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## "In the Quiver of the Kingdom: Jon Rappleye" Exhibition Brochure

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IN THE QUIVER OF THE KINGDOM

Jon Rappleye

2008 january 18 through february 13  
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn

In Jon Rappleye's *In the Quiver of the Kingdom* the artist skillfully weaves a number of visual languages together to create a lavish wonderland. At first glance the paintings create an impression of a natural history museum diorama assembled with left-over parts from every other diorama in the museum. The viewer vaguely recognizes most of the parts but something is awry. Within the context of the natural world, it is a given that the rabbits, deer, snakes, and owls that inhabit Rappleye's paintings are potential predators as well as prey; however, they appear to exist without conflict or fear in this wondrous place. While the work flirts with the potential for danger (volcanoes, snakes, owls, etc.) the well-constructed nature of the images adds to the feeling that the space is safe, if only for the moment. Presenting a collage-like gathering of a variety of animals in a single location is a trope rooted in a common history shared by most artists, who as children would draw from a variety of sources to compose fantastic animal gatherings. This is long before they could fathom the roles of animals in the food chain or grasp the notion of geographic habitats. In the common drawings of their collective childhoods, tigers, raccoons and snow leopards would drink from the same water where the sea lions, otters and sharks would swim. (Imagine a more densely populated *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* only without the messy struggle.) While his work can be viewed as an extension of this early experience, Rappleye has given himself the very grown-up task of creating a landscape that is as playful as it is didactic.

The paintings' varied stylistic and compositional qualities come together to create a mythical, narrative space that seems to span the whole of time. The background is almost primeval with its steaming volcanoes and the sometimes exaggerated, eerie palette capturing the light just before or right after some cataclysmic event. Rather than the lizard kings one might expect in this prehistoric, rocky terrain, the viewer finds the most delicate of animals. While some appear as they would if

encountered in the real world, others appear as amalgamations. Relating again to the sense of play in a child's drawings, the animals' body parts appear to be interchangeable. Birds appear with deer heads, deer have velvety, rounded moose antlers, and owls appear with deer antlers. The owl is perhaps the most used subject in the Rappleye's tales. The already symbolically loaded figure is made even more mystical as it appears more often than not with its eyes replaced with six-pointed Marian stars. The owls are also seen with a nimbus-like ring of stars. The owls appear as the enlightened, eternal watchmen of the artist's kingdom while gazing out to the viewer on the other side.

The artist assigns the components of the landscape—background, intermediate and foreground—with dramatically contrasting characteristics. The deepest space of the scene is rendered by a series of carefully applied layers of painted and sprayed media. The modern acrylic palettes range from the subdued misty morning light to jarringly acidic sunsets. The foreground trees and earth are built with heavy, black lines similar to those found in traditional Japanese printmaking. The bulbous trees appear to be wrapped in a sinewy, undulating pattern that gives them an otherworldly presence. Their clunky, rotund bases give rise to long, delicate upward reaching stalks and an occasional flowering vine releasing its seeds into the atmosphere. In several of the images (*Where Grows the Vine in Woodland Waste*, 2005 as well as *In the Tremble this Nature Abounds*, 2007) we see the branches morphed into a dream-catcher like symbol that appears to function as an antenna that might both gather and broadcast energy. Lastly, usually in the closest foreground, all the animals are lovingly rendered, with great attention to detail, reminiscent of Audubon on his best day. The careful brush and quill strokes sensitively model the subjects' fur, feathers, wings or scales. Their delicately gradated tones recall black and white illustrations found in old nature manuals or children's fairy tales, thus giving the animals a timeless quality. The black lines that surround the animals,



*Nightwood Bloom*, 42" x 87", acrylic on paper, 2007

flora, and fauna seem to act as impenetrable barriers against the strangely colored worlds they inhabit. The exceptional detail and craftsmanship remind the viewer that nature is worthy of such lavish attention.

All this is not to say that Rappleye is illustrating an idyllic wilderness. In *Nightwood Bloom* we are startled to find a deer with a clear tube filled with pink liquid poking out of the place where his antler has molted. And in *From this Ancient Forest Blight* the necks of four-legged vultures are elongated to snake-like proportions. While they are always beautifully rendered, these distorted and hybridized animals are unsettling and sometimes, just plain scary, particularly in a time when real world headlines reflect similarly disturbing aberrations. The trees in Rappleye's paintings are also often grossly disfigured by growths similar to those caused by gall

producing parasites. The stark contrasts in the coloration of the mushrooms are so jarring it might lead one to believe that all this could just be a hallucination. Pushing the sense of anxiety even further, the artist inserts words like "quiver," "brutal," "venomous," and "tremble" in his titles. The titles for the artist's paintings and exhibitions also offer hints that help frame the work. His exhibition *Out of the Silent Planet* is the title of a 1938 science fiction novel by C.S. Lewis. The painting *Nightwood Bloom* makes reference to Djuna Barnes' novel, *Nightwood*. His last show at Jeff Bailey Gallery in New York, *Awakened in the Peaceable Kingdom*, makes reference to the well known 19th century American folk painter Edward Hicks whose *Peaceable Kingdom* paintings illustrated the Old Testament notion that man and animals should live in peace. Like Hicks, Rappleye's paintings are largely utopian but share the potential for the darker,

*In the Tremble this Nature Abounds, 52" x 40", acrylic on paper, 2007*

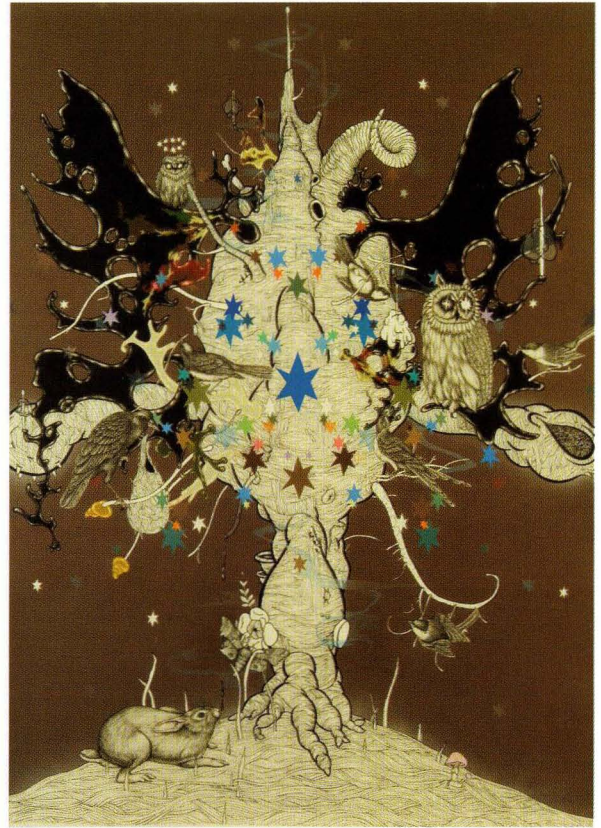




*In a Sea of Honey, A Sky of Honey, 30" x 22", acrylic on paper, 2007*

more destructive nature of the world.

While man might have a metaphoric presence or a perceived residue in Jon Rappleye's paintings, there seem to be no people or manmade objects in these landscapes. However, the role of man in these paintings appears and reappears as we are aware of the artist's decisions and in the visibility of his hand. Nestled within the delicate layers of metaphor and painting (with a capital P), are the questions and issues the paintings subtly and plainly



*Bird and Hare Drink Where Flows the Venomous Nectar  
49" x 36", acrylic on paper, 2005*

raise regarding man's precarious relationship with nature and the environment. Rappleye weaves his perception of places both real and imagined into a world that is complex in its wonder, fragility, and brutality. This truly exceptional work shows an artist deeply committed to the exploration of a disparate and sometimes desperate nature.

Hamlett Dobbins  
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery



From this *Ancient Forest Blight*, 42" x 60", acrylic on paper, 2007. Image courtesy the artist and Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.



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Cover Image: *In the Quiver of the Kingdom*, 40" x 51", acrylic on paper, 2007. Private Collection, image courtesy the artist and Jeff Bailey Gallery, New York.