The Possible at the Berkeley Art Museum
(January 29–May 25, 2014)

Reviewed by Kim Beil

The Possible was not just an exhibition. It was an extraordinarily ambitious social project, which aimed to reimagine the space and purpose of the museum. Guest curated by the Oakland-based artist David Wilson, The Possible transformed the Berkeley Art Museum (BAM) from a site of judgment and static display into a place alive with change and artistic creation. Wilson’s practice often involves collaboration and community organizing. In Arrivals, a recent project that Wilson created for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the artist prepared a series of hand-drawn maps to lead visitors on self-guided walks around the city. Each tour culminated at a site where Wilson and his artistic collaborators had created a sound experience. Visitors could relive these performances by listening to tape recordings that were stashed at the sites. As in Arrivals, The Possible harnessed the creativity of the diverse members of Wilson’s artistic circle, from musicians and performance artists to historians and visual artists, and aimed to share the sometimes solitary experience of making art with other artists and visitors, when they elected to participate in the Sunday workshops.

For The Possible Wilson identified more than eighty artistic collaborators and invited them to participate through an elaborate mail-art campaign; this early stage correspondence was documented on the exhibition’s website, the-possible.org. Responding to Wilson’s invitations, the artists proposed workshops to be conducted in makeshift studios in the museum during the course of the exhibition. As artists and workshop participants created work to fill the galleries, the exhibition would evolve continuously during its five months in residence at BAM.

The exhibition divided the Museum’s large main gallery into three studios: ceramics, printmaking, and textiles. The walls between these spaces were lined with works in progress and the tools of their creation, from looms and dye vats to Xerox copiers and clay. Upstairs a recording studio hosted musicians and sound artists. Like Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Library of Babel,” the implication was that all art might be contained in these galleries. By offering up the tools of production, one can make (almost) any artwork imaginable. The exhibition reveled in the inchoate nature of artistic process; the constantly changing gallery displays and open studios presented a direct challenge to the perfection of typical contemporary art exhibitions, whose professional lighting and installation tend to fix the object rather than highlight its potential for flux.
The calendar boasted some truly spectacular experiences, from workshops with renowned choreographer Anna Halprin or internationally-exhibited contemporary artists Amy Franceschini, Fritz Haeg, or Charles Long, as well as dozens of music sessions. The logistics of this panoply of events proved to be rather unwieldy, however, as the Museum’s website and publications competed with the guest curator’s own descriptions of events. While there were more than one hundred artists listed on the exhibition’s main page, along with the caveat that “new participants will be continually added throughout the exhibition,” there was no search function that allowed visitors to easily plan for these events, nor to see the results of workshops that they have missed. If you want to know exactly what participants could expect to do in intriguingly-titled workshops, such as “Pushing Something” or “QUIET” or “Gravel and Gold Shoot,” you’re out of luck. The Google calendar associated with the-possible.org offered empty links that promise “more details” and the Museum’s own website simply listed sixteen links identically titled, “The Possible Workshop.” While some of these links did lead to additional information, it took more than a little perseverance to uncover the dates or title of any specific workshop. These communication challenges highlight the disjuncture between the exhibition’s stated goal of inclusiveness and the difficulty of adapting the established institutional framework to accommodate a rich and constantly changing programming schedule.

Arguably, this was an exhibition for artists, and specifically for the workshop participants whose work remains, in varying stages of completion, on shelves and plinths and even haphazardly arranged on the floor. If indeed the exhibition was about opening up access, both to the means of artistic production and to the traditionally restricted site of display, then the most radical aspect of this experience—outside of placing your own artwork on display in the gallery—lies in knowing who these outsiders are who have infiltrated the high art citadel. Without identifying labels or interpretive text to accompany each of these installations, however, little distinguished one object from the next, nor illuminated the individual goals of their makers.

The most illuminating experience that I had in the exhibition resulted from a chance encounter with one of the participating artists, Amy Trachtenberg. On April 19, 2014, the Museum hosted a large symposium organized by the UC Berkeley Arts Research Center (ARC) called Valuing Labor in the Arts. Powerfully resonant with the themes of the exhibition and the interdisciplinary backgrounds of Wilson’s invited artists, the ARC symposium seemed a natural extension of the exhibition. In a day-long series of workshops, attendees had the opportunity to work with performing and visual artists, labor organizers, and authors, engaging in activities that fueled discussion of the varied kinds of value attributed to artistic labor. I sat down next to Trachtenberg in an afternoon session as she was discussing the distinction between models of shared creation. As an example of collaborative work she pointed across the gallery, where the results of the workshop she led with Jérôme Waag were “displayed” on the floor. I had been in BAM’s main gallery for more than three hours at this point and had not even noticed this large group of objects, pushed out of the way up against a wall. I couldn’t tell simply by looking at the objects whether they were artworks or materials awaiting
transformation. This is not at all to fault the artists; rather, the museum context leads to the expectation of what Svetlana Alpers calls “the museum effect.” In the absence of such framing or didactic commentary, or even any obvious attention to installation or display, I simply didn’t know where to look.

Trachtenberg’s description of the workshop and her passionate interpretation of her participants’ work was absolutely transformative. The objects that I had overlooked were deeply meaningful, though without guidance this meaning was entirely invisible to me as an outside observer. Trachtenberg and Waag’s workshop, described in the calendar only as “Minimum Dwelling: Making and Unmaking the Body,” asked participants to identify an object of deep personal significance that they were willing to physically deconstruct. The prompt elicited a wide range of responses. Many of the objects represented things that their owners couldn’t bear to get rid of. The workshop enabled people to engage with and, in some cases, diffuse the talismanic power of these objects. From a laundry basket that was among one participant’s few possessions upon immigrating to the United States to the framed posters that were gifts from father to child, deconstructing and refashioning these objects into new artworks seemed to turn the fetish on its head. I suspect that the museum setting had everything to do with the ability to disengage from and reflect on these objects. While one couldn’t leave such a personal memento out at the curb, the transformative power of the museum and the deep respect that it confers on its contents enabled workshop participants to distance themselves in an appropriately ceremonial way. It is precisely the residual power of the museum space that made these artworks possible. The redistribution of institutional authority is also what makes The Possible a radical social project. Rather than ignoring the museum’s authority or pretending that it no longer exists in a world where artists inhabit the galleries, it is critical that the museum actively interrogate its own role in the transformation from a place of judgment to a democratic site of creation.

Understanding the visitor’s place in this new paradigm also requires more attention. The exhibition, like dozens of other American museum initiatives aimed at audience building since the 1990s, begged the question: which audience? Creating more inclusive museums demands not just that we get to know the visitor, but that we recognize that there are many different kinds of visitors, each of whom has different needs in an exhibition. The difficulties I encountered while trying to make sense of the events calendar and the objects on view in the galleries left me feeling like an outsider, leading me to understand that The Possible spoke most cogently to a very specific audience, not the broadly democratic one imagined in the publicity materials. While The Possible may have been a powerful site for makers, it did little to engage visitors who were not also active participants. Even visitors who are typically at ease in art museums, such as the undergraduate studio art majors to whom I spoke, described confusion in the exhibition. The Possible admirably aimed to share the pleasures of artistic creation by opening up the art museum to amateurs and even non-artists. Yet, to fully appreciate the exhibition’s success in this important social goal, non-participants needed to know what the objects were and who made them in order to understand why their presence in the gallery constituted a departure from traditional curatorial practice. Educational
and interpretive materials could have given voice to these objects and makers, which at least were seen, though still not heard. The Possible’s inspired guest curator, David Wilson, did push the boundaries of “what a museum can be,” even as the institution itself lagged behind in adapting to this new relationship.

About the Author
Kim Beil is the Assistant Director for ITALIC, an arts immersion program for freshmen at Stanford University. She has also taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and at the University of California, Irvine.

Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance at the Abbe Museum, Bar Harbor, Maine

Reviewed by Laurie E. Hicks

Artists have a long history of creating work in relationship to nature. The images and forms they create have, in some cases, had a profound impact on our cultural consciousness of nature. They have become part of the way we understand, talk about, and act in response to our contemporary environmental situation. Art, as a result, becomes a form of “nature talk,” a type of speech that is fully situated within particular histories and cultural experiences. As such, what an individual depicts and how are obviously not only personal expressions of the artist but are social practices, created and viewed from within cultural knowledge and conditions. Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance, an exhibition of contemporary art, presents an opportunity to consider the “nature talk” of a small group of Native American artists whose work is intimately associated with their views of nature and concerns about the destruction of the environment.

Housed in the Abbe Museum, a renovated historic building in Bar Harbor, Maine, whose primary focus is Maine’s Native American culture and a “broader Native American experience,” the exhibition, Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance, curated by Rick Hunt (Abenaki) brings together the work of nine artists whose diverse cultural histories and experiences provide an interweaving of views and concerns about our environment. Through a coming together of different perspectives, media, and processes, the exhibition creates a strong sense of common cause and a voice that clearly articulates the need for us to reflect on what it means to live in relationship to nature and our place on earth.

Even before entering the gallery, the viewer is drawn in by the visual richness and intensity of Will Wilson’s (Diné) photograph, Auto Immune Response #5, one of seven images that speak to an idealized relationship “between a post-apocalyptic
Diné (Navajo) man and the devastatingly beautiful, but toxic environment he inhabits” (Abbe Museum 2014, Figure 1).

Wilson’s photographic montages of panoramic landscapes into which he has inserted his own image create a dystopic narrative where humans can no longer live in harmonic relationship with the land. Wilson’s images are alarming, provocatively beautiful, and painfully disturbing. In Auto Immune Response #5, Wilson uses a double image of himself to reach out and draw us into his post-apocalyptic landscape, a world that is vulnerable and highly toxic. From behind a veil of gas masks, Wilson’s unblinking gaze challenges us to acknowledge our culpability in the destruction of this land and adds to the haunting power of his imagery.

Turning from Wilson’s photographs the viewer becomes a listener, attending to the sounds of indigenous drums and chants alternating with techno-electronic beats that come from the work of Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Aleut). Galanin’s photographs and video installation “create a commentary on the intersections of the modern world and Tlingit cultural expression.” In his contrasting video pieces, Tsu Héidei Shugaxtutaan I and II (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue3oaKV1LF8 & http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg2c1jtm59o), Galanin maps the illusionary dance movements of David “Elsewhere” Bernal onto “a traditional Tlingit entrance song” and the traditional Tlingit Raven dance, as performed by Dan Littlefield, onto contemporary techno-electronic beat. It creates a provocative, unsettling, and mesmerizing juxtaposition that highlights the coming together of “the modern world and Tlingit cultural expression” (Abbe Museum 2014).

Though less overtly connected to natural environmental concerns than the work of Will Wilson, Galanin’s imagery seems to emerge from a collision between the artistic and cultural traditions of his Tlingit/Aleut heritage and engagement with contemporary urban experience. Both performances respond to particular times and places, and reflect an awareness of the creative and potentially controversial interplay between traditional and contemporary cultural environments. The work of Gabriel Frey (Passamaquoddy), a painter and twelfth-generation brown ash basket maker, speaks directly to the “connectivity and reciprocity” of his worldview (Abbe Museum 2014). Frey’s paintings reflect interconnections between diverse traditions, integrating imagery associated with Navaho sand painting with a more European form of portraiture. Like sand painting, his images,
especially that of his grandfather who taught him to make baskets, has a spiritual
and living quality. These same qualities can be seen in his brown ash pack basket,
which is an impressive example of traditional processes, attentive to the continu-
ation or passing on of long established techniques and ways of understanding the
significance of such forms.

Like Frey, Vera Longtoe (Abenaki) draws on traditional techniques and forms of
basket making. Grounded in these cultural processes but responding to our contem-
porary environmental challenges, Longtoe incorporates discarded materials in the
creation of basket forms. Her use of contemporary recycled materials in traditional
ways seems to emerge directly from her view that “Native People...are stewards of
the environment” (Abbe Museum 2014). Her work speaks softly but with clear
intent, reminding us that all resources must be used judiciously and with a sense
of responsibility.

Shane Perley-Dutcher (Wolastoq, Maliseet) uses his art to connect to the land and
the traditions of his culture. As a metal smith, Perley-Dutcher has developed a way
of creating that is respectful to and inspired by his culture. His intricate and graceful
pieces bring together traditional forms and symbols in new and compelling ways.
His agility as an artist is clear, as is the importance he places on his bond to the
land, a bond he holds as sacred.

Gina Brooks’ (Maliseet) drawings and paintings emerge out of Wabanaki material
and spiritual culture. Powerful pen and ink drawings of such figures as Polam
(Salmon) or Putep (Whale) draw on the distinctive designs of traditional stories
and symbolic forms. Through the rendering of her images, Brooks embraces the
rich cultural language of the Wabanaki in an effort to draw attention to contem-
porary issues. Her images seek to “call on the people of the earth to write a new story
in the language of the old ones” and to “give thanks to the earth for everything it gives”
(Abbe Museum 2014).

Patricia Michaels’ (Taos Pueblo) fashion designs are captivating and clearly reflect
her own history and cultural experience. Even though each design tells a personal
story, they also create a narrative that evolves with each viewer. For Michaels,
“Each design tells a story. Just as a river is pierced by a tree branch, time is
momentarily anchored within the garment” (Abbe Museum 2014). Though the
direct connections to the environment are made clear by her use of natural materials,
the fuller story is left to the viewer to create.

Rick Hunt (Abenaki), curator of the exhibition, has only included one of his own
paintings, Balance: Diabetes. Hunt’s disconcerting image of a “traditional’ Native
man who represents a healthy relationship with nature” is complicated by his head-
dress of syringes. The image speaks directly to the ways in which our bodies respond
to both physical and cultural disruptions of our relationship with the earth. When
the earth is out of balance so too are our bodies; the medicine of nature is replaced
by industrial medicine.

Integrating photography with traditional Cherokee basket making, Shan
Goshorn’s (Eastern Band Cherokee) works speak with great clarity about critical
issues of human rights and contemporary native concerns. Through her art,
Goshorn addresses controversial policies that have adversely impacted Native iden-
tities, seeking to open and promote honest dialogue. Using Cherokee single and
double-weave techniques, she brings together traditional patterns with images that focus our attention on policies such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 (Figure 2) or the forced education of more than 10,000 children who were sent to boarding schools for the purpose of cultural assimilation. Goshorn’s baskets are provocative, intelligent, and inspiring. Though mostly reflecting historical events, she skillfully draws our attention to contemporary issues and our need to come to terms with the relationship between human rights and the sustainability of our world.

The relationships of native peoples to the natural environment are often romanticized, and they are assimilated by mainstream culture in ways that do not always represent the diversity of practices and intentions in native communities. This exhibition, *Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance*, housed in a museum dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of native cultures, is significant, therefore, because it creates a space for contemporary Native American perspectives on the environment to be heard through the works of these nine artists.

The works presented in *Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance* challenge viewers to consider and reconsider conceptions of nature and humanity, and the intersection

**Figure 2** Shan Goshorn, *Preparing for the Fall*, 2012.
of cultural traditions and the material world. As persuasive, yet often subtle forms of “nature talk,” these works represent creative and aesthetic practices that reflect diverse understandings of our relationship to the environments we inhabit. The work leaves viewers with questions concerning the makeup of our own “nature talk” and pushes us to consider how prepared we are to re-think the human and environmental ramifications of the speech we use to identify and communicate our own place in the social and natural world. *Twisted Path III: Questions of Balance* is an impressive exhibition that is well worth the trip.

**About the Author**

Dr. Laurie E. Hicks is professor of art at the University of Maine where she teaches art education theory and practice, and graduate research methods, and serves as curator of the Lord Hall Gallery.

**Reference**