are small bunkers, the street worn smooth with travel, tombstones. It is difficult not to smile at their absurdity! Who hasn't lugged a too heavy suitcase through airport corridors and bus terminals? Who hasn't wished they could just set the thing down and walk away?

For years, Eller traveled away, packing too much in his suitcase. They are heavy, over regulation weight. But, these days one must be cautious, best not to draw attention to oneself. *Have your bags been out of your control since you entered the airport? May I search your bags?* Eller is an expert in these matters. Here, the cement casing is a polished mask, ordered and contained, the traveler's best face forward.

When opened, the suitcase splits like a book and reveals the traveler's intangibles, the story inside the book. The interiors of Eller's two suitcases are rough as work-worn hands, personal baggage, or mean, secret thoughts. Inside one, footprints stuck. Inside the other, the cast of the artist's face, two fold. The single traveler argues with himself. Set in stone, he is unflinching. On the other side a mirror, a way to see the traveled distance behind one's reflection. There is no escaping one's self.

Next to the flag poles, the baggage seems to have been left behind. But the artist does not speak of the suitcase left rotating around the conveyer belt at luggage claim, alone as a man

standing in a crowd. He says that we will return to it. The object is important. Eller explains that *it contains what we need ... who we are*. Standing before them, it is true, we have returned.

8.

In this short walk, we have traveled a vast distance, and it seems appropriate that we end in a station terminal, a point of departure and arrival. But, where have we arrived? How will we find our way back from the practical matter of Eller's "suitcase" to the natural world of Childress's "Plate VI"?

Shells, exoskeletons, both are the casings, something that will eventually be unpacked or shed as proof of life. Throughout this exhibition, these artworks have continually asked us to situate ourselves in the world and to ask ourselves about our own relationships with others and nature, and with ourselves. What will we leave behind? Perhaps we are still evolving. Perhaps we will learn from each other.

Every piece—with its tendril, its handle, its desire to hold or be held, weighted or lensed—has its own give and take. The question has always been: what will we do with what we know?

Sometimes the word 'look' means 'listen'.

Notes:

1. From John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.
2. From Paul Auster's essay "Black on White" in *The Art of Hunger*.
3. Quotation taken from Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*.
4. From Tim O'Brien's story *The Things They Carried*.

Biographical Statement:

Glori Simmons is a poet, writer, and the manager of the Thacher Gallery at USF. Her book of poems, *Graft*, was published by Truman State University Press in 2001. She will be a Stegner Fellow in fiction this fall at Stanford University. She is grateful to each of the artists for their time and insights.