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info@rulegallery.com 303-800-6776



The Art of the Unnatural

Brendan Seibel / 01.25.2018

When he was a kid, Jason DeMarte enjoyed visiting natural history museums to see the dioramas filled with taxidermy wildlife and carefully positioned plants. As an adult, he determined that those scenes are intended more to capture the imagination than to document reality. And while the diorama designers' motives may be pure, there is a darker side.

DeMarte saw a correlation between the museums' "perfect, pristine snippets of nature" and product photography of the sort he'd done for Toys 'R' Us to pay the bills while earning an MFA in photography. That experience of creating flawless images of merchandise exemplified photography's role in cultivating consumer desire for false perfection through manipulation and good lighting. "I started thinking about nature in a different way, as a commodity, as a way of packaging, promoting, and selling a commodifiable object," DeMarte says.

The disconnect between manufactured perceptions of nature and the imperfect reality has been DeMarte's artistic focus ever since. His work is a commentary on the artifice underpinning our concept of the world, as well as our constant desire for something "better." "I'm thinking about how we have manipulated nature to suit our aesthetic desire," he says. "I've been studying botany and how we manipulated plants to suit a certain need, whether it's for brighter, bigger apples or for different colors of flowers."



Create



On the left, DeMarte's work "Invasive Apathy" from the Adorned series. On the right, "Cardinal Sin" from the Confected series.

DeMarte's twin projects, Confected and Adorned, offer romanticized tableaux populated by impossibly perfect birds, insects, and flowers, all thriving in bucolic harmony under gentle showers of sugary treats. In reality, the works are digital compositions of DeMarte's photography, each visual element painstakingly edited into an uncanny nature display.

"We're adorning everything," he notes. "We're making everything much more extravagant than it would be in its natural state. Whether that's candy or whether that's peonies, we're doing it to everything," he says. "When you go to a garden or when you're sitting on your lawn, you don't understand that none of this is natural," he continues. "This has all been manipulated by us." He sees a conceptual relationship to candy: "It's this innocent-looking thing but it has this insidious manipulation behind it."

The birds and butterflies are species that today only exist in cohabitation with people. The flowers have been cross-bred to perfection by generations of botanists. DeMarte grows or finds everything near his Michigan home, but even those locally sourced specimens are in some way the product of human intervention, either by accident or by agricultural geneticists and processed food chemists.

On the left, "Blue Mourning" from Confected. On the right, "Unseasonal Icing" from Adorned.





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Create

DeMarte explores the commercialization of nature by daubing plants and animals with glossy paint and uses Adobe Photoshop CC to edit and composite his photos into wholly imagined scenarios.

“It relates to consumption, and to desiring more, and to perfection and beauty—all of these ideals that we have in this capitalistic structure that we surround ourselves with,” he says. “I’m applying the same sort of aesthetics to the plant life: What do we feel we need to do to plant life for it to be acceptable to plant it in front of our house and have it surrounding us?”

The insects and birds of *Adorned* live in a world where humanity’s manipulation of nature has gone too far, past the point of no return. Tempestuous skies harken the approach of extreme weather, the unintended consequences of technological hubris that infects everyone and everything, down to the DNA.

On the left, “Vanilla Sky” and on the right, “After the Deluge.” Both are from Adorned.





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Although his art examines the divide between airbrushed concepts of nature and the scraggly reality, DeMarte employs the same tools used to churn out slick advertisements and glossy catalogs. “The digital platform is metaphorically suited to make the work because the ability to change things on a pixel level emulates the idea of genetic modification—this idea of getting in there and mixing things,” he says.

DeMarte is as hands-on as any scientist. In the spring, he grows flowers in his yard, then photographs them in his basement studio. He stocks feeders to lure birds throughout spring, summer, and fall, and then photographs with remote triggers. He even raises insects in his garage, sometimes aided by his young son. A single insect may appear in multiple works as a caterpillar, a cocoon or chrysalis, and finally in all of its winged glory.

Hiccups pop up along the way in spite of the digitally perfected end result. DeMarte still has to collect clippings from yards around the neighborhood and buy flowers out of season. His feeder cameras can’t capture an entire bird in focus, so he has to rebuild them from multiple exposures or even from photographs of multiple birds. The local natural world isn’t tame.

“The silk moths are interesting because they eat apple leaves from apple trees,” he says. “I underestimated how much they were going to eat in the summer that I had them and I pretty much cut down my entire apple tree trying to feed them and keep them alive.”

Placid Propagation, the latest piece in the Adorned series, will debut March 2019 at the Art on Paper Fair. The work was commissioned to match a wallpaper design that DeMarte had already prepared. The wallpaper, which he prints himself in his storage space, is constructed from massive 88”x144” sheets that repeat from left to right.

At first glance, it’s easy to interpret DeMarte’s work as sweet delicacies to seduce hungry eyes. On closer examination, however, it’s clear that they actually serve up food for thought.

On the left, DeMarte’s photos of some of the original elements that went into “Placid Propagation.” On the right, the finished piece.

