

## NATURAL DECLINE: KATRINA MOORHEAD'S POETIC PERCEPTIONS

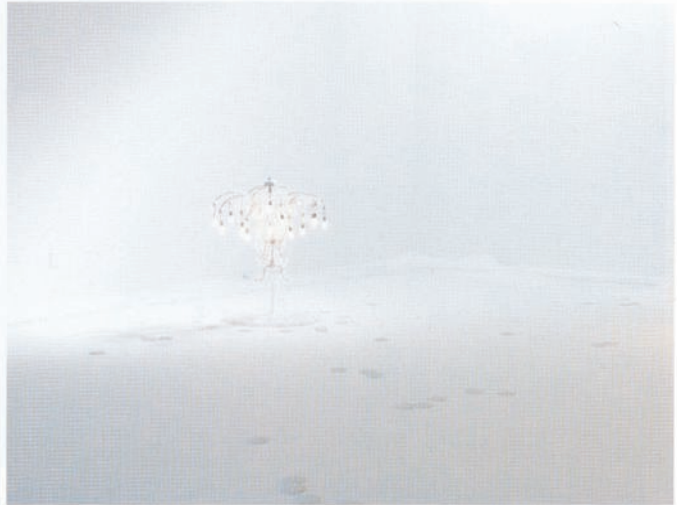
TEXT / MICHELLE WHITE

A dreamy haze surrounded *an island as it might be*, 2005, Katrina Moorhead's Venice-inspired installation at ArtPace in San Antonio. Bathed in the evening by the ambient light of sparkling chandeliers growing from the ground, and by a shaft of sunlight during the day, the work was a series of subtle spatial ruptures. Ceiling became floor. Piles of chalky dust muted angles and corners. Carefully placed, plaster medallions and decorative architectural elements broke up the pristine white ground, and smoothed its fading into the walls. This monochromatic atmosphere was so mysterious and quiet that incredulous visitors often extended their arms into the space, to see if it was real.

*an island as it might be* is a culmination of Moorhead's romantic preoccupation because it presents itself as a sincere attempt to get back to something real. Her adoption of picturesque compositional devices borrowed from eighteenth-century English gardens or Claude Lorrain paintings as well as her reliance on a soft atmospheric horizon and a deliberate lack of focal point made the room look "natural." The line of crown molding seemed to grow away from the wall. The chandeliers turned into drooping trees, and rosettes sprouted in clusters next to hills of plaster dust. The installation's disheveled formality converted artifice into the pathetic likeness of a landscape. Sound also contributed to the environmental transformation. Speakers broadcast the amplified drone of the air-conditioning system, turning white noise into an eerie arctic wind. Despite the wistful mood, the chilly atmosphere and deteriorating interior invoked a decadent soiree's morning after, a post-celebratory reminder of a fleeting moment.

It is easy to be skeptical of beauty. Worn out by the likes of Dave Hickey and Arthur Danto in the 1990s, it is a discursive notion whose validity is perpetually recycled. The New Sincerity—or the new romanticism—is arguably a movement that encompasses a set of issues framed in reaction to this cyclical argument. Developing in the context of our post-information age, post 9-11 cacophony, defined by the desire to make meaningful connections, and premised on the conscious rejection and reevaluation of postmodern irony, this emerging school of thought provides a way into Katrina Moorhead's work. Her drawings, installations, and sculptures take an unabashed and earnest delight in reclaiming the seduction of nuance, fragility, and temporality. Isolating the melancholic relationship between nature and artifice to explore how "vulnerable aspects of experience" complicate the perception of authenticity, she is significantly contributing to this critical discourse.<sup>1</sup>

Moorhead was born in Northern Ireland. When she came to Houston in 1996 for a residency at the Museum of Fine Art's Core Fellowship Program she became deeply affected by the idea that "everything we do is incongruent with the natural world." Intrigued by the new-world abundance of Styrofoam and plastic, and fascinated by the dried up swimming pools and artificial lakes she encountered in the California desert, she realized that the problem exceeds



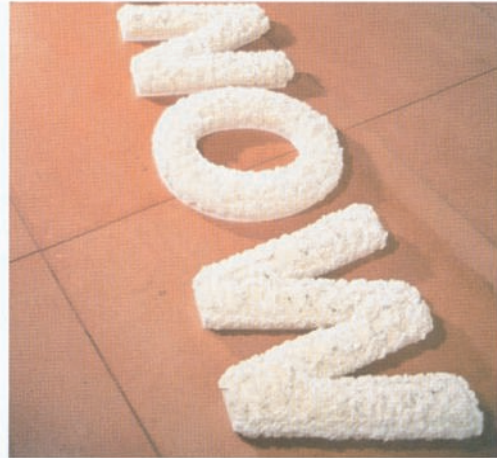
the tangible deterioration of the natural world. Rather, it is a problem of mediation. Our predicament is the result of the layers between the real thing and its experience. Objects that are the product of this warped perception, therefore, are the crux of her project. She offers redemption as she pushes the mediation to implosion, by either restoring or deconstructing the objects' relationship to nature.

This was the liberating premise of Moorhead's *Sampled Sky*, a temporary installation sponsored by Houston's Lawndale Art Center in 2004. Occupying a billboard near a freeway overpass, in an especially desolate urban area, it featured a grid of magnified paint chips. Heavenly Blue, Big Sky Blue, Overcast Dawn, and Open Air were among the thirty-three Martha Stewart-brand shades of blue that Moorhead used to "rehabilitate or reinstate the sky." Literally freeing the air and giving the space back to the heavens, the project is a witty semantic play with Clear Channel, the billboard's prominent sponsor and a media conglomerate infamous for controlling content. More profound, however, was the artist's effort to diffuse the cynicism of her critique. As the Texas sky changed color throughout the day, perfectly coordinating from one moment to the next with one of Stewart's samples, she briefly gave the arbitrary signifiers of "sky" and even their faux-romantic names a sincere and fleeting connection to nature.

Moorhead's work for the Northern Ireland Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale marked a significant shift in her practice. Addressing more contentious themes, she demonstrated how her yearning for the natural world is also profoundly political. *On or About December 1981, 2005*, draws from her personal memory of a historical moment in Northern Ireland, when the DeLorean Motor Company began to produce its infamously short-lived sports car in a factory strategically placed between a Catholic and a Protestant estate in West Belfast. Moorhead explained that the workers were so excited to be producing a "cool" American product that the factory became a place where factions were temporarily trumped, and political discussion stopped by the excitement. This liminal space, however, ended in December 1981, when poor weather delayed a shipment, and legal issues caused bankruptcy. While history has regarded the car as a flop, Moorhead reconsiders the fleeting production as a "poignant savior in the height of the Troubles" by focusing on the car's most recognizable part, the slick flip-up doors, also called gull-wings. Again, she isolates an abstract representation of nature. Mournfully placed on the ground like clipped wings, her smooth full-size doors, made of bent plywood and wood, respond to the make's signature raw and unpainted stainless steel skin. The tension between the car's organic and anatomical connotations and the design's slick futuristic promise becomes a potent analogy for the artist's personal relationship to the past, and by extension, the failure of political reconciliation.

INSIDE FRONT COVER: *Sampled Sky*, 2004, printed billboard, image: 150 x 300 inches (photo: Katrina Moorhead) / ABOVE: views of *an island as it might be*, 2005, constructed ceiling/floors, chandeliers, cast plaster, plaster dust, sound amplification, dimensions variable (originally commissioned by Artpace San Antonio; photo: Duncan Ganley) (all images courtesy of artist and Inman Gallery)





Since 2002, Moorhead has been culling found information for large-scale floral text pieces for an ongoing graffiti project she has been working on with artist Maggie Hills.<sup>2</sup> The artists appropriate the colorful and temporary advertisements on hillsides and in public gardens, where planted flowers spell out words. This form of communication is traditionally used to promote a broad range of festivals and civic events in the United Kingdom. It initially intrigued the artists because it deceptively veils its commercial vulgarity through a physical attachment to the landscape. Inverting the medium, their site-specific installations deploy austere white carnations and bold sober fonts to provide a “different way of experiencing text.”

A version of this project is currently at Arthouse in Austin. Working individually, Moorhead makes declarative text of transposed small and discrete bathroom-stall confessions—vague fragments of impulsive, alcohol-induced words that wonderfully capture a moment when it is easy to spill genuine emotions for an anonymous audience. The amplification pays homage to the personal expressions and the ephemeral medium, giving them physical roots in the local geography and offering clarity through a minimal language. However temporary, even flowers and heart-felt thoughts need to reestablish a genuine connection. Thus, much like her interest in Martha Stewart’s versions of the sky, or car doors that evoke a bird’s wings, the work metaphorically plays with our concept of the natural.

Moorhead wants her work to be like the middle of a sentence, a poetic extract that creates atmospheres rather than declarative statements. As Hugh Mulholland observed, even when the artist tackled a loaded social and cultural history in the DeLorean project, she successfully hinged her “passionate and enthusiastic enquiry” by only hinting at the complexity of the reference.<sup>3</sup> Her quiet confidence only gives us clues, yet it still evokes profound melancholy, a mood that is noticeably widespread in contemporary art. As I write, Cai Guo-Qiang plans to emit bursts of dissipating black smoke in the sky over the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Like Moorhead’s indirect expression of anguish, this ominous and romantic relationship to the changing landscape makes us skeptical of what we see and how we see. Conversely, it optimistically suggests that there might be something true and beautiful underneath all of the perceptual layers.

NOTES

1. All quotations are taken from Moorhead’s artist statement and the author’s conversations with the artist on February 28 and March 14, 2006.
2. In 2004 Moorhead worked with Maggie Hills on a living version of the floral graffiti series. The outdoor collaborative project inaugurated The Vardy Gallery’s off-site project space at the University of Sunderland, England.
3. Hugh Mulholland, *The Nature of Things: Artists from Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2005, 155.

Michelle White is Curatorial Assistant of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She is a regional editor for *Artlies*, the Texas Journal of Contemporary Art.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *On Or About December 1981*, 2005, bass wood, plywood, wood glue, zinc screws, and brass-plated steel screws, 45 x 56 x 16 inches each; detail of *Ideal Total Now*, 2002, cut chrysanthemums, Styrofoam, floral pins, dimensions variable