

SHAWN PETTERSEN

ARTIST STATEMENT

By interweaving references to natural disasters, geological history, biblical stories, and American biography and myth my work attempts to pose a very specific sense of loss and longing. In so doing I examine the relationship between epic yet detached historical loss and the confusing, personal, and contemporary issues of displacement. The bridge between these disparate psychological spaces is where the crux of my work resides. My work deliberately avoids references to contemporary modes of popular visual cultural such as the internet, advertising, and fashion. I accept the omnipresence of mass media in today's society and choose to skirt the discussion of its intentions. I prefer to present an alternative view of our time versed in a more remote tense; something prodding at the romantic, tragic, and antiquated.

By disassembling taxidermy mannequins, then fitting them with other bits of imagery and upholstering the cobbled forms in a variety of fabrics and marks, I create an elegant, yet humble, solution to the mangled histories of the animals; a kind of futile consolidation or reparation to a saga that I never personally participated in, yet inescapably feel attached to. Each newly formed animal references societal archetypes; the vulnerability of the massive and intimidating predator or the sly scavenger is a reoccurring theme. A phantomous shark of the deep who leaves only teeth behind as evidence of its existence. The coyote, with its long and sordid memoir in the American landscape, where he is both indigenous and reviled. The buffalo with its marriage to both the romantic vision of a now long lost, untamed country and the confrontation of its appalling over-hunting and near extinction. These animals' backstories and biologies can then be seen as indicative of the themes of fleeing, displacement, and adaptation which lay at the bedrock of my interests.

My work also combines imagery from the NASA space program with documentation of ghost ships from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Photos taken by the astronauts of the Apollo missions remind us of our aspirations in voyages to another frontier (last century's wild west). The Challenger accident injured that ambition, and became a painful turning point for an artist who's six-year-old eyes watched a symbol of American promise and potential tear into a billowing pillar of white smoke and heavy debris. Massive boats have seemingly disappeared only to reappear, sometimes decades later, crewless and adrift on a silent sea. Ghost ships do not reveal the secrets of their journeys. I see a connection between these mysterious spaces where few have travelled. The digitally altered imagery that I build from the old photographs are large in scale and intentionally blurry. I want the viewer to fall in to the fog where these mirages are always out of reach. These images hint toward an ongoing, albeit ambiguous, story of searching, nostalgia, and thwarted hope.

I see my work as a shifting series of small allegories or parables with no moral lessons or solutions. These new animals are never offered a consolidated account of their disheveled chronicles or even the solace of a new home. The shuttles are failed toys that will never fly. The boats are destined to be lost in a sea of dark water and metaphor. The frontiers they explore have been tainted by human folly and conceit, or natural forces beyond our control. This is our shared soundtrack of unresolved music and these are the saddest songs I know.

ARTIST BIO

Shawn Pettersen's work is primarily based in sculpture and drawing, and often surrounds themes of displacement, memory, and being lost. Shawn has worked as a graphic designer, creative director, college instructor, jeweler, courtroom artist, set designer, and studio assistant for artists in New York. His work has been shown regionally and nationally. He was born in New Rochelle, New York but has spent most of his life in Southern Florida. He received his Master of Fine Arts Degree from Montclair State University in 2005, and his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Ringling College in 2003. Shawn is currently the Fine Arts Technician at Ringling College of Art & Design.