

# **Critical Appraisal of *Inspired by Nature: Beyond Function***

**By Candice Russell**

One artist turns wood, while the other artist shapes ceramic. Bob Bagley of Parkland and Jan Kolenda of Plantation unite their passions in a thought-provoking exhibition "Inspired by Nature: Beyond Function" at the Coral Springs Museum of Art through August 21, 2010. There are works by them as solo artists at the top of their respective media in terms of creativity and manipulation. But the works likely to cause the most comment are their collaborations.

No stranger to the museum, Kolenda and fellow clay master John Foster were its artists in residence in 2003. With the help of volunteers, they created "The Everglades: A Relief Ceramic Tile Mural" on an exterior wall of the museum. This stellar work is an invitation to all who visit the building and a permanent tribute to this fragile ecosystem.

In a style dubbed "faux bois" or "fake woods" by Martha Stewart, Kolenda creates teapots that look borrowed from the stoves of woodland fairies. With their twisting branches and surface textures imitating tree bark, these ceramic vessels seem organically grown rather than human-made. "Mangrove Teapot" has the kind of stout-legged muscular presence of mangroves with their bold tentacles, found in the Everglades. Other triumphant works beautifully mimicking nature are "Live Oak Teapot" and "Crepe Myrtle Teapot" with their intriguing branch-like handles.

Bagley takes the concept of wood to sculptural heights as in "Mud Flow" (spalted maple, twine and clay). This industrial-looking work features three large wood spigots arranged at different points on the wall. In contrast to the hard masculinity of works like this is the lacy-looking elegant vessel "Elven Artifact #1" (rosewood and spalted maple).

A photographer as well, Bagley is represented by a display of digitally manipulated color photos. The subconscious takes over in "Within the Dream," a study in pale tones of purple, blue and lime green. Several lonely leaves on a thick branch are the stars of "Shattered Foliage," a minimalist appreciation of form as much as the transitions within nature.

When Kolenda and Bagley unite, magic happens. The genius of their collaboration is evident in works such as "Epiphyte Vessel" (mahogany, ceramic and iron chain). This wall-mounted piece with its spiky outpouring of fingers recalls medieval torture devices and art on loan from the spooky mansion of the Addams family. One cannot help but be fascinated by the architecture of this piece, as well as the process by which two artists in different media were able to find common ground with stunning results.

"Nepenthes Vessel" (rosewood and ceramic) is suitable for table display. It is a hardly benign wood bowl with three layers adorned with orange witch's talons. Viewers should

get close to this piece and look downward because Kolenda adds a surprise — a flat blue surface resembling the pristine lakes of Colorado mountain tops. This juxtaposition of the foreboding and the peaceful makes “Nepenthes Vessel” another standout artwork.

Bagley and Kolenda successfully come together again in “Crown of Thorns” (spalted maple and ceramic), a drum shape with beckoning claws. Favorable comments were heard often at the show’s opening night party. “I love the dichotomy between the fun part (of these pieces) and the danger,” said Miami artist Judi Schwab, who recently had a solo exhibition at the Coral Springs Museum of Art.