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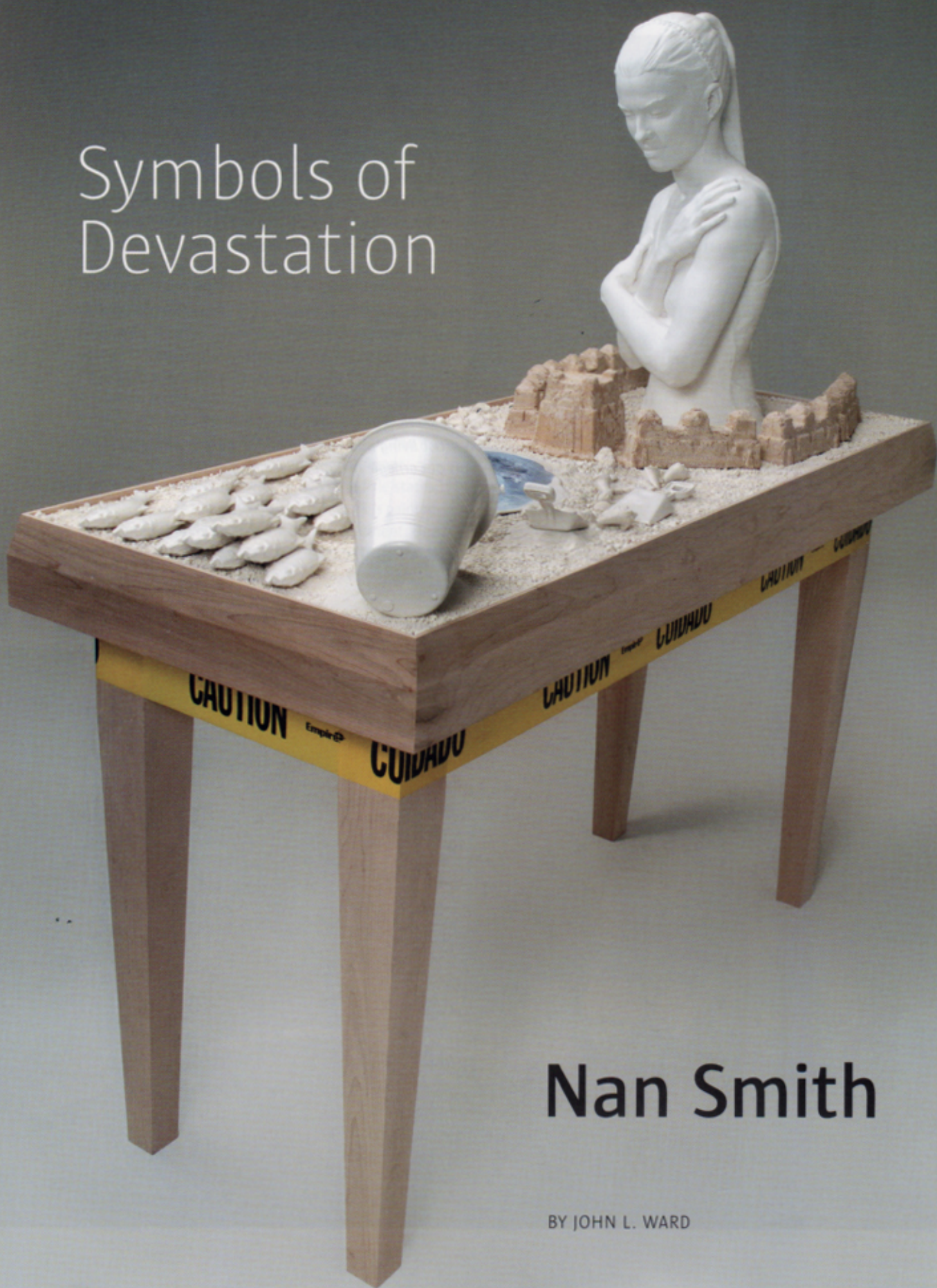


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Symbols of Devastation



Nan Smith

BY JOHN L. WARD



Opposite: *Summer's Over*, 2011.
Glazed and painted earthenware,
china paint overglaze decal, wood,
and plastic, 62.5 x 25.5 x 59.5 in.
Above and detail: *Garden*, 2010.
Glazed earthenware with china paint
decal, steel, wood, and backlit pho-
tomontages, 132 x 96 x 168 in.



Nan Smith is an ambitious artist. Over the years, she has increased her command of the ceramic medium, extended her range of techniques and media, and set herself more demanding goals. A full professor in the ceramics program at the University of Florida's School of Art and Art History, she has also served as head of the department. Since 2010, she has drawn attention to how human activities have damaged functioning ecosystems. Relying primarily on ceramic material and techniques, she also incorporates photography to document environmental narratives.

Smith uses diverse materials, techniques, and imagery to create an interplay of complex symbolic meanings that portray both inviolate nature and its ravaging by corpo-

rate exploiters. Her works have a strong presence and visual effectiveness even if one disregards their allegorical narratives, but to do so is to miss a vital part of the work. Smith has had to invent much of this symbolism herself, since existing symbols did not meet her needs. Consequently, while the general concept behind the works is readily evident, some of the ideas implied by her choices and the interplay of details are less so.

Her earliest environmentally themed piece is the installation *Garden* (2010). As in much of Smith's work, a young woman is the dominating form. She glides forward on a white surface covered with cosmos flowers (*kosmos* is Greek for the ordered world). The figure's slightly warm, monochrome tonality emphasizes her sculptural

identity, as does the broken arm supporting the pitcher on her head. Her skirt, which sweeps the ground, makes a beautiful effect but is not practical for gardening. She and the pure white garden convey an ideal: an increasingly discarded tradition of harmony with the land that modern agriculture must recover to be sustainable.

Above the white garden, a helix of seed packets bursts into colorful life. Below, alarm clocks filling a blue hat reflect the vegetables produced by the seeds. Like all of Smith's objects, except for a few wood and metal constructions, these are ceramic. The packets sport pictures of vegetables on the front, but show pictures of industrial farming, with a list of good agricultural practices, on the back. The brand



Summer's Over (detail), 2011.

name, "Seeds of Hope," signals an expectation that both individuals and large-scale farming will avoid the fertilizers and pesticides that pollute our waterways. The alarm clocks suggest the need to wake up to the loss of family farms and their replacement by corporate agriculture.

Above a smaller garden section, separated from the larger one by a wide interval that invites viewers into the work, a hanging metal frame with three windows presents three photographic views of a woman with unfocused gaze and praying hands, who contemplates a tiny cube appearing before her forehead; the cube contains a ceramic sculpture of a child's feet, a symbol that Smith

uses with some frequency. The tableau suggests a prayer for a sustainable future.

A large, curved photograph—attached back-to-back to the pictures of the praying woman in a contrast of hope and threat—merges several views of large-scale agriculture with a nighttime aerial view of homes and water. Not visible from most points, it is the darkest part of the work, with dramatic tonal contrasts and vertiginous perspectives. Seen from a position with the forward-striding woman centered under it, it forms a radical counterpoint. In particular, it contrasts a field-long sprayer, typical of those used for large-scale farming, with the water carrier figure and visually juxtaposes long rows of

industrial crops with the spiraling seed packets. It conveys the dark side of industrial farming, especially over-irrigation, which has caused rapidly sinking water tables in many parts of the world. But individual scenes related to the merged farming views in this image also appear on the seed packets in more cheerful lighting, which suggests that a modified and sustainable large-scale agriculture is achievable and will feed increasing world populations.

Smith's treatment of environmental problems in *Garden* remains at a fairly generalized, poetic level and only hints at possible damage. This changes in ensuing works. *Summer's Over* (2011) is the first of four smaller pieces that deal with oil spills; the first three address the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The scene is presented on a table skirted with yellow "caution" tape. Arrayed on a granular surface suggestive of a beach are several dead fish, shells, two small shovels, an overturned child's pail, two puddles (one small, the other much larger, evidently spilled from the pail), and a half-length young woman, presumably half buried in the sand and surrounded by a child's clay fortress. She gazes at the large puddle while crossing her arms in a protective gesture echoed by the fortress. She frowns at what she sees in the puddle: a vision of deep water in which a half-submerged woman (herself) emits a scream, her expression mirrored by her reflection in which a large, striped fish explodes from her head. To the left of the reflected screamer, a construction resting on long cylinders hovers just above a square marked on a forward-curling map. Enough information is presented to identify the dark, diagonal shape as Florida and to locate the structure in the Gulf near New Orleans—a clear reference to the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil platform in 2010. In the spilled puddle, which is flanked by an array of dead fish, the young woman reacts to the far-reaching consequences of this lethal spill. The same event forms the central image in *Summer's Over II* (2012), a wall piece filled with fish and soap bars. These fish, like the dead fish in the table sculpture, are menhaden, valued for their ability to clean water (thus analogous to soap), but highly vulnerable to oil spills, the coal mine canaries of the sea.

Spill (2013), the fourth of these works, presents a disgusted young woman on an oil drum pedestal. Her legs, which disappear into a small patch of blue indicating pure water, are surrounded by dead menhaden arrayed on the black lid. The oil drum leaks onto a supporting board, littered by more menhaden, where a blue hat (also seen in *Garden*) has blown from the woman's head into the black oil, symbolizing, for Smith, a fateful event, such as the BP oil spill.

In *Mercury* (2014), Smith translates a pollution cycle into symbolic form. Emitted by coal-fired plants and precipitated into bodies of water, mercury changes into methylmercury and is ingested by fish. To represent the threat, Smith uses small, silver-colored 1949 Mercury autos, decorated with mercury's astrological and alchemical symbol. The cars circulate in a figure eight over a photographic image of water, accompanied in the first loop by living bluefin tuna and by dead fish in the second. At the crossing, the cars collide, scattering tiny mercury puddles to suggest their toxic discharge. Tuna cans in the water and on the bench show the means by which mercury is transmitted to humans. A young woman, again the center of attention, washes her feet. Her action and whiteness, like the miniature carwash made of soap bars labeled "Natural" through which the cars circulate, symbolically convey efforts to clean up mercury, which also coats the two dead fish on her bench representing methylmercury, which is invisible, internal, and not readily removable.

Three photomontages hanging as a backdrop complete the ideas laid out in the floor scene with images of power plants—the largest source of mercury emissions. On the left, steps lead to a tar-spattered beach where a 1949 Mercury confronts the viewer. Reflected in its hood is a power plant. Below, the seated girl reappears, swimming over various Mercury models that suggest increasing toxicity. She passes through a network of faint outlines, which define American states, in which tiny ecru gaps in a haze of pale blue water form much harder-to-see skulls with pairs of pale dots for glowing eyes. These mark major coal mine locations. On the right, two exhaust stacks from a ghostly coal-fired plant appear to transmit mercury directly into the nostrils of the sub-



Above and detail: *Mercury*, 2014. Glazed and painted earthenware, glazed porcelain, photomontages on fabric, metal, and wood, 121 x 144 x 240 in.

merged swimmer, while another fouls the water with yellow-gray emissions. Below, the surf expels an open-mouthed fish, belly up, from the picture. In the central image, amid a school of fish, the swimmer surfaces in a burst of color and life, as if released from the effects of the coal-burning plant above and the gray, debris-littered surf below.

Smith's transition from a more poetic presentation in *Garden* to her reliance on scientific research and specific symbolism in *Mercury* indicate her growing commitment to showing the causality of environmental damage. (More information can be found at Smith's Web site devoted to the

project <<http://mercuryartscience.com>>.) It was necessary to create a symbolic vocabulary to tell the story of mercury, invisible as it is when emitted by power plants, precipitated into water, and ingested by fish, which are then eaten by humans. Although *Mercury* relies on extensive research to show the steps by which the damage is done, like Smith's other works, it presents its message as an experience in which the orchestration of forms and interplay of invented symbols have an intrinsic aesthetic resonance.

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