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Travelers & Settlers

JANUARY 13, 2016 BY ROBERT MAHONEY

Thoughts on Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez's *Travelers & Settlers* at the Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney, thru April 3.

This exhibition is part of the Nebraska Now series, four shows of contemporary artists per year, curated by Teliza Rodriguez, and funded by Deanna and Fred Bosselman.



Installation view of Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez's *Travelers & Settlers*.

When I last encountered Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez's *Anonymous* (2014)*, a colorful storebought carved bird perched on a chunk of Missouri River driftwood, mounted on a tall plinth, I commented that it was a "confusion of nature and culture that again indicates a kind of haunting, and a reminder that some places are just translations of others ever after." But then, I also closed my [Art Seen review](#) by enlisting it as a muse and a guider of spirits, "at the end of my tour I could not help but hear Friedemann-Sánchez's strange little artificial bird echo in my mind as if chirping an inaudible 'where to now?'" Little did I know that within the year, the bird, as part of Friedemann-Sánchez's serial work, or, as she calls it, "ongoing visual novel," musing on her status as a Colombian-American formerly of New York and LA living now in Lincoln, would reappear, its overture tweet in the crowded confines of *Art Seen* given full throat in the wide open spaces of a gallery atop the Museum of Nebraska Art in *Travelers & Settlers*, her one-person show up through April 3.

MONA's contemporary gallery is at the top of its stately former beaux arts post office surroundings, open to a skylight. Most visitors will enter into the gallery with Friedemann-Sánchez's bird and plinth, hosting two other object ensembles, on the right, then a long run of what look like worktables at the center of the gallery, holding several objects, many wood carved, and then on the far wall, to the left, a series of black painted panels with lamp inserts, running along the whole length of the far wall. But as I made my way through it all, the installation only began to wake up when I arrived at the far end of the gallery and looked up. From there, turning back to it, the bird seemed to lift its imaginary voice to the daylight descending from above, then float over to the *Self-Portrait with Papaya* panels, and then, only then, did my mind want to go down through, then swing around and take in the central experience of the *Settlers*. Why?

Having mused on *Anonymous*, that bird has become something of a talisman for me. It represents not only voice, but, more specifically, poetic voice. But then it represents something greater still. A bird of course is the central singer in Walt Whitman's famous elegy to the fallen Lincoln, *When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloomed* ("To the tally of my soul/loud and strong kept up the gray brown bird/With pure deliberate notes/spreading filling the night;" or, again, "From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still/Came the carol of the bird.) In this context, Whitman was working with an ancient magic concept that to sanctify a place a gong or tone must be struck, for it to then reverberate through the universe. That's what a "carol" is and does, "resounding" is the actual word (and one of my favorites). A vibration struck wakes up the world, and then it takes off, and as it resounds it echoes and echoes again and from that a whole crescendo of sacred meaning is made. (This notion likely goes back to ancient oracles and sybils, most of whom, like that at Cumae, aged down until they were imagined as consisting only of their voices (a quaint explanation for cave echoes). The most famous example of an actual resounding occurred in Rome in the second century BC, when suddenly everyone heard the sky, they claimed, emit a spontaneous trumpet blast, the natural siren setting off a panic, especially to worried augurs. In the early 90s, I called this sort of voice a "nomos".) This theme strikes me as relevant because when an outsider moves to a new place, human nature, ever desiring to be "inside," makes them try to make their new locale a reflection of their old locale. The memories of the former come over the present like a temperature inversion, causing a psychogeographic precipitation of there over here to create a new, if dreamier here. At the same time, the new present and it's norms forces them to adapt, to keep quiet. Since one is not, by this fractionalizing of space, ever to be firmly settled in one place versus another, or can entirely be "feet on the ground" at home, one is always dealing with gaps, an epic poetics (nomos) seems the only way to capture this nonmaterialist, geography-scaled, cognitive-relational world view. In so far as Nebraska seems to be taking on a second identity as a place of asylum-seekers, it is possible that the homegrown meaning of flatland is slowly morphing into a more acoustic-oriented concept where wide open spaces and big skies do not still

you in awe at abstract natural beauty of an essentialist, minimalist sort, but creates an echo chamber of cultural conduction in which all acts of mind and culture echo, and echo, and echo again and large.

This musing caused my sequence of viewing to take flight to the skylight daylight and then come to rest down on *Self-Portrait with Papaya* (2013), but especially a specific panel I have seen twice before, on the far right, in back. I formerly read this panel discretely as a single work, its blackness represented minimalist power and impassivity, the reflectiveness of car paint nonetheless allowing one to see oneself, as if to insinuate oneself by emulation into the power construct, but then for Friedemann-Sánchez to have inserted a lamp fixture into the picture with a mysterious, open laced pearl sconce over it, creating a space between it and the surface, caused me to turn my shoulder, and feel a slight chill as if passing by some burgeoning haunting. By that turn, a deeper dream state was weighed, but then paused before. Well, that too, it turns out, was overture business: here we get the full notion, fully worked, and it's a pretty dazzling seven panel ensemble (each called *Self-Portrait with Papaya*, 1 thru 7). It lines the wall, closely spaced, all panels with similar lamps, but, intriguingly, hung at different heights, and apparently lamps of different wattage, irregularities that imply the presence of some ghost custodian leading one by lantern through a dark wood. The eye runs in a whoosh across the whole thing, then the body carefully follows: the whole of the ensemble immediately grabs up the individual panel and involves it in some larger purpose.

Mostly, in this expanse, one's relation with the idea of the panel as a portrait changes. A portrait is benign, traditionally, as an icon in a family house, to remember a loved one, but it can also be a family icon, someone and something to live up to, and exert unwanted pressure. One reflects in it musing on one's place in family life, if one looks like, or can live up to him or her. But a line of portraits, all in row? That is something entirely different. The portrait parade is a classic trope of gothic novels and movies, usually lining stairs or entry hallways, telling of the great tradition of family life (in gothic movies this reverted to telling the horror stories of the family's infamy, usually ending up with something being thrown at a portrait (see *Woman Who Came Back* (1949) or *The Black Torment* (1964), for example)). So, immediately, the tone here is darker, fuller, more confrontational and engaged with the whole of the past. Then, again, seeing the sconces lined up in a row evokes memories of the corridors of haunted places, vibing off the whisper of bodily elements and the notion of low hanging fruit, where enchanted souls are caught (the most famous being Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) -- and these amazing little pearl sconces do have that same dreamy elegance). That too puts one on alert, Friedemann-Sánchez talks of writing a "visual novel," serially, in her works, that would imply narrative, and moving the plot forward with each excerpt. Well and good as rhetoric, but the art world often fails to deliver on its promises (a recent exhibition on the idea at the Guggenheim in New York was notably lacking in narrative pull). Here, however, in gingerly pacing through this strange visual tunnel, if you will, you begin to feel the actual pull of narrative (the carol of the bird) activated in the gallery, it grabs you and pulls you along, now an intercessee to some pull. And then a bigger surprise, reflectedness reflects again, and again: multiple reflectedness too is a classic trope evincing mental pulled-apartness, a whisper of that too, but the paint is so glossy it immediately pulls still further, and that would be in, and, even, I think, behind. And I believe I momentarily meant that literally: for a slight glimmering, I felt like I was in some other room, in back of the mirroring, looking out (simply having this thought indicates that I sensed a whirlpooling of its dreaminess to a deeper level). Here, too, a device of some heritage: the mirror that suddenly turns into a window into another, haunted room (best example, also from the 40s, *Dead of Night* (1946)). While previously I had felt some hint of haunting in the fronted space between the lamp sconce and the surface of the "painting" now the eight of them altogether surprised me by pulling me back in, even past the fictive and support space, to some "other space" in back of the whole, looking out. This is deep cult space, evidence of a deep longing, or missing of a former place. Fronting (i.e. positioning the "action" of the work not in support, fictive or surface space, but in the space

between surface and viewer) is a very “hot” relational device in all contemporary art now, it appears to be the site of 21st century painting so far, but the pulling back in and through, back into some “spirit trap” behind the whole idea of the piece, that’s pretty unique, promising thrilling twists and turns to come. Thus, the slap in the face against minimalism implied in the single panel of *Self-Portrait with Papaya* (2013) has itself been drawn into a broader, deeper and more relational immersion in thoughts and feelings that altogether simply dematerialize literal space, rendering modernist minimalism obsolete.



But then the thing is, I came out from that looking-glass fall, stepping back out (virtually speaking) into the gallery. Friedemann-Sánchez, by the way, has let all the cords of all the lamps on all the panels hang loose and snake on the floor: this too is purposeful process-oriented deconstruction of minimalism, but to me, in situ, it evidenced an ectoplasmic leakage from my momentary embodiment in the panels themselves. By “stepping back out” into the gallery, I now engaged the central element of the exhibition, *Settlers*, a long alignment of wooden tables, of workbench simplicity, running down the center of the gallery, arrayed with a parade or caravan of strange objects, some real collectible finds, others, extremely abstract. Having come to the table by way of the bird’s wake-up call and the travelling soul of self-portraits my inclination to see it as a formalist deconstruction of a stately pater familias dinner table, all a family set around, was distanced, to see the same, but long, even centuries after the fact, with some things just left behind. But since most of the forms were boat-like, also a playful reimagining of some ever flowing Nile-Tiber-Orinoco on a table later reclaimed by children. To enhance the dream state status of the flotilla of wooden boats, they are all carved very minimally, simply, even bluntly, nothing fancy. Such restraint truly demonstrates the artist’s command of the wiggle room of her particular narrative space. As such, they exist as forms, or echoes of forms, materialized, in no way reaching toward seeking admiration of their craft as models of ships, or collectibles. They are memories, only, vivid, cloudy, fading, epigenetic memories, momentarily materialized. Since Friedemann-Sánchez is Colombian-American with Spanish-Native Colombian DNA in her family tree helix, the content will refer to those roots. An authentic pre-Columbian Colombian artifact stands at the end like a pharaoh on his barge, a blunt, thick sharpened ice-cutter shipshape handful of wood, it all begins as a dream triumph, Roman Style. A second real object escorts him, however, a real 17th century conquistador stirrup, terrifically weird, unexpected in its reality, like some lost treasure in this context, but, then, one pulls back, as it twists the context, who’s in charge? And then other boats move ahead on this “tabletop exercise” (a war game device) showing, depending if you respond to the wood materially, or to it being stumped roughly, in terms of process, a deeply rooted, or chopped up and mutilated family tree. Another

amazing thing about this helix is that it can ebb and flow either way. In particular, the “play” here between abstraction and real objects, between sophistication and bluntness, is quite precise, equivalent, in its mastery of its push-pull dream grammar, to St. Clair Cemin’s early tables and even Martin Puryear’s ambiguous objects.

Down in the middle of the long expanse is a strange two-by-four that alone was devised as an environmentalist retort to Carl Andre’s bricklaying minimalism and its glorification of zero degree literalist space (the ultimate statement of American materialism). But, in the context, a rough felluca sail got tossed on top at the last minute to set it adrift in the procession. Here the vibe is of river commerce, lumber floating downriver, exploitation, brute force. Further on, entering modern times, another found object, an antique iron, stubbornly recalls woman’s work, worse, backbreaking labor, but in this context repurposed as a steamer, moving along at a good clip. Everything culminates, back where we began, with a big chunk of local salvaged wood, the artist compares it to a whale, leading it all, but it immediately relates to the chunk of driftwood that the caroling bird of *Anonymous* nearby perches on too, closing the circle. In its size and full-handedness, its tree rings, but then its cracking up too, perhaps it represents the present and the synchronic blindness that makes it impossible for us to see past it to the past. Read this way (and every viewer will walk the walk in Friedemann- Sánchez’s shoes differently), it is all indeed an entirely fulfilling full chapter of her “visual novel,” demonstrating a considerable thickening of the plot and deepening of the artist’s themes. As a whole, *Travelers & Settlers*, for me, read as an elegiac litany to sacred space reclaimed from the pushes and pulls of modern history, with the artist acting as guider of souls, urging us to gain a deeper appreciation of the unspoken realities of cultural translation, and, beyond all that, arrive safely again at our common humanity.

*In my review of *Art Seen* at the Joslyn Art Museum, I misidentified *Anonymous* as *Close Enough*.

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