

Stylizations of Nature

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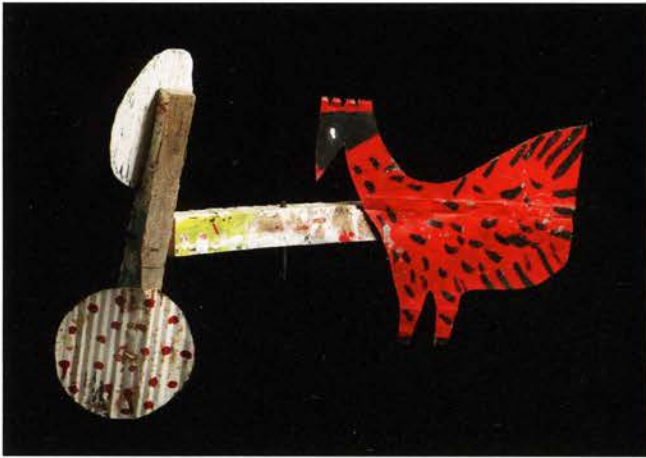


From the dawn of time, people have used works of art to communicate ideas, perform rituals, explain religion, decorate objects, and more recently, as a form of self-expression. A common thread—perhaps the most pervasive—among these has been nature and humankind’s varied attempts to re-create it pictorially. This ongoing endeavor coils through time and spans the globe, beginning with prehistoric cave paintings and continuing into the contemporary era. An enduring facet of such artwork is the complex interaction between humans and nature; it is in this realm that Billy Hassell creates art.

Memento joins Hassell’s most significant paintings over the past three decades with select anthropological objects and artwork from the Mabee-Gerrer Museum, as well as several from the artist’s collection. While most are not direct respondents, the pairings nevertheless illustrate Hassell’s inherent stylistic attractions and the indirect visual references at play when he creates. Formally, Hassell appreciates how each piece addresses the challenges of interpreting the three-dimensional world in two-dimensional space. This juxtaposition of the untamed natural world and humans’ recreations of it to conform to social and aesthetic desires ultimately manifests itself in abstraction and stylization.

Hassell’s thirty-year career has been continually informed by his lifelong interest in the connection between humans and nature, specifically, how we simultaneously revere and defile it. His work often addresses this duality: we construct civilizations and societies, creating physical and psychological barriers between nature and ourselves. Only after that separation has occurred do we see fit to invite nature into our living space on our own terms—limited, distilled, and sterilized in the form of artwork, wallpaper, and other stylized representations of the jumbled exterior chaos.

Acutely aware of the intricacies involved in taking a naturalistic approach to painting, Hassell focuses on the visual impact achieved by interpreting nature not simply through observation, but by sifting it through personal and cultural filters. The resulting “stylizations of nature” are inspired by the organic splendor of the natural world and transformed by the artist’s process into ordered, aesthetically captivating representations of the vast outdoors. Such personal stylizations emerge throughout Hassell’s body of work as he paints colorful birds and wildlife gathered in flattened landscapes or resting atop deliberately patterned, decorative backgrounds. Although he approaches things from a contemporary academic perspective, he also considers his work against other cul-



Rooster Whirlygig by R.A. Miller (1980's), Collection of the artist.



Ojibwe Bandolier Bag (c. 1930), Collection of the Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art.

tures and styles that have displayed an inextricable link with nature, namely, Native American beadwork, Japanese woodblock prints, and contemporary American folk art.

Native Americans celebrated and revered nature as they sewed beads onto both everyday and sacred objects. Beadwork was done as a form of respect for the natural world, and beads were made from such materials as shell, bone, and stone, which provided a physical proximity to nature. The act of working with beads was considered a form of meditation, and the process of sewing the beads held greater importance than the finished product.¹ Their filter was a spiritual one. Hassell channels this spirituality in *Bluejay Ojibwe*, a direct response to the museum's *Ojibwe Bandolier Bag*, and a new painting for this exhibition. Hassell echoes Native American process-based enlightenment in his meticulously painted arabesque patterns, which establish a compelling visual rhythm through order and repetition as they carefully wind throughout the space. Like the Native American beaded bag, Hassell's painting has a compressed picture plane; the artist has reduced complex forms to their most basic—purest—linear elements. The addition of the more detailed, naturalistic blue jay creates a synthesis of wholly organic and stylized nature, while also alluding to the manipulation of nature to fit human constraints.

The nineteenth-century Japanese printmaker Hiroshige presented nature with astounding technical prowess. His filter was an awe of the natural world and its power. In Hiroshige's *Landscape*,

overarching mountainous landscapes and vast skies are defined by delicate color gradations and emboldened by spatial compression. Hassell's *Barn Owl*, *Orange Sky* employs similar color progressions within flattened planes to create a warm, palpable atmosphere that borders on the surreal. Like Hiroshige's print, Hassell has given equal importance to all elements within the piece—plants, animals, and the surrounding landscape. This treatment again illustrates Hassell's concerns with the love-hate relationship between nature and humankind, as the stylized elements suggest humans' need to control nature within our own environment.

Contemporary American folk artists reveal pure sentiment with their undiluted, idiosyncratic interpretations of animals and nature. Their filter is unedited contemplation. *Whirlygig*, by R.A. Miller, typifies the visual focus exhibited by so many folk artists. Basic shapes, bold colors, and repetitive patterns coalesce into a simplistic but visually alluring design. Likewise, Hassell's work is deliberate and focused as it emerges from the filter of his own introspection. By distilling his subject matter down to essential shapes, lines, and patterns, he liberates it from ambiguity. Hassell enjoys the freedom that comes with the creation of such work, which inevitably reveals a truly undistracted place in the artist's mind and a close tie with his subject.

Just as humankind celebrates and reveres nature's bounty, it also has a primal urge to control it. This control factor appears all-too-often in art, as nature is transformed and idealized by way of



Untitled Landscape Woodcut by Hiroshige, c. early 19th century. Collection of the Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art.

our cultural beliefs and aesthetic ambitions. Billy Hassell asks not how we fit into the vast scheme of nature, but how nature fits into our world of physical and social constructs. In the end, his paintings utilize these constructs to engage the viewer with tight visual rhythms, bold colors, and a nod to the world of design. The result is a highly energized aesthetic that speaks of nature, not through a vain attempt at facsimile, but as an enhanced, and humanized, entity.

¹ www.beadinglife.com/native-american-indian-beads.html