

BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE

Artist Suzanne Paleczny examines life cycles through sculpture and portraiture in her new exhibition at the Yukon Arts Centre

By Lawrie Crawford

Before she was old enough to attend school, Suzanne Paleczny says she was “obsessed with making stuff.” She would sew small figures and stuff them with tissues. That obsession to create continued throughout her life, but its scale increased exponentially. Case in point: the 11 driftwood and clay sculptures she created for her exhibition at Whitehorse’s Yukon Arts Centre are each nearly three metres tall.

For her solo show, titled *Human/Nature*, Paleczny created a forest of larger-than-life humans framed by five enormous paintings. The oil paintings reflect Paleczny’s traditional style of portraiture, but the sculptural driftwood figures with clay appendages are a recent evolution of her art.

It all started in 2015 with “Icarus Descending,” a hanging sculpture depicting the winged man from Greek mythology that Paleczny created with support from members of the Yukon’s Southern Lakes Artist Collective. The substantial piece is made from driftwood, paper, wire, clay, rock, glass, and canvas.

Before that creation, Paleczny confined the majority of her

practice to painting. After moves to various regions in Ontario, as well as stints in Africa and Egypt, Paleczny and her husband arrived in the Yukon, in 2010. While abroad, she used painting as a way to connect with people she met in communities, and her work was featured in exhibitions in Cairo and the National Gallery of Zimbabwe.

As a self-taught artist, Paleczny was grateful to receive a Yukon Advanced Artist Award through the Government of Yukon, enabling her to take classes last year at the prestigious New York Academy of Art, in New York City. She trained in traditional painting techniques, sculpture, and anatomy. The courses included deliberate emphasis on pure form, so Paleczny began looking at her materials in a new way. She returned to the beach at Yukon’s Tagish Lake in search of driftwood to use as the bones and muscles of her figures.

Originally, Paleczny envisioned an exhibition of five figures made from driftwood and clay that would fill the large gallery space at the Yukon Arts Centre. However, as she worked, the size, scale, and number of



Paleczny working on her piece “Weight of the World.”



Suzanne Paleczny surrounded by her driftwood figures.

Photo: gippenhain.ca

Photo: Calla Paleczny



Left: Detail of Paleczny's "Human Forest." Right: Working in her studio.

"WORKING IN LARGE SCALE FEELS SO VISCERAL ... ALMOST LIKE I AM WORKING FROM INSIDE THE WORK."

pieces continued growing. "As I got faster at it, I just kept going," Paleczny says. "Then it was the number I could complete before it got too cold to work outside."

Working in the carport of her rural home north of Whitehorse, she routinely dealt with the elements: cold, wind, and unwanted visitors, like a bear cub that ran through the piles of driftwood laid about her workspace.

Inside posed challenges, as well. Paleczny's painting studio was designed for smaller pieces, not large-scale sculptures. "It is difficult to get proper lighting over parts of the work that are close to the ceiling, and it is impossible to get physically far enough away from the work to see it properly," she says.

Paleczny works hard, often spending 10 to 12 hours per day on her art. "I'm obsessed. Even when I'm not working, I am thinking about the work," she says. "The process of making art could be described as continuous problem solving. Everything requires some sort of figuring out, whether conceptually or just the practical stuff, such as how to make something balance and not fall over."

She developed a system of mirrors and photos to gain perspectives on her artwork that space and logistics don't allow. The scale of her art also keeps her active.



Paleczny's painting "Apeiron (the 'infinite')."

"It is much more physical work than producing something small—it involves a lot of climbing up and down ladders and scaffolding. Working in large scale feels so visceral ... almost like I am working from inside the work."

As the number of pieces for *Human/Nature* grew, other challenges arose. Doubling the number of driftwood beings increased the number of clay appendages that needed sculpting: 11 faces, 22 hands, and 22 feet. That increased the amount of time to shape, dry, fire, glaze, and fire the pieces again. Paleczny had many conversations with other local potters and sculptors, and after some experimentation, she settled on the process of saggar firing, which smokes or burns clay pieces in sawdust, leaves, or pine cones. This technique subtly colours the clay with the dust of scorched forest materials, which mimics the grey patina of the driftwood.

Paleczny says exploring sculpture stretched the way she thinks about combinations and approaches. "With painting, so much attention is focused on the effects of light. In three-dimensional work, there is no need to think about light or point of view. It is all about form."

She has also observed that paint and clay are similar to work with, but driftwood is different. "Driftwood is appealing because unlike paint or clay it cannot be overworked; it's not possible to smooth it into skin. Driftwood forces me to work more with the suggestion of a gesture," she explains. "I also love the task of collecting it and the fact that it is free and will one day just degrade naturally back into the earth."

This cycle of life is a theme in *Human/Nature*. The exhibition invites contemplation about the extinction of species, motherhood, and the vastness of space, while blurring the lines around relationships between people and nature.

For Paleczny, this collection of artwork is the culmination of five years of thinking, as well as over a year of continuous creation. "Although the work begins with a particular intellectual idea, once it is underway, the emphasis shifts to the visual and all decisions become visual ones," she says of the process. "The original ideas and concepts morph, so much so, that by the time it's finished I often find it difficult to talk about the work and to translate it back into words." Y

Suzanne Paleczny's solo exhibition *Human/Nature* is on display in the Yukon Arts Centre Public Art Gallery from Sept. 7 until Nov. 25, in Whitehorse.

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