

Nancy Macko and the Real Bee

Symbolism, like a dusting of pollen, weighs heavily upon the flight of bees. They've been around for an awfully long time – at least sixty-five million years which seems more impressive, taxonomically, than the mere two-hundred thousand or so for modern humans. They're older than us and deserve our respect, which bees have received abundantly over time in the charmingly weird way that humans honor some of the “*others*,” the non-human animals with whom we share the planet, by making them into gods or supporting actors in stories of creation. Of course the gods seem to exist primarily to oversee and mirror the affairs of humans, so their invention is really more a form of our own self-aggrandizement. Being about the bees, is really about being us.

The spiritualization of order and regimen, of design and seeming purpose in nature as a means of self-reflection, is a curious and complex human phenomenon, one investigated by artist Nancy Macko's long foray into the fascinations of the bee world.

Macko grew up in New York, attended the University of Wisconsin, and came west in the late 1970s for graduate work at UC Berkeley. Long before her early '90s appointment to the faculty at Scripps College, where she still teaches, a visit to southern California brought her into contact with the community of women working on Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. She sewed banners and watched the iconic artwork come to fruition, cognizant also of emerging feminist social structures that she'd later embody through art objects which investigate the female cosmos of honeybees.

The Egyptians liked bees. So did the ancient Greeks, Africans, and Mayans, and so has just about everyone else. The Egyptian sun god Ra wept tears that fell from heaven to the desert sands and grew into bees – serving as a sort of insect internet, broadcasting supernal scuttlebutt to mortals below and perhaps giving new meaning to the term buzz. For the Maya, bees were considered mystical progenitors of cardinal virtues. The Greek god Aristaeus, an Apollo offspring, had a farmyard full of domains for which he was the divine go-between, including cattle and fruit trees, hunting traps, and cheese-making in addition to his bee-keeping duties. To Hindus, bees'

honey was and is one of the elixirs of immortality. A golden nectar that seeps throughout much of ancient lore and religion, a land flowing with milk and honey describes the heavenly allure of paradise in the Book of Exodus. Milk and honey is also the title of a 1984 album by Yoko Ono and (posthumously) John Lennon, although Yoko meant the phrase to symbolize landing in America, not in literal heaven. There's really no end to the fractal-like permutations that spring from mythology and linger for centuries sheathed in a hybrid of fact and fiction.

It's interesting that milk, another "*other*" product, got mixed up with honey. What is it about living organisms and their chemical byproducts that so alluringly lend themselves to mythic fable? Why did we imagine a ghostly god of cheese-making and why an ethereal paradise of flowing honey, when we already had evolved cheese and harvested honey as delights right at home on our star-tethered blue-orb Earth? What better beauty is missing from the unadorned natural world so that we must gild its lily with a manufactured sparkle of spiritual pretense. Why so possessed of double pomp, to have frosted over exquisite natural beauties with sugary confections of the supernatural?

The perspectives embedded within Macko's bee series are concerned with examining just such questions and other tantalizing nuances of the big long-lasting bee metaphor. In various parts an eco-awareness and empathetic appreciation of nature, a feminist allegory and scientific study of symbiotic networks, Macko's poetic engagement with bees is both activist and passionate, and evocative of how tentacles from the ancient memes reach into our present. Today a twenty-first century love of bees is both very much akin to, and yet substantively different than, the one inherited from the distant past.

In recent years, the honey-making pollinators have been disappearing — in alarming numbers — in a planet-wide phenomenon called Colony Collapse Disorder. Its cause has been traced to contamination by neonicotinoids, a class of systemic pesticides used extensively in agriculture which cause disorientation in the bees' foraging navigation. After two decades delving into gender symbolism offered by honeybees' female-governed and highly successful social structures, Macko shifted her eye and critique in 2009 to

confront the political and ecological realities of bee survival. In her sweeping wall-installation of over one-hundred hexagonal units called *Honey Teachings: In the Mother Tongue of the Bees*, each of Macko's lovingly crafted commemorations is like an island poem, or a flower in the field, beckoning as if through the wafting scent of nectar to a telling of the bees' current and bittersweet story.

As the Earth's most effective pollinators, the real significance of bees is tightly woven into the existence and interconnectedness of all living things, and so in another way than imagined by the ancients, they are a part of our essence. By choosing the beehive's central structural element, the close-packing hexagon, as the lens through which to visualize her story's narration, Macko implies the elegant fit of bees into a larger scheme of things. She posits a series of signposts, of warnings and alarms mixed seamlessly with a sublime affection, that lures us into an emotional attachment and agitated regard for the life of every bee. That the plight of the bees is of scientific concern, is embraced by Macko in a manner that imbues the pragmatic with endearment. She manages this as a matter of feeling rather than informing, mystifying without deifying -- making biology, not gods, the source of our spiritual sensations.

It seems clear that humans desire, hunger after, an intense emotional connection to existence. There's plenty of satisfaction available in the arts for such a longing, if we would just allow the arts to fully own that ontological niche. But instead its fulfillment has largely been assigned by the ages to supernatural belief and a supposed divine origin to things, especially regarding those parts of existence we describe as being the most extraordinary. As evidenced in the stirring appeals by mythology to classic narratives such as love and sacrifice, humans appear to need to be seduced emotionally rather than intellectually into their reconciliation with the realities of birth, existence, and death. This is a good thing to have discovered and to expose to discourse — that a mechanical appreciation of the universe, of living, or of bees or anything else, is not enough: there must be a moving grandeur that produces in us an awareness of deep meaning. For that, acquiescence to the illusion of a magical universe was required of the ancient mind, and all other phenomena that got swept up in

the act, including the bees, were supernaturalized to fit the pattern of need.

But it's no longer necessary for this to be the case. Despite its long otherworldly inflection, a whiff of transcendence has always in fact been a matter of art, and it is time for art to claim ownership. In the art-science paradigm of Macko's work, transcendence is alloyed to the material utility of science – which de-supernaturalizes the spiritual quest by investing in it an authentic tangibility. In Macko's bees the spiritual is no longer imaginary and mythological, but rather is the substance of her engagement with knowledge -- with the sweetness of our conscious ability to know and to acutely appreciate the privilege of knowing.

From a non-theistic perspective, we are left to consider why our wonder and concern for these tiny living things can amount to such sensations, sometimes soaring sensations, of the profound. While her bee appreciation is affiliated with that of the ancients, Macko's connection is now provided greater bandwidth by science our ancestors didn't have – and it differs substantively in its emotional textures by virtue of our gradual Copernican-begun ontological realignment from the imaginary to the real. Having stripped bees of their deifications, Macko illuminates the poetic dimensions of a more deeply emotional, more exquisitely complex and no less mysterious bee – the real bee. Through her art we are introduced to it, and she is telling us that we need, for our own loving soulful sustenance, to help this bee survive.

-- Stephen Nowlin

An illustrated version of this essay appears on *KCET ArtBound*, at: <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/nancy-macko-and-the-real-bee>

Nancy Macko: The Fragile Bee, was exhibited at the Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, CA, May 9 through June 28, 2015.

Nancy Macko: The Fragile Bee catalogue is available from **Blurb** at: <http://www.blurb.com/b/6913758-the-fragile-bee-nancy-macko-at-moah>

More on Nancy Macko: <http://www.nancymackophotography.com>