Chris Ramsay: Meditations in Stillwater

September 15, 2014 – January 17, 2015

[Fo] Fossils: Patterns of Organic Energy, detail, 1994, etched copper, wood, pedras, found objects, and Ralston-Oklahoma brachiopods, 26" dia. X 10" deep, photo by Chris Ramsay


[5] As You Save... So You Prosper, detail, 2000 (first edition), ten 5" x 4" diameter globes of similar size and shape, displayed side-by-side on a 4' shelf, each featuring a different National Park postage stamp from the 1934-35 commemorative series and soil, photo by Chris Ramsay.


[7] As You Save... So You Prosper, 2000 (first edition), ten 5" x 4" diameter globes of similar size and shape, displayed side-by-side on a 4' shelf, each featuring a different National Park postage stamp from the 1934-35 commemorative series and soil, photo by Chris Ramsay.

These chance acquisitions were arranged on shelves to create meaningful relationships. The ability to integrate different kinds of objects with one another in this way—to manipulate things by hand to produce compositions that were more than the sums of their parts—would years later inspire his interest in jewelry making. As a graduate student at Texas Tech University in the 1980s he fully acknowledged the origins of his art when he produced a series of pocket jewelry designed to be carried, taken out, and explored, rather than simply worn on a lanyard or suspended from earring hooks.

If the acts of collecting, arranging, and presenting that characterize Ramsay’s art are habits that can be traced back to childhood, the significance that he ascribes to these acts emerged only later—like so many milestones in life—through experience of loss. While still in his early twenties, he helped a cancer-stricken friend create a garden: a living legacy to persist and grow beyond the span of a single life. A few days after his young friend’s untimely passing, Ramsay experienced an event that deepened both the mystery and the meaning of existence. At night he awoke to the sensation of a slap to the forehead. Sensing something over his left shoulder, he turned to see two perfect, concentric rings of energy that still burn brightly in his friend’s memory. The fossils, including both actual brachiopods that Ramsay gathered from an Oklahoma location and photographic memento mori, reminders of the perseverance of life: of an energy that is perpetual and invisible in the collective, even if it wanes and returns out in the individual.

Like circles, spheres are common in Ramsay’s art, particularly in those he calls “stones” and “globes.” The former consist of marble spheres cut and inlaid with buttons, potsherds, shells, and other small objects by employing skills acquired through an artist’s residency at Pietrasanta, Italy. The latter, the globes, apply the idea of preservation, central to Ramsay’s habit of collecting, specifically to the context of the earth and its resources. Such works as Endangered (fig. 2) and Extinct (fig. 1) combine paper globes from the 1950s with inlaid metal-framed lenses, beneath which can be glimpsed postage stamp and postcard images of flora and fauna species that today are threatened or have already been entirely eradicated due to human impact on the biosphere. Although the nostalgia evoked by the vintage globes makes these works more melancholy than alarming, they elude simple description. Like gravity, this force evokes action at a distance; a hidden continuity between all things, whether they be living or non-living, near or far away. Memento mori, reminders of the perseverance of life—the message is clear.

Ramsay directs that message more specifically in a series called A You Save…So You Prosper (fig. 5 & 6), a multi-globe/coin-bank sculpture in which historical postage stamps provide clues to the contents of the metal spherical earth from each of ten national parks. The sense that meanings lie like secret souls ensconced within objects is pervasive in Ramsay’s work. In some cases the viewer is invited to peer into interiors to discover these meanings in the form of vintage photographs. The pair of sculptures titled A World View–Insects (fig. 4) and A World View–Birds (fig. 6), for example, contain antique stereopticon cards purchased at a de-acquisition sale at the Stillwater Public Library. The act of looking inward at these miniatures evokes the process of introspection: a looking into one’s self. In an important sense, Ramsay’s art is not just about an intuited force that, contrary to entropy, draws objects together across time and distance and establishes a natural order of things. More importantly, they are about negotiating a personal path within this natural order: they are about the walk, the discovery, and the meditation on the process of introspection: a looking into one’s self. In an important sense, Ramsay’s art is not just about an intuited force that, contrary to entropy, draws objects together across time and distance and establishes a natural order of things. More importantly, they are about negotiating a personal path within this natural order: they are about the walk, the discovery, and the meditation on this order of things. More importantly, they are about negotiating a personal path within this natural order: they are about the walk, the discovery, and the meditation on this order of things.

Ramsay directs that message more specifically in a series called A You Save…So You Prosper (fig. 5 & 6), a multi-globe/coin-bank sculpture in which historical postage stamps provide clues to the contents of the metal spherical earth from each of ten national parks. The sense that meanings lie like secret souls ensconced within objects is pervasive in Ramsay’s work. In some cases the viewer is invited to peer into interiors to discover these meanings in the form of vintage photographs. The pair of sculptures titled A World View–Insects (fig. 4) and A World View–Birds (fig. 6), for example, contain antique stereopticon cards purchased at a de-acquisition sale at the Stillwater Public Library. The act of looking inward at these miniatures evokes the process of introspection: a looking into one’s self. In an important sense, Ramsay’s art is not just about an intuited force that, contrary to entropy, draws objects together across time and distance and establishes a natural order of things. More importantly, they are about negotiating a personal path within this natural order: they are about the walk, the discovery, and the meditation on this order of things. More importantly, they are about negotiating a personal path within this natural order: they are about the walk, the discovery, and the meditation on this order of things.