

# SUSAN ROBB by Elizabeth Pence

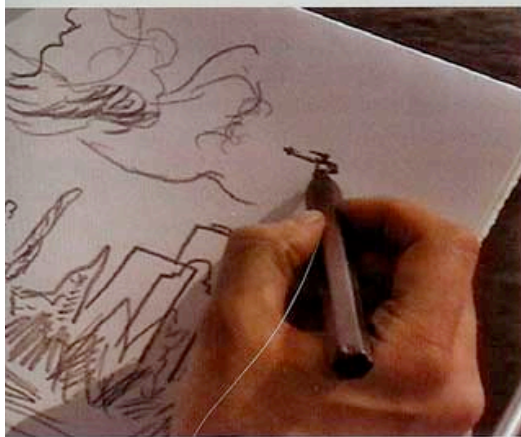
Lawrimore Project, Seattle WA April 24 · May 31, 2008

"The Challenge Nature Provides," Susan Robb's first solo show at Lawrimore Project, transforms everyday objects into biomorphic hybrids situated somewhere between the body, nature, and technology. Comprised of a recent video, inkjet prints, and sculpture, the show describes how this Borg-like amalgam defines us, how there's nothing natural about the natural world, and how nature, like nudity, is largely the product of herd behavior. Robb thus toys with the viewer's built-in preconceptions, transporting them to parallel worlds. For instance, *Digester* (2008), made from six 55-gallon drums engineered to produce methane from human waste, fuels a small campfire nearby (marshmallows were roasted at the opening). Raising the conceptual stakes, Robb uses the gallerist's own effluent to power the barrels, configuring gallery culture as an organic spectacle of decay and regeneration—in truth, as cultural dissemination.

These messy fragments, placed alongside each other, nonetheless have numerous points of traction, becoming generative and self-incriminatory. *Using De Maria's Lightning Rods, the Animals Stage a Valiant Surrender* (2008) comprises a mound of geometric gray and orange acrylic "boulders" supporting a metal pole, at the top of which hangs a white flag made up of feathers, fur, and wire. Simulating one of the stainless steel poles used in Walter De Maria's 1977 earthwork, the shadow it casts on the wall more clearly references a leaning, tattered flagpole, whose precise angle evokes the iconic photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* of 1945. By conjoining these renowned cultural icons, Robb generates a powerful narrative of animals using one of man's pinnacle triumphs to plead surrender, making a flag out of the remnants of their own destruction.

Robb typically takes various given peculiarities of material form and highlights them in contextually meaningful ways. For *Racing Towards Hardness is a Kind of Softness* and *The Gentlest Gesture* (both 2008), Robb grew crystals on Sakura branches from the Japanese flowering cherry tree. The two programmed sculptures display silver and purple Mylar "blossoms," which are attached to muscle wire, those "shape memory" filaments that contract when electricity passes through them. Their robotic blossoms pulse, casting twitching, glowing shadows on the walls.

Taking a cue from the films of Diana Thater and James Benning, who counter moments of pure contemplation with fleeting absolutes, Robb deploys technology in such a way as to accommodate both its ideologies and its critique, avoiding the need for any resolution. For her 20-minute, high-definition DVD, *Warmth, Giant Black Toobs #4* (2007), with a remixed score by Shuttle 358, Robb filmed an outdoor installation of 50-foot-tall inflated black polypropylene garbage bags in Seattle's Volunteer Park. The air in these "toobs," with each end anchored to the ground, is heated by solar power, causing them to float upwards and rock from side to side in the ambient breezes. As we look up through the roiling, kelp-like bags, we easily imagine them to be living creatures, ironically revealing the pernicious effect of oceans now choking in plastic waste. As noted British businessman John Sorrell has noted about the still almost planetary refusal to address climate change and other manmade disasters, "it isn't about self-denial, it's about reinvention [and] redesigning the way we all manage our lives."



ing roles in films like *Captain Blood* (1935) and *The Bounty* (1933), Flynn also earned notoriety for his self-indulgent womanizing, brawling, drinking, and womanizing. A target for idle gossip and ill feeling, he was even accused of statutory rape and of being a drunkard during the war. He traveled to Vancouver, B.C., in 1959, ostensibly to sell his deluxe schooner to millionaire George Caldough. The 50-year-old actor came for an alcohol binge. Five days later, en route to the airport, he felt ill and was taken to an apartment building near English Bay. During a party there, Flynn suffered a massive heart attack and died. Robb seeks to capture Flynn's clash with destiny and his chaotic, spontaneous gestures, the artist lambastes the seasickness-inducing waves that crash against the shore, inundate a forested Pacific shoreline. Or just as suddenly, a fiery downpour eating through a pile of body buildings, swallowing up the surrounding scarlet and a flotilla of triangular maritime signal flags in the sky. On the far right stands a dark cedar tree gradually consumed by the waves of fire, its trunk's wobbly shape a damaged heart of the painting. To quote from Markowsky's *Gut Symmetries* (1997), Markowsky's work is a reminder that, "A landscape is a reminder that, 'A landscape spreads indefinitely, though at its farthest it is only flimsy.'"



(TOP) MICHAEL MARKOWSKY, *DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE WHILE STANDING IN THE WAKE OF CAPTAIN GEORGE VANCOUVER*, 2008. (MIDDLE) ERROL FLYNN AS SEEN FROM THE BACK OF LIMOUSINE (*ERROL'S LAST RIDE*), 2008. (BOTTOM) 30 FT. (ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM) *DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE FROM THE*

BACK OF LIMOUSINE (*RETRACING ERROL FLYNN'S FINAL MOMENTS*), VIDEO STILL. *DRAWING THE LANDSCAPE WHILE STANDING IN THE WAKE OF CAPTAIN GEORGE VANCOUVER*, 2008. (MIDDLE) ERROL FLYNN AS SEEN FROM THE BACK OF LIMOUSINE (*ERROL'S LAST RIDE*), 2008. (RIGHT) SUSAN ROBB, *THE GENTLEST GESTURE*, 2008, CULTURED CRYSTAL, MUSCLE WIRE, CIRCUIT BOARD, MYLAR, POWDER-COATED ALUMINUM SHELF, 24 X 14 X 12 IN. COURTESY LAWIRMORE PROJECT, SEATTLE.