

Perspectives

Mingling scientific detachment and personal passion

By Christine Temin
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"Last year six whales (I know of) committed suicide near this spot. I made this homage for them at low tide. It lasted six hours — one hour for each whale." This is the text that accompanies the four photographs in Daniel Ranalli's "Six Whales . . . Sept., '87," which is part of a show, "Tidal Works," at the Laura Knott Gallery at Bradford College, Bradford, through Saturday. Ranalli is best known as a photographer. Here, though, his photographic skills document his other art: temporary sculptures made on a Cape Cod beach where he likes to walk. He uses materials at hand: seaweed, stones and such, which the tides will eventually disperse, and he often notes on the mat board the hour and day the piece was made, emphasizing its temporal quality. Imagine someone coming on these seaside pieces unawares: A huge fish skeleton made of stones might be as mysterious as Stonehenge.

A cool air of scientific detachment mingles with a personal passion and sense of awe in these works. On the formal level, Ranalli acts like a 19th-century gentleman scientist, arranging materials, photographing them in straightforward style, mostly in black and white, and writing labels for them with his own hand. In content, though, the work is poetic, elegiac. Reading left to right, the four photos in "Six Whales" show how a huge whale skeleton made of seaweed is worn down by the incoming tide, until it is just a few unrecognizable lumps above the water. The destruction is inevitable: The efforts of man washed away. It's a fast-forward version of what happens with everything humans build, and reminds us how foolish is our belief in the permanence even of concrete and steel. They merely take longer to erode than kelp does.

"Fifty Foot Seaweed Line Against the Grain" is three photos of a ridge Ranalli built at right angles to the shore. The line's struggle is as heroic as a classical column striving skyward. Ranalli can have fun in these works, too. A piece called "Seaweed Figures" surprised him: The tide failed to dissolve the gingerbread-man shape according to Ranalli's prediction. So he made a mate for the first figure, and a sec-



Daniel Ranalli's "Fifty Foot Seaweed Line Against the Grain." The line's struggle is as heroic as a classical column striving skyward.

ond photo shows the two of them lying on the beach, like sunbathers, with the water at a safe distance — for the moment. Funniest of all the works is "45 Horseshoe Crabs Headed Back to the Sea," arranged in a triangular military phalanx, ready to scoot. There's a witty installation of real crab shells, too. On a sand bar in the middle of the gallery, they look like alien invaders poised to charge at the college library next door.

"Two Dune Visits" records the same seascape at 10 a.m., then at 10 p.m., with both photos in quiet opalescent colors: coolest aquas in the morning, deeper tones at night. These and other serial works documenting the changing light have something in common with Monet. Ranalli's attachment to the natural world shines through everything here. He joyously documents the highest tide of the year by placing a found board upright on the beach, and sticking two seagull feathers in the top, to make a triumphal head-dress. He shows the same view from different angles, at different times. "Lots of days the walking and waiting are more meaningful than the work," he writes, putting himself in a vulnerable position as an artist. "Coming back to the same spot, I always seem to see something new."

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I admire Ranalli's current work, and I've also long admired the "Forum" column he writes for that estimable monthly, "Art New England," which celebrates its 10th anniversary with the December issue. "Art New England" has been the biggest unifying force in the local visual arts community, a reliable source for information and opinion during a decade when, Ranalli notes in the current issue, the price of a van Gogh

still life has gone from \$2.2 million to \$59.5 million. At the same time, he writes, most living artists are "still ignored, or at best treated insensitively, by the many institutions that, ironically, depend upon them for their very existence."

Ranalli has not been afraid to speak his mind. Many artists, nervous about damaging their connections with museums or collectors or galleries, won't do the same. Or they

grumble privately. Not Ranalli. In his December column, for instance, he tackles the attitude of New England museums toward New England artists. The Institute of Contemporary Art has "little support from the artists in the city and remains an institution for 'art-world types' in search of a hip party, and not artists." The DeCordova Museum "is the one place where regionally-based artists seem regularly to be treated with dignity, and the exhibitions are consistently first rate." As for the Museum of Fine Arts, Ranalli points out that with its new parking garage, the MFA now "devotes more indoor space to parking cars than it ever will to 20th-century art."

"In keeping with its long-standing attitude toward artists," Ranalli goes on, "the MFA did not bother to invite the few living, regional artists who were included in the 'Collecting 150 Years of Photography' show, which was staged jointly this fall with the Fogg Art Museum, to the opening reception until the MFA was harshly chastised at the last minute."

We know the feeling, Dan. Not so long ago, the MFA's press releases directed national and international press to call one number, and local press to dial another.



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