

TRACY LINDER *Windswept*

Installation at the Holter Museum of Art
Helena, Montana
May 8 – Sept 6, 2009

Essay by Melissa Kwasny





Chad Tretin/Helena Independent Record

Preface

Tracy Linder examines the spiritual through the corporeal, an alchemical process that turns materials of the earth (animal gut, hide, sinew, tree limbs sacrificed to the wind or human or animal intervention) into sacred objects, sacred for their quiet beauty, dignity, and depth, for their contemplative quality.

We are excited and honored to present *Windswept* at the Holter. *Windswept* is the most clearly other-worldly and this-worldly of Linder's exhibitions to date. *Wings* is uplifting, inspiring. The light from below casts tangents of shadows up the tall walls of the Holter's High Gallery. *Limbs* grounds us, the branches and their shadows reaching toward the earth.

We are grateful to Tracy for her commitment to do something "big" for the High Gallery and for the long months she spent creating *Wings* and *Limbs* for this gallery space. We also thank Melissa Kwasny for her lovely meditation on *Windswept*; her insights help us grasp why the installation is so moving, both to those familiar with Montana's windswept prairies and to all who care about the human and natural condition. Thanks, too, to DD Dowden for her sensitive design of this catalogue.

Liz Gans, Executive Director
Holter Museum of Art
June 2009



Chad Tretin/Helena Independent Record

Windswept

Every object is afloat on the processes that created it and will consume it; it can also be read as a symbol of those processes and scrutinized for signs of them.

What is present should speak of what is absent. REBECCA SOLNIT

I. Branches and wings

They face each other from opposite walls, violet and gold—colors of the eastern plains and mountains of Montana, where Tracy Linder grew up, where she resides now on farmland of her own. The two installations reach out toward each other, or outward, regardless, the way wind reaches out, could be defined by its reaching and its reach. On one side, the branches: a line up. On the other, a splay of wings. And the doubling, sometimes tripling of shadows.





Linder has spoken previously of her work as the making of the invisible visible, and wind could certainly be the bright absentee here: limbs swept from trees, birds swirling into the air, both weather-beaten, weather-shaped. “You do change your posture on the prairie,” she says, “you walk with or against the wind.” I think of the invisible processes—genetic adaptation to the wind in order to ride it, the evolving aerodynamics of wings—or the pressure from without, what the poet Wallace Stevens called the imagination pressing back against reality—tree sacrificing its weaker limbs for the growth of the stronger, limbs growing in accordance to the pressures of air.

I am struck by the quietness and the sparsity of these two installations, the noticeable lack of explanation, the utter disappearance of, as in much of Linder’s previous work, evidence of the human: shovels, tractor tires, produce. As one is struck when caught suddenly alone in the vast expanses of prairie, no houses, no people to mediate the experience. Given only shape and color, what do we make of it? We are not often asked anymore, in this over-constructed world, to make meaning ourselves, which is to make metaphor, yet that is exactly what this work requires of us.

“*Symbol*,” Solnit writes, “comes from the Greek *symbolon*: a broken piece, one half of which signifies the existence of the other, a presence that indicates what is absent; the incompleteness of the presence, but the incompleteness of the absence: symbionts.” The wings are violet and blue, as if it were the sky we were seeing through them. They do not feel tangible, but light-rimmed, iridescent in the way color is often merely an *effect* of the light on faceted feathers. The wings rise up, an assemblage, a collection, inspiring as real birds are in their ability to swirl and not collide. Their long, inelegant shadows overlap above them, as if wings could make shadows on the air. Looking more closely, though, I realize something

strange. These birds are *sans body*, *sans beak*, *sans feet*, not feathers floating down, but fleshless wings. The limbs, too, one now notices, have no trunks, no leaves. What can this mean? The forms are here, but without the content that would make them coherent to us. They are isolated not only from their bodies but from the familiar context with which we ordinarily view them—limbs which would lie on the ground project from the blank space of a museum wall. I am actually looking down or am at eye level with the wings. It occurs to me that this work, though suggesting the forms of trees, of bird flight, the natural object, the common gesture, is not a representation at all, that someone has gathered these things, that she has arranged them in this lovely and disturbing way, and that what is missing is what we, the viewers, will make of it.



II. The branches

May you keep in your branch's wind your essential friends.

RENÉ CHAR



The cast-off limbs are parsnip-colored and frayed. They are bright, as if, in gathering them, which Linder does painstakingly, searching for particular shapes or “beautiful curvatures” that catch her eye, she also selected those lit with summer sun. On the wall behind them, the shadow-life of limbs, sometimes two or three of differing shades, increasingly dim, as if marked with a softer and finer brush. The shadows add a different dimension to this installation, a background life, a whispering one must get up close to see. I think of the unending sunlight in eastern Montana, which could be genesis for these shadow plays. In August, Linder says, the grass shadows can be ten feet long. Out her window on the farm, she says, “They are part of my daily vision.”

On closer inspection, it is not bark these limbs are sheathed with—by the time Linder finds these cast off limbs below the cottonwoods and the elms, they are shorn of bark—but a soft chamois, a kind of doe-skin which is stretched tightly over the limbs and stitched with a sinew, making the limbs seem animal-like and, surprisingly, cared for. Why would anyone take such care, such time, in this age of industrial reproduction, to select each limb, gather the skin around it as if bandaging, as if wrapping a wound? As I move from limb to limb, examining the almost impossibility of this *close work*, as needle work such as this used to be called, how closely the chamois gloves and *tends to* the curvatures, the nubs and branchings, I begin to wonder about the paths growth takes itself. Why split? Why elbow? Why curve here? Why this decision to meet or stop? I begin to wonder what

invisible instructions, inner or outer, the tree is following, what unseen necessities, or what intelligence.

It could be, of course, the wind. As Linder says, living on the eastern prairies where she has “watched the tree branches form in this tremendously winded zone,” she has also been moved by what each individual tree has endured to survive. And I do notice each branch as individual. A small one, third from the door, two thin limbs forming a crotch as if dancing on air—flung! All exclamation mark! Some are so thick and sutured that they regard me like strange, wounded presences of their own. Indeed, many of the limbs recall ritualistic objects used in ceremonies of healing, the wrapping of eagle feather stems in colored thread, say, or the hide stretched over ceremonial drumsticks and rattles. In a previous statement about these limbs, which she began two years ago during a residency at the Ucross Foundation, she states that sewing allowed her time for contemplation, not only of the torn branches, but also of our sometimes alienated relationship to the land.



Chad Tretin/Helena Independent Record



III. The wings

Almost everyone has a memory of the moment when a large flock of birds is startled and takes off, or decides to land, that up-do or downdraft of tint and gloss, each bird part of an exultant collaboration, subsumed in a choreography bigger than their sum. “Often, I drive truck for local farmers during harvest time,” Linder says. “I’ll drive corn truck and beet truck. It’s also a migratory time. So, as the fields get emptied of the corn, this is when we get the incredible flocks coming in and landing—geese, sparrows—when the earth is fresh.” Unlike the growing of limbs, which is time-worn, the moment she is talking about is fleeting, here only once and then gone.

So, too, while the limbs are individuals, the birds here are all the same, as if cast in one mold, one movement, and indeed, literally, they are: the resin in each wing is layered with fiberglass and varying levels of blue and purple dye, cast in open face molds to simulate a dove’s wing. Wings like apostrophes, like waves, heading in the same direction across the wall, glint of light off the wingtip—albeit dismembered, partial wings, made of plastic, not feathers, the wild gesture caught, frozen, and the archival remains. I find myself thinking of the bloodied swan wings and strewn feathers on the ground at the lake after hunting season, or more disturbing thoughts of butterflies pinned. What complicates this sense of loss is memory: how difficult it is to separate what something is from what it represents, how difficult it is to simply see.

“I’ve used translucency a lot throughout my work,” Linder says, “the idea that we can see through to a past,” as if memory were behind some curtain, some shroud we peer through, made of resin or glass. Symbol, I would argue, is also a kind of translucency. Our hearts lift with the birds when we see them take flight, some part of that genetic, perhaps—birds are the oldest animals on earth, descended directly from the dinosaurs—some part

particular to our particular body and its ties to place. “Not only words and pictures but things tell their stories in a language older than image making or speaking,” Solnit writes. “That is, the world itself is a language that speaks to us.”

How open this language is to interpretation, to our own acts of connection and memory, for one cannot have metaphor without memory. How openly the world asks us to engage. Bird wing, broken limb: they may conjure any number of experiences, something the art not only has no control over, but requires. It is the transparency of this work that asks this of us: *Stay long enough. See through the glass. What do you find there?* Perhaps this is what departure fundamentally means: to depart from what is known. As when an artist departs from her subject, the premonition as the limb departs from plan, as birds are startled, then find their fit in air. We could call it elision, as in what is purposely left out. One could also call it leaving room for what is missing.

Tracy Linder is known as an artist of the farm and of farm life, her work speaking to issues such as food sustainability, loss of the family farm, the reciprocal relationships necessary to “the survival of both the grass and the flesh.” Agriculture: the cultivation of, the caring for the field. These two installations, whose images do not directly refer to the human, broaden this question of reciprocity. The birds, the trees live in worlds of their own without us, yet they are made more and more vulnerable by our lives. In turn, as Linder says, “The trees are part of our agriculture. The birds are part of our agriculture.”















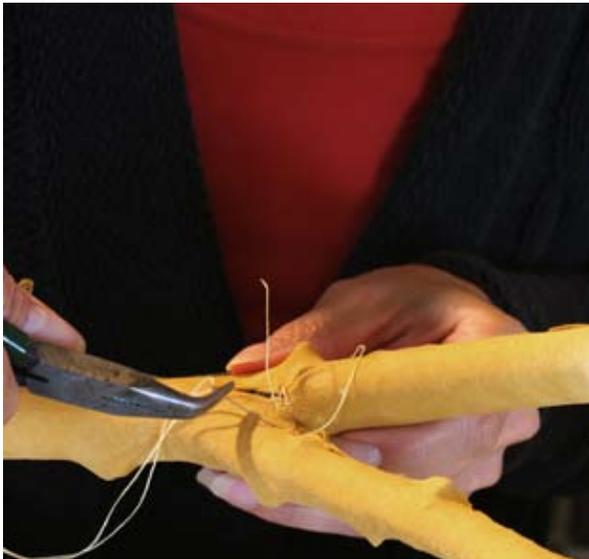
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TRACY LINDER: *Windswept*

Holter Museum of Art
May 8–September 6, 2009

Works exhibited in the Holter's High Gallery

Wings series 2009

One hundred wings of polyester resin,
fiberglass, and pigment
on loan from the artist



Limbs series 2009

Twenty-two tree branches (elm and cottonwood)
wrapped in leather and stitched with artificial sinew.

On loan from the artist

Individual titles for each limb, from left to right along the gallery wall:

<i>Derrick</i>	<i>Yvonne</i>
<i>William</i>	<i>Vanessa</i>
<i>Albert</i>	<i>Lynn</i>
<i>Miriam</i>	<i>Mark</i>
<i>Jacqueline</i>	<i>Bruce</i>
<i>Jill</i>	<i>Wanda</i>
<i>Grace</i>	<i>Barry</i>
<i>Glen</i>	<i>Keith</i>
<i>Russell</i>	<i>Phillip</i>
<i>Maria</i>	<i>Renee</i>
<i>Tina</i>	<i>Carl</i>

Tracy Linder

Tracy Linder's agriculturally based sculptures and installations address our indelible connection to the land and the sanctity of our food sources. Linder transforms remnants of animal, plant, human, and machine into visceral hybrids that reveal the reciprocal relationships necessary to sustain life. She is interested in the individual biographies of the mundane, the endurance and perseverance of the vulnerable.

Linder's works are derived from living a life close to the land—she grew up on a family farm and now lives out on the vast prairie of south central Montana with her husband, Mike. Her sculptures and paintings have been exhibited in New York, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and throughout Montana, Colorado, and North Dakota. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Yellowstone Art Museum and Billings Deaconess Hospital in Billings, Montana; North Dakota State University in Fargo; and Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana. Linder received her M.F.A. in 1991 from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

In 2009, four institutions are presenting solo exhibitions of Linder's work (Holter Museum of Art, Helena, Montana; OK Harris Works of Art, New York, New York; University of Wyoming Art Museum in Laramie; Gallery of Visual Arts, The University of Montana in Missoula) and three are including her work in group shows (Salt Lake Art Center, Utah; Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Ketchum, Idaho; and I.D.E.A. Space, Colorado Springs, Colorado).

Melissa Kwasny

Poet Melissa Kwasny is the author of three books of poetry, *Reading Novalis in Montana*, *Thistle*, and *The Archival Birds*, as well as editor of *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry 1800-1950*. She lives outside Jefferson City, Montana.



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