Juan Willam Chávez

LIVING PROPOSAL
PRUITT IGOE BEE SANCTUARY
2010-2012

Organized by

Marilu Knode
Executive Director
and
Dana Turkovic,
Curator of Exhibitions
Juan William Chávez
Living Proposal:
Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary
2010-2012
Kranzberg Exhibition Series 2012
October 27, 2012 – January 20, 2013

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Kranzberg Exhibition Series at Laumeier Sculpture Park and the end of our 35th anniversary year, and it is fitting that this year’s project is by Juan William Chávez. Like Nancy and Ken Kranzberg, Juan has had a broad impact on the arts in this community, through his own artistic practice, through his creation of Boots Contemporary Art Space, an alternative exhibition and performance platform in St. Louis, and today at his Northside Workshop space, in which Nancy and Ken have been involved from the beginning. Over ten years the Kranzberg Series has marked the evolution of St. Louis-based artists, and Juan’s career exemplifies our collective cultural maturation.

I am grateful to the Laumeier staff that has made this show happen. Curator of Exhibitions, Dana Turkovic, continues the organization’s goal of re-imagining how sculpture parks can “make place” as the world around us changes. Juan’s show also launches the next phase of our working together; a five-year exchange between Laumeier and Juan’s Northside Workshop. Juan, with partner Kiersten Torrez, will work with Laumeier staff in producing unique experiences that focus on our mutual interest in the landscape that is at the heart of our lives.

As always, my gratitude goes to Nancy and Ken Kranzberg who make so many things possible for Laumeier and our 300,000 annual audience members. Thanks go to Nick Lang, Chief Preparator, Kara Pettrow, Registrar / Collections Manager and Eric Nauman, Assistant Preparator, who get all of our programs up on time. Our Development team—Jackie Chambers, Development Officer, Marie Oberkirsch, Special Events Manager and Jennie Searson, Membership and Museum Services Manager—creates a wonderful environment that supports all of the programming we do here. Don Gerling, Operations Supervisor, St. Louis County Parks, and his staff Mike Clermont, John Meyer and Wes Nance manage the grounds for artistic experimentation. Karen Mullen, Curator of Education, and Clara Collins Coleman, Curator of Interpretation, have worked with Dana and Juan to organize educational experiences that further Juan’s exploration of the clash of interests that create our built environment.

My thanks also go to Julia Norton, our diligent Administrative and Volunteer Coordinator, Mary Ruskin, Accounting Director, Beday Adams-Deo, Public Relations Officer and Jay Wright, Librarian, for all of the ways in which they make Laumeier the glorious oasis that it is. As always, I am grateful to our Board and volunteers, St. Louis County Parks, the Regional Arts Commission, the Missouri Arts Council, the Arts and Education Council of St. Louis, the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Mark Twain Laumeier Endowment Fund for on-going support of our mission.

Marilu Knode
Executive Director Laumeier Sculpture Park
and Aronson Endowed Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History, University of Missouri-St. Louis
Old English
Sitte ge, sīgewīf,
sīgað tō eorðan,
næfre ge wilde
tō wuda fleogan,
beō ge swā gemindige,
mīnes gōdes,
swā bið manna gehwilc,
metes and ēðeles.

Translation
Settle down, victory-women,
Never be wild and fly to the woods.
Be as mindful of my welfare,
As is each man of eating and of home.

For a Swarm of Bees
A thousand years ago, when For a Swarm of Bees was sung in the original Old English, a swarm of bees in the attic was seen as a blessing as it gave the cottager an endless pot of honey. Today a bee hive is seen as a danger to be removed by animal control. Attitudes have changed and not for the better, as artist and social activist Juan William Chávez points out in Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary, his survey of the modern ruins of St Louis. He seems to ask, where have all the people gone and how can we get them back?

These series of photographs, films, bee suits, unused hives and outdoor sculpture promote a public dialogue over a field research period which spans two years, are collectively titled Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary: Living Proposal 2010-2012. The galleries at Laumeier restage Chávez’s methodology from conception to its current state as a “living proposal” exploring the empty lot where the infamous and immense Pruitt-Igoe tower blocks in north central St. Louis were built and demolished between1956-73. The apparently dead ground of the ruins constitutes a miniature tour of American racial segregation and desegregation, the failures and triumphs of aborted civil rights struggles and hopeless Modernist Utopian housing schemes. More specifically, Chávez’s work addresses urban abandonment, refocusing the conversation about the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe complex from one soaked with bitter history into one loaded with future possibility.

Chávez chose to research Pruitt-Igoe because of his initial confusion about where it was actually located—it is often confused with other housing projects like Cabrini Green in Chicago and Darst-Webbe in St Louis. He seems to ask, where have all the people gone and how can we get them back?

The dramatic bee population collapse of 2006 left billions of dollars of crops at risk endangering global human food supply because bees are a key pollinator of fruits and vegetables. Ironically our capitalist system (and ultimately our liberal democracy) necessarily rest upon the foundation of the bee’s collectivist (perhaps even socialist-like) hive society. The epidemic and its self-evident threat to our own society challenged researchers to discover the cause. According to Ralph Grundel from the United States Geological Survey, “Colony collapse disorder has cut through honeybee populations, with some beekeepers reportedly losing up to 90 percent of their stock in recent years.” In this plague a lot is at stake and Grundel continues with a prophecy of understated elegance: “It is important to understand the health of our native pollinators because in the absence of pollination, whole communities could collapse.” Grundel of course means human society would also collapse along with the bee population which constitutes an early warning of our own fate.

Chávez sees the successful beehive as a metaphor for a sustainable community and an enduring civilization. Represented by the 33 buildings of the Pruitt-Igoe complex, the beehives become a temporary site-specific installation that formally mimicked the towers. In the film and five framed photographs, Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary, 2010, plant life is recorded as it exists today and the documentation acts as a fallow ground of Pruitt-Igoe itself represents the overabundant mythology that continues to surround the dingy organic-criticism of “white flight” to the suburbs and the ultimate irresolution about the site’s future use, deemed as it now seems to be the subject of endless graduate student proposals and vanity projects. On its face Puhak’s “masculine belittled lament” “I never thought people were that destructive” is only secondarily the corrosive impact of the brutish pride of an archi- tect commenting on the destruction of vandalism (who had already trashed the towers long before the controlled demolition). Primarily this mournful assessment cuts to the flame heart of urban ecology, which Chávez recasts as a grave cycle of decay and growth.

After the demolition of the towers in 1973 (the rubble finally cleared in 1976) the remaining empty lot of several acres near downtown has, in the fullness of time, transformed into a habitat for various flora and fauna. Chávez explored the forested site, increasingly intrigued by the state of disrepair a half kilometer away from central St Louis. There have been many artworks made about the iconic destruction of the buildings, as Chávez focused on its current condition rather than its pyrotechnic explosion. Chávez explains, “I entered this forest expecting the remnants of a community but was surprised to see the beginning of another.” Observing the number of bees that had claimed the woodland as their own, Chávez came to think about the sculptural comparisons and the metaphorical potential of bee communities, realizing that, like the human population of St. Louis honeybees are, for various environmental reasons, also on the decline.
an important memento mori. Chávez views his project as a promissory note for the city, an acknowledgment of pathological epidemics, creating a poetic gesture recognizing that our relationship with bees is something both dangerously tangible and ancient and perhaps one as old as art itself. With this in mind, Chávez traveled to the Cuevas de la Araña (known in English as the Araña Caves or the Spider Caves) in Bicorp, for the first stop on his summer 2011 research trip in search of the “Man of Bicorp.”

A town of 600 people in Andalusia, Spain, Bicorp holds the oldest recorded example of the human/bee relationship; an 8,000-year-old cave drawing of a figure climbing a tree toward a swarming beehive. Other drawings in the cave illustrate hunts, weapons and domestic animals, verifying the important role of honey in the Neolithic diet. These markings appear in the film as flickering gestures that demonstrate and emphasize an increasingly symbiotic rapport.

Luxembourg Gardens, 2011 is a documentary-style film using an 8mm camera set in a heavily used harmonious public space for bees and humans in France. Filmed during the second stop on his bee research trip, Chávez toured France’s Pucher École (Beekeeper School) located in Paris’s Luxembourg Gardens. The work interlace scrutiny documentation of the gardens and an interview with native Parisian/Willifred Segue, a black Frenchman who taught for two years at Soldan High School in St. Louis in the film. Segue compares and contrasts the social attitudes of Parisians to public spaces with the shrinking cities of the Midwest, merging the interview about his experience in working on the North side with the generous public aesthetic of the French people. Segue notably mentions the influence of urban French styles in St. Louis such as Benton Park contrasting this with the meaner public ethos of American cities. This observation and “outside perspective” provided a critical conceptual and formal link as the exhibition at Laumeier, as a St. Louis County park and mansion turn art museum, is grounded in the connection between historical city planning and access to green space. However glamorous it may sound, the Pucher École is a simple gazebo that houses beehives and a few tool sheds; Parisians lounge alongside the millions of busy bees in blissful harmony. The film therefore provides proof of a long-standing and safe coexistence, a good example of urban beekeeping commingled within a city environment and viewing bees more as a “maintenance crew that naturally helps sustain the park rather than a fearsome menace.” mindful of one another’s welfare and peacefully settled among each other. The film also attempts to demystify and explain the human/bee symbiosis using an existing model to demonstrate the possibility for a similar space to exist on the Pruitt-Igoe grounds along with an education center and public park.

Untitled, 2012, assembled from 14 recycled street lampposts are arranged to create a 1:1 scale footprint of a Pruitt-Igoe building, is Chávez’s version of the Native American Mississippian’s “Woodhenge.” It replicates the form of the contemporary reconstruction of the henge, providing a monumental, poetic echo of the collapsed civilization. The towering wooden poles compare modern and prehistoric con-
Juan William Chávez
LIVING PROPOSAL
PRUITT IGOE BEE SANCTUARY
2010-2012
33 BUILDINGS
11 STORIES

In the summer of 2010, I created a series of photographs that focused on the current state of the Pruitt-Igoe site. What was once 33 buildings standing 11 stories high was now an overgrown urban forest.
To explore the relationship between humans and bees I had to start from the beginning. So I traveled to Spain to document and analyze an 8,000-year-old cave drawing, the Man of Bicorp. The drawing depicts a figure in tree reaching into a beehive with bees flying around. It is the first record of humans and bees interacting. Surrounding the drawing were images of the hunt, tools, wild and domestic animals. The drawing inspired a question: what was so important to humans 8,000-years ago to etch into the walls of this cave? Survival, and beekeeping was part of that survival.
In 2011, St. Louis falls to its lowest population in more than a century. Concurrently, 30% of honey-producing hives in the United States were lost due to Colony Collapse Disorder. Saint Louisans and bees were now in the same situation.
I wanted to know if there was a preexisting model of bees living within a public space. This inquiry led me to the Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris, France. In this park resides the oldest Beekeeping School in the world, le Rucher-Ecole du Luxembourg. It was here that I had a conversation about education and public space with a French teacher that taught in the St. Louis public school for two years.
LIVING THE PROPOSAL

Inspired by education and public space, we took the proposal off the page and developed a pilot project called Urban Gardens: Beautification of Vacant Space. This summer program consists of five workshops that focused on addressing vacancy through the development of an urban garden. Middle school students learned an introduction to beekeeping, gardening, and printmaking.
So many parts...

So harmless

They stung you?

You would do the

Next time leave them alone!

What did they do to you?

After you swung on them?

Left:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

Right:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX
Left:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX

Right:
Title of Piece
Dimensions notes etc
20XX
Juan William Chávez was born in Lima, Peru and lives and works in St. Louis. Chavez received his B.F.A. from the Kansas City Art Institute in 2000 and his M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004. He has exhibited in galleries and museums nationally and internationally, including: the Van Abbé Museum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands; Art in General, New York; TinT Gallery, Thessaloniki, Greece; Getsumin Gallery, Tokyo; Gal- lery 400 University of Illinois at Chicago; the Helenic Museum and Cultural Center, Chicago; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; Harris Lieberman Gallery, New York; and White Flag Proj- ects, St. Louis. In 2006, Chavez founded Boots Contemporary Art Space, an artist-run art lab in South St. Louis City. In 2011, Chavez was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship for Advanced Study Abroad in 2012 and a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

Biography
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