



## Boyd Webb: Photographs 1988-89

Sept. 13 - Oct. 23, 1992

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



## Boyd Webb

**It's the only environment we have, so we might as well look after it.**

– Boyd Webb<sup>1</sup>

Born of a quirky imagination, Boyd Webb's photographs are alternately funny and chilling. Made in a studio, they use thinly disguised theatrical devices – dramatic lighting, exaggerated color and the craft of replication – to create scenarios of a natural world gone awry. In the photographs assembled for this exhibition, Webb's chief props are inflatable animals and toy globes seen in a variety of comically threatening situations – submerged, suffocating, frozen, ensnared or otherwise imperiled, most often by clear plastic sheets that “stand in” for a variety of fake natural phenomena. In Webb's hallucinated universe, infants become the guts of marine life, packing materials glowing embers and a tape cassette a serpent's dinner. As shamelessly staged as commercial photography or movie stills and yet highly individualistic, his odd vision seems to hover somewhere between science fiction and Surrealism.

But a Webb photograph is no one-line joke. After the initial wonderment and chuckle, one sees that an important idea is being presented – Webb's works send out strong moral messages about humankind's folly in relation to nature. Bolstered by titles that are brief but highly evocative, his photographs are calculated to set you thinking.

Webb, a native of New Zealand who has been working in London for the past 20 or so years, is among a number of contemporary artists whose chief mode of expression is the setup photograph. The practice of inventing and photographing fictive scenes, although nearly as old as photography itself (Julia Margaret Cameron was an early adherent), has been particularly widespread since the late 1970s. Cindy Sherman's chameleon personae, William Wegman's dress-up dogs, Bernard Faucon's picnicking mannequins, Joel-Peter Witkin's brutalized Victorians, James Casebere's monochrome block-house cities and Sandy Skoglund's animal nightmares are all variations within this genre.

Flourishing in a time of cross-fertilization among art media – a period that has given rise to the term “photoartist” – this kind of work is both an antidote to traditional documentary photography and a stepchild of art trends of the 1960s and early 1970s. Reversing the intense, inclusive realism of such photographers as Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, the setup photograph grew out of Conceptual Art's use of

sequential photographs to illustrate ideas, Performance Art's tableaux vivants and concurrent sculpture's reordering of media to include the ephemeral and the site-specific.

Webb was a sculpture student at a progressive art school in New Zealand when he took up photography to record his own arrangements of life-cast figures of fiberglass. The medium suited his thoughtful, if slightly subversive, temperament. One of his student projects was a film, shot painstakingly frame-by-frame, of an umpire overseeing an underground, off-camera tennis match. Another was a photograph of a child in a picturesque English garden



*Croup*, 1988, unique cibachrome photograph, 62 1/4" x 48 3/8". Private collection, Oklahoma City

whose edging fence was actually a series of dead eels frozen into arch shapes. Webb's contrariness came out full force with his degree exhibition, in which examiners were screened by a secretary before being allowed to rummage through cabinets where they found Webb's work, which included both photographs and objects.

Moving to London in 1972 to study at the Royal College of Art, Webb was apparently so taken by that dark, Old World city that he soon used its interiors, streets and outskirts to stage and photograph witty parodies of English characters. Accompanied by preposterous written directives or explanatory texts, his photographs of the 1970s (sometimes in sequences of two) included such images as bureaucrats engaged in a tug-of-war, a “lichenologist” demonstrating his research and findings, and a nanny and perambulator tumbling over near railroad tracks. Fusing a Monty Python zaniness with the stagey deadpan of British performance artists Gilbert and George, Webb's work reflected his attraction to the clarity and didacticism of

Victorian genre paintings. Inspiration also came from reading the work of Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), the French Dada poet and playwright whose absurd scenes and visions flip easily into hallucination, and Sufi parables – a hippie-generation favorite – in which Persian mystics use enigmatic story lines to ascribe universal significance.

In the early 1980s, Webb began reducing his texts into pungent one-word or one-phrase titles and refined his images into single, large-scale compositions created entirely in his studio. Moving from episodic narratives to cosmic themes, particularly focused on stars and the sea, he began crafting startling fabrications of water, sky, planets, terrain, and plant and animal life, presenting them in cross sections, NASA-type space shots, artful tableaux recalling store displays and idiosyncratic simulations of microscopic, aerial and underwater photography. With a fascination for forgotten objects paralleling that of British sculptors Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow, Webb would scour kitsch shops, street corners, second-hand stores and ethnic food markets for materials to help in his setups. Models (which he uses less now) were recruited from among friends and strangers whose bodies and features seemed right.

By the mid-1980s, Webb was creating such startling images as a man suckling on a whale's underbelly, a megaphone-wielding plainswoman on a green-carpeted earthscape, and a reliquary-like composition of a flattened Pekin duck on a bamboo pike. “I think an artist produces his best work indirectly,” the artist told an interviewer in 1983, “without truly realizing what he is making. The work seeps out, deciding for itself when it is complete. It is like juggling a lot of cats in the air at the same time – at the right moment they form a rug.”<sup>2</sup>

Orchestrating new works in a high-walled, one-room studio in London's East End, Webb can spend from two days to a month setting up the perfect tableau. Using a large-format camera and flash, he generally photographs two versions of the scene before creating another. Since 1982, he has used the cibachrome process, preferred by many artists because it is archival and produces intense color. Made from transparencies, all Webb's prints are unique, larger in scale than most photography that goes on exhibition and mounted on grommets inside box-like frames, not unlike how a tapestry might be displayed. All this serves to reinforce their identity as art objects. “I want my work to be seen properly, like a painting or sculpture,” Webb says.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in the works assembled for this exhibition, texture, color, surface, light and





*Day for Night*, 1988, unique cibachrome photograph, 62 1/4" x 48 3/8". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Edward Elson, Atlanta

composition, which range from luscious to spare to muscular, hold the fascination of certain kinds of paintings or sculpture. Yet Webb's works remain photographs, and although the artist shies away from being identified as a photographer *per se*,<sup>4</sup> his own "decisive moment," to use a term originally applied to Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs of Paris, is very much in evidence. Webb achieves this not by exploring and attempting to harness the randomness of the outside world in a single, definitive shot, but by imagining and then putting before the camera a wholly artificial situation that is completely within his control, like a director on a soundstage preparing to "roll 'em" rather than a documentary filmmaker on site. Webb photographs dreamscapes, not events. But as he has moved increasingly toward openly ecological subjects – paralleling our own awakenings to such subjects in this era of diminishing rain forests and global warming – his dreamscapes have developed a potential to become more, not less, like reality.

Ecological balance teeters in Webb's work. In *Undrained*, 1988, vinyl flamingos appear drowned in reflective "waters" beneath a post-apocalyptic sunset. The discarded umbrella could be a metaphor for humanity's carelessness or the inability of technology to protect other forms of life. In *Croup*, 1989 (the title refers to a bronchial disease), a sheet of clear polyethylene, which doubles as pollution and creates a curious *trompe l'oeil* effect with the photographic paper, has choked a flock of semi-deflated toy ducks that are displayed like trophy heads. A slightly sick scenario, it makes its point. Additionally, *Thaw*, 1989, presents a nightmarish vision of deceased

fowl, this time entombed by a huge plasticene icicle discarding its prisoners drip by drip in an image of extinction as repellently beautiful as neolithic corpses in turf (a National Geographic-type icon). In *Day for Night*, 1988 (the title is a Hollywood term, once immortalized by Truffaut, for the daytime filming of nighttime scenes), two groups of ensnared vinyl zebras are held playfully aloft, one like a sideways lollipop, against a stormy, Wagnerian sky. The message here is anything but lighthearted. And in *Aurora and Aspic*, 1988 – its deadpan title referring to the lightbulb's illumination and the water's similarity to the cold, gelatinous luncheon dish – a smarmy cesspool of a sea seems to have killed off all life. Camels are submerged, a book is useless, and if a "bright idea" emanating from technology, as symbolized by the bulb, will save the situation, it had better hurry.

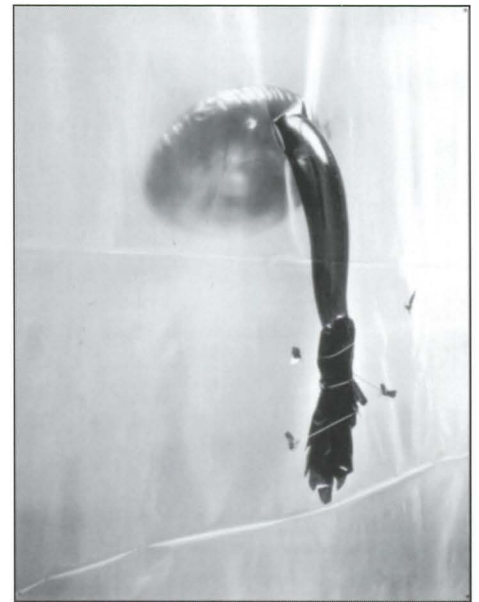
The globe, the dangers to which are part and parcel of these scenarios, appears as an actual motif in others. Thus *Untitled*, 1989, presents a slightly tired-looking toy Earth and lightbulbs, which we take to be stars or moons, entwined in a net – a galactic setup indicating vulnerability, rather than permanence. In *Veil*, 1989, the globe appears as a schematic map beneath a translucent cascade of illusionary water patrolled by zombie-like deflated geese that come across more as a menace than protection to the planet.

Some works are far more oblique in their references to the state of the Earth, raising, particularly in those with inscrutable juxtapositions, a torrent of questions. How can we suspend our belief, for instance, that an inner-lit pile of packing "peanuts" is actually a white-hot heap of coals in *Styrene Jihad*, 1988? And what of the peculiar slate-grey objects hovering above? Circuitry? Missiles? A teenager's unassembled kit for a model of some kind of war craft? With "Jihad" being the term for holy war, could this be a warning about a Mideast-induced apocalypse? And why is the dead, strung-up snake in *Pillion and Waiver*, 1988, clutching a tape cassette in its mouth? The dictionary defines "pillion" as a pad on a saddle, derived from the Latin word for skin or hide. Does the tape contain humankind's "waiver" for exploiting animals (signified by the hide-saddle allusion), saying something to the effect of "I'm responsible for destroying nature but it's not my responsibility"? What equally open-ended form of communication is going on in *Siren*, 1988? Does this inverse world, where snakes breathe water and a birdcage/shark cage harbors inanimate life, symbolically depict a siren song being wailed from humanity to nature – sheet-

music horns luring a trio of beasts into oxygenless obliteration? And why are the winged insects in *Moth*, 1989, gleefully tying up that pom-pom of clear green plastic à la Disney's *Bambi* or *Cinderella*? In its entirety, the fecund, water-balloon imagery rather unambiguously alludes to fluids passing through a phallus, and the moths are getting nowhere in stopping its flow. Is this work about the futility of AIDS? With the epidemic now rampant in Africa and promising new destruction elsewhere in the Third World, it is difficult not to think so.

In *Sucklings*, a diptych of 1989 that replicates a half-filled aquarium, the implications are equally dire. This update of the parable of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome who were raised by a she-wolf, shows two views of twins as the flesh and blood of two jellyfish embarking in opposite directions on some unknown journey. Who is digesting whom? Have marine and human life been interjoined, and will these strange organisms perish? In an era of imperilment, not only of oceans but of humanity itself, if not by pollution then by epidemic, one cannot but help make that chilling speculation.

Among many inspirational wellsprings Webb has drawn upon in developing his



*Moth*, 1989, unique cibachrome photograph, 62 1/4" x 48 3/8." Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York

distinct vision, New Zealand is not insignificant. Webb came from this remote, one-time frontier society to the hub of civilization, making art that at first reveled in and then retreated from the urban scene he found. Creating his own universe in his cavernous studio in an unglamorous London neighborhood, Webb has in effect given vent to a vision informed by his native country. The crisp light, dizzying



vistas and shifting sense of scale of his work recall the New Zealand landscape, only transported to the hermetic realm of dreams and imagination. There is something also in the stage-set artificiality of his work that harks back to Christchurch (where Webb went to art school), a picture-perfect surrogate English town complete with tidy gardens, Tudor architecture and a poplar-lined river. Finally, although Webb is not an artist who accurately can be classified as political, it is perhaps significant that the one country identified with an almost militant ecological activism is also the country of his birth.

Taking in Webb's work can be a heady experience, challenging us on one hand to have fun with his fakery, as we might with stone clouds of the Baroque, mock sashimi at a Japanese restaurant or movies that revel in sound-stage esthetics such as Coppola's *One from the Heart*, and on the other to ponder the unponderable, namely, that life on Earth as we know it could soon end. Neither a crusader nor a moralizer ("That would be too straightforward," he says, "like a smack between the eyes"<sup>5</sup>), Webb is a concerned citizen of the world whose chief mode of communication is his photography.

Sidney Lawrence, public affairs officer, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

#### Notes:

1. Brandon Taylor, "Boyd Webb," *Artnews* 88 (March 1989): 155.
2. Edited by the artist from a quote that appeared in *Boyd Webb*, exhibition catalog (Eindhoven, the Netherlands: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1983), p. 10.
3. From a July 20, 1990, interview with the artist.
4. Webb has in fact created and displayed sculptural tableaux in tandem with his photographs on a number of occasions. These include, in the United States, individual works for the Walker Art Center's *Cross References: Sculpture into Photography* exhibition of 1987, and for the 1988 showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles of the large Webb retrospective that originated the previous year at London's Whitechapel Art Gallery before touring to the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Hanover, West Germany. Catalogs were published for both exhibitions.
5. Taylor, *ibid.*, p. 155.

(Essay adapted from *Directions—Boyd Webb*, exhibition brochure, Sidney Lawrence, organizing curator, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Nov. 1, 1990 - Jan. 27, 1991)

Cover: *Undrained*, 1988, unique cibachrome photograph, 48 3/8" x 62 1/4." Collection Edwin C. Cohen, New York



*Thaw*, 1989, unique cibachrome photograph, 48 3/8" x 62 1/4." Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York

#### Checklist

(All works are unique cibachrome photographs)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Aurora and Aspic</i> , 1988<br>48 3/8" x 62 1/4." Collection Bloom, Dekom and Hergott, Los Angeles      | 10. <i>Untitled</i> , 1989<br>48 3/8" x 62 1/4"<br>Collection Edwin C. Cohen, New York           |
| 2. <i>Styrene Jead</i> , 1988<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Collection Vajna/Bloom, Los Angeles                     | 11. <i>Pillion and Waiver</i> , 1988<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Collection Jan de Bont, Los Angeles |
| 3. <i>Sucklings</i> , 1989 (diptych)<br>each print 62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Collection Kathleen Watt, Los Angeles | 12. <i>Veil</i> , 1989<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York              |
| 4. <i>Day for Night</i> , 1988<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Collection Mr. and Mrs. Edward Elson, Atlanta          |  |
| 5. <i>Moth</i> , 1989<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York                            |  |
| 6. <i>Croup</i> , 1988<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Private Collection, Oklahoma City                              |  |
| 7. <i>Thaw</i> , 1989<br>48 3/8" x 62 1/4"<br>Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York                            |  |
| 8. <i>Siren</i> , 1988<br>62 1/4" x 48 3/8"<br>Collection Ruth and Jake Bloom, Los Angeles                    |  |
| 9. <i>Undrained</i> , 1988<br>48 3/8" x 62 1/4"<br>Collection Edwin C. Cohen, New York                        |  |

#### Acknowledgment

We are deeply grateful to Boyd Webb for his assistance with this exhibition. His insight, enthusiasm and warm humor greatly facilitated the organization of the show.

We would also like to thank the private collectors and galleries who generously agreed to loan their works. In particular, we are most appreciative of the support of Antonio Homem and Laura Bloom of Sonnabend Gallery, New York; Ruth Bloom of Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, Calif.; Robin Vousden of Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London; and Jennifer Vorbach of Citibank, New York.

Finally, we extend our thanks to Sidney Lawrence of the Hirshhorn Museum for his excellent essay on Webb's work.

Johnson County Community College  
Cultural Education Center  
12345 College Blvd.  
Overland Park, KS 66210-1299