



Biography

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1960, Alberto Rey received political asylum through Mexico in 1963 and moved to Miami, Florida in 1965. In 1967, his family relocated to Barnesboro, PA. He lived in this small coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania until 1982 when he finished his BFA from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In 1987, he received his MFA from the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. The following year, while teaching at several institutions in Boston, Massachusetts, he attended a few courses in Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University.

In 1989, he moved to Dunkirk, New York to accept a teaching position at the State University of New York at Fredonia. In 2007, Rey was promoted to the rank of SUNY Distinguished Professor. Rey's artwork can be found in over twenty museum collections and has been presented in over 130 exhibitions.

Artist's Acknowledgments

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Checklist

Paintings

Biological Regionalism: Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA
Oils on Plaster
60" x 96"
2009-10

Biological Regionalism: Largemouth Bass, Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA
Oils on Plaster
60" x 96"
2009-10

Video

Biological Regionalism: Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA: III
(Bottom Panel)
Color Video
1:30:12
2010

Biological Regionalism: Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA: II
(Middle Panel)
Color Video
1:36:30
2010

Biological Regionalism: Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA: I
(Top Panel)
Color Video
1:30:34
2010

Photography by Biff Henrich.



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Brochure design by Michael A. Morgan.



Alberto Rey

Biological Regionalism: Ellicott Creek, Amherst, New York, USA

March 18 – May 15, 2010

UB Art Gallery, Center for the Arts



Alberto Rey: Replacing a Sense of Place

The Lightwell Gallery in the UB Art Gallery is, in my opinion, one of the most unique exhibition spaces in Western New York. Designed in 1994, this two-story columnar gallery—once described by an art critic as “vertiginous”—has served as a vessel for numerous innovative site-specific installations commissioned by the gallery to advance its mission of “offering emerging and mid-career artists an opportunity to work on an unprecedented scale and challenge their practice to move in unexpected directions.” The space’s greatest obstacle and most significant asset is its unorthodox physical dimensions—a footprint of 663 square feet that soars to a height of 40 feet—combined with the fact that works installed in it can be viewed from below as well as from a midpoint balcony. Alberto Rey has taken maximum advantage of this highly structured setting to create a sacred space for the contemplation of Ellicott Creek, a natural environment located a short distance from the University that is nonetheless unexplored territory for most of the North Campus population of approximately 30,000 students, faculty and staff.

In his installation, Rey combines piscatorial painting and video taken of Ellicott Creek to reference and draw connections between a number of movements in art history, most notably a period in European and American art during the early 19th century when artistic documentation of flora and fauna provided exposure to nature for a population that had become increasingly removed from those environments. Considering the fact that part of the UB North Campus is built on former swampland, Rey’s stated desire to address a current “need to rediscover nature in our own immediate environments” seems uncannily appropriate for this particular exhibition space. His work also recalls eras such as the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery when artistry and the sciences merged as painters sought to accurately and faithfully render new species of animal and plant life in the service of scientific empiricism.

Throughout the history of art, artists have attempted to pictorially convey the sublime qualities of nature and pay homage to both its incomprehensible power and quietude. These range from English landscape painter J. M. W. Turner’s stirring monumental landscape paintings to Charles Burchfield’s spirituality-infused watercolors to Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko’s meditative canvases that are housed in the famed Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. In a related vein, Rey has used several devices to immerse viewers of his installation in a state of contemplation. The darkened environment he created by covering the skylights and painting the walls dark gray produces a sense of repose so that entering the installation at the lower level is akin to the experience of entering a dimly lit chapel. The triptych format of the work—a central tripartite video flanked by two large paintings—finds its parallel in the architectural structure of a religious altarpiece. Finally, the sheer height of the central images forces the viewer’s gaze upward to see it in its entirety. The cathedral-esque layout of the exhibition ideally sets the stage for a multi-sensory experience that incorporates static images, audio (ambient sound recorded at the site that has been slowed down to 30% its actual speed to preserve the solemn mood of the space), and movement, all intended to be experienced from several vantage points.

Rey, with his 14 years of fly fishing/guiding experience across the globe, approaches the subject of his art from the perspective of an insider. This not only gives him keen knowledge and insight into the focus of this project, it also endows him with an abiding respect



Map of Ellicott Creek, watercolor, 17.5" x 32".

Ellicott Creek in Amherst, NY and its adjacent landscape) and one of its indigenous inhabitants (a largemouth bass).

Perhaps the most approachable image is the idyllic landscape view of the creek to your left as you enter the gallery. Rey’s consummate painting skill is immediately evident, exemplified by brushwork that powerfully conveys the varied textural characteristics of the scene, from foliage to gravel shore to sun dappled reflections in the rippled water. This combined with the overall use of highly saturated, jewel-like colors, gives the scene a somewhat hyper real appearance. You walk away with a highly aesthetic impression of the essence of the site as well as critical reference points for seeing parallels with the colors/textures in the image of the largemouth bass on the opposite wall.

Paintings of fish are less familiar to us, especially ones that depict the animal several times its actual size (the length of an average largemouth bass is 18 inches). The sheer size of the image—the painting measures five by eight feet—demands inspection of its details and as one examines it, one becomes acutely aware of the complexity of pattern and prismatic color on the surface of the animal. The expected gray/green coloration of its head and flank is in reality an intricate blend of masterfully and patiently applied brush strokes in multiple shades of green, deep reds, violets and subtle rose tones. The luminous highlights on the fish as it emerges from its watery void intensify the effect of otherworldliness. The blurred perimeters of both of the oil on plaster paintings is a device Rey has effectively used in previous series to refer to memory and takes on new meaning in this installation as the borders mimic film stills and echo the edges of the video images in the gallery. As a result, the artist sets up a sort of “toggle” between the paintings and the videos to facilitate viewing them as related variants of a scene.

The three-part underwater “fisheye view” video that rises ladder-like the full height of the gallery, figuratively submerging the viewer in Ellicott Creek, is mesmerizing. The middle video is particularly intriguing as it captures glimpses of largemouth bass during their annual migration. A time-based element that keenly provides a sense of the place, the videos enable connections to be made between environment and inhabitant, and foster consideration of the beauty and elegant nature of both. The glimmering play of light and shadow, and

for the environment he is representing and its inhabitants. Perhaps this is why his translation/interpretation, which has been pared down to the most essential elements—a harmonious pairing of image and sound—appears so seamless. To achieve this, Rey has set up clearly articulated relationships between the specific environments (a stretch of the

subtle (and sometimes erratic) movement of water and/or organic debris lyrically transform the video images into “animated” paintings and invite comparisons with the brushwork and use of light in the large paintings on the walls flanking them. Despite the range of imagery, Rey has carefully edited and methodically composed all of these elements. The overall effect is calming, clear and concise—an uncomplicated and reverential homage to a bucolic locale that is under recognized despite its proximity to the campus.

Rey’s approach is in alignment with a growing trend in contemporary art installations in which artists combine various forms of media on a large scale as an immersive strategy for creating insightful metaphors for society and our place in that society. In Rey’s case he literally submerges the viewer into an aquatic environment to comment on the current condition of rushed lifestyles where we are indifferent to the natural world or see it as unapproachable. This sense of alienation is changing, though, with an increasing interest in sustainable agriculture and the locavore movement. The *Biological Regionalism* series is a timely reflection linked to these developments that Rey envisions as a means to “create indigenous symbols of a culture” that encourage us to reconsider how we perceive and interact with animals and areas in our immediate surroundings. Visual theorist and cultural critic Johanna Drucker in her analysis of this series of Rey’s work questions that “if we could see all of the world as Rey see these fishes, then what new ecology of aesthetic appreciation might come into being?”

The source material that comprises the *Biological Regionalism* series is taken from all over the world. Ultimately, Rey hopes that sensitizing viewers to the complex ecosystems of their local environment will lead to a more global understanding in which people can begin to appreciate the similarities and differences outside their region as they journey through Rey’s work from their own backyard to Bozeman, Montana all the way to Los Jardines de la Reina (The Queen’s Gardens), Cuba and beyond.

This poignant and thought provoking installation that Rey has created accurately measures the mood of Nature and achieves the artist’s goal to reassert the contemporary relevance of piscatorial and landscape art and its ability to bring about a heightened awareness of the biology of a region. It raises the level of familiarity that we have with a specific natural ecosystem and challenges us to pause and contemplate the connectivity that exists among us, with this particular environment and its underwater migrants.

Gerald Mead

