

Walking The Line #27: Sea Urchins

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These sea urchins, cast in bronze, are by Toronto-based sculptor Anne O’Callaghan, and form part of a two-person exhibition with Lynn Campbell called Shape Shifters, now at Toronto’s Redhead Gallery.

2) The sea urchins, set out with considerable precision on a long table in the gallery as if they were part of a museum display, are part of a large work O’Callaghan calls *Acquiring Nature*. The table is laden with piles and distributions of other trophies from nature as well: piles of twigs, big fearsome thorns, seed pods, shards of bark, seal vertebrae and other harvestable, collectible outcroppings of morphologically interesting things that, as I pointed out in my review of the work in the *Globe & Mail* last Saturday, might have found their way into any civilized Victorian naturalist’s Cabinet of Wonders. Some of these objects, the thorns, for example, are cast in bronze.

I am interested in this idea of casting things directly from nature, in the way the casting process short-circuits the sculptural act, functioning, instead, more the way a photo-copier does. Casting, if not precisely replicating, is copying.

3) It is ruefully amusing that the bronze “copy” of the object—especially of a “natural” object—is, in some say, more “attractive”, more “desirable” than the original object itself. Why is this? Because of the special, eternalizing status the bronzing bestows? What was once mutable has now become fixed. And, in a sense, generalized. Each of O’Callaghan’s bronzed sea urchins is now its own tiny monument to itself. The bronze casting, however skilful and detailed, is inevitably an extrapolation of the original object. Nature has become artifice. Although you could be sophisticated here, I guess, if you wanted to be, and argue that artifice was itself merely as subcategory of the natural.

4) But surely you take my point. O’Callaghan’s museum-like table full of specimens is a table full of trophies—the spoils of a hunter-gatherer, objects thrown up in the wake of an explorer and marshalled, on a table, into an inspectable order. The sea urchins, the four long rows of them, are like soldiers mustered on a parade square, front and centre, spit and polish—an unnatural geometricizing of their former runaway, free-range naturalism.

5) O’Callaghan deftly heads off the suggestion—the accusation—that she has rather unsubtly plundered nature to generate her “sculpture”. As a work, *Acquiring Nature* is less about biology or, more likely, anthropology, than it is about sociology: the sea urchins, and the other fallen tidbits of nature she has gathered together, are, in their table-bound presentation and ordering into rows of graded sizes, insistently commodified—objects of delectation which (they are in an art gallery, after all) are now offered for purchase. Although the urchini are now definitely, inescapably objects for sale—commodities—they are, at the same time, merely allusions to commodification, since, as I pointed out in the *Globe*, “it is presumably O’Callaghan’s point that we all have to make important decisions about what we what from nature—and why”.

6) What do we want from nature? To master it? Well, collecting is a kind of mastery. To admire it merely? Well, bronze castings offer a more durable end to admiration than any dewy, uncast object—which is likely, beneath the impress of our scrutinizing and the unravelling of entropic time, to descend into morphological ruin. To bronze a sea urchin or anything else is to delay its disintegration. A cast sea urchin is, to sound Duchampian for a moment, a *Delay in Bronze*.

7) And is this *Delay in Bronze* a beatitude-imbued memorial, or is it a slow bronze hand-grenade, ready to explode in slow-motion the face of the natural rhythms of the universe?

