

# POND LIFE: A LANDSCAPE OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE TABLE

by

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The purpose of this written report of my thesis is to discuss the visual element presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree. The objects in this visual presentation address our habits of mindless consumption by referencing the decorative style of the medieval feasting table, while the idea of sustainable use and ecological stability is presented through the cohabitation of native and introduced species. The plant and animal forms in this presentation are linked to the idea of consumption through the reference of traditional food vessels and are presented not as static objects, but as vital beings. This combination suggests a landscape of coexistence between our agricultural practices and regional organisms, which will plant a seed of change in the mind of the viewer.



POND LIFE: A LANDSCAPE OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE TABLE

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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## INTRODUCTION

Carved and painted utilitarian vessels have been around for centuries, but turning a vessel into a sculptural display is a relatively recent development. The first dishes we would recognize as sculpted casseroles were crafted by Josiah Wedgwood in response to a wheat shortage during the late 18th century, which prompted a ban on the use of flour to make pie crusts. These dishes were made to mimic the elaborately decorative pie crusts which had previously graced the tables of England as far back as the medieval era. The animal and vegetative forms referenced the hunt or cultivation that went into gathering the foods which were used to fill the pies and presented them in a ready-to-serve state, dead for the table. In this body of work, I am appropriating the language of these highly decorative vessels as a tool to create an idealized landscape of native North Carolinian and domestically raised life in a cultivated pond ecosystem. The vibrantly alive creatures in these vessels are representative of those that are planted there by man, and those who take advantage of man's cultivated landscape as their own home and food source. Abandoning the medieval theme of consumption in this work, I instead present a message of sustainability and preservation in an ecosystem which can benefit man and nature.

I have come to my subject matter from a love of the countryside and rural life. I have lived in the country my whole life and have a much deeper connection to nature and agriculture than to people and cities. Animals of any sort have always fascinated me, but birds have held a special place since I became a 'mother' to chickens at the age of eleven. I share closer friendships and understanding with my birds than with people. They are my children, my dearest friends, my equals, and at times something sacred. Through them, I have tapped into an ancient alliance between human and animal that allowed our ancestors and their first domesticated



creatures to flourish. Most people no longer remember this relationship, did not grow up with the natural world at their doorstep and are gradually disconnecting from nature and agriculture. To me, this is a tragedy.

My initial research into ancient races of poultry has shifted to an interest in sustainability and preservation, both of domestic animals and the wild creatures with which we share our space. As man has left the traditional farm, moving into the cities and suburbia, the sustainability of agriculture and our coexistence with wildlife is being threatened. The demands on the agricultural system have forced a change to intensive management practices for domestic plants and animals to the exclusion of native flora and fauna from the system. By returning to a previous agricultural model that works with nature and the wild creatures for survival instead of fighting a battle in which all parties ultimately lose, mankind can rediscover our niche and connection with nature.

By referencing birds and other animals, I share a little bit of my personal experiences and respect with others. I am reminding people of the connections we share with our domestic animals and of our mutual reliance on one another. I am preserving a memory of where we came from, in a world which is increasingly alien and paved in cement. What I put in is my love and respect, my walks through the woods and my quiet contemplation watching a flock or a herd go about its daily business.

## THE PROBLEM OF INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE

The image that most often comes to mind when people think of agriculture and food production is an idealized version of the farm. In this pastoral scene, a variety of domestic plants and animals are raised on a landscape with boundaries that overlap territory belonging to wild flora and fauna. A natural balance is kept by rotating crop varieties and herding animals, replacing nutrients in the soil and controlling pest populations without chemical pesticides and fertilizers. This integrated system is an image from our recent past, rarely seen today anywhere other than on a hobby farm or educational farming exhibit.

This farming system has been replaced by monoculture farms, the typical factory farming system, in which one species of plant or animal is raised in the same place year after year. Because a grower can focus on raising and harvesting only one species, this can be a highly efficient and superficially cheap method of raising food crops and animals, but in reality it causes long term harm to our environment.

Monocultural practices in our food systems have led to unhealthy ecosystems barren of nearly all life but the organism being raised. In an effort to maximize productivity of a single crop, chemicals are being utilized to remove competing plants and animals and to replace the nutrients in an unbalanced soil. These exclusionary tactics employed by agribusiness displace the native life which would normally help maintain nutrient levels in the soil and balance pest populations. For the sake of profit, we have created an agricultural system which does more harm to the environment than it does good.

The native species of plants and animals represented in this series are specific to a region, in this case North Carolinian ponds and swamps, and are able to flourish with the foreign

species, rather than face the loss of food and habitat so often caused by our environmental alterations. These human changes provide hiding spaces for native prey animals and hunting grounds for top predators, who enjoy the abundance of the ornamental and game fish with which we stock our ponds. Despite the human intrusion, this is an ecosystem in harmony.

## FINDING A BALANCE

The *Pond Life Series* is a discussion of sustainability through the man-made ecosystem of the cultivated pond landscape, using the language of traditional food vessels. It represents one of the few moments where human interference, via the creation of a landscaped water ecosystem, can actually benefit the local wildlife by providing a source of food and shelter even as it acts as an agricultural resource for man. The game fish with which we seed our manicured ponds, and the plant life we encourage to grow is adopted as the natural food and shelter of herons, raccoons, frogs, eels, and a host of other opportunistic plant and animal life. Unlike the harmful practices of industrial agriculture and aquaculture, which destroy native habitats and pollute on a large scale, the integrated pond is capable of sustainably providing a food source for mankind without excluding native plants and animals from the system.

With a human population now surpassing seven billion, we have reached a tipping point as a species. Current agribusiness practices are by design harmful, both to the organisms farmed and the surrounding environment. The current system of monoculture depletes the vital nutrients in our soils and waters, while poisoning with an overabundance of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Organisms which would naturally balance the system are excluded in an attempt to keep products 'clean' for the market and boost productivity.

This series aims to spark a dialogue between maker and consumer as well as dinner guest, about sustainability and conservation. It does not seek to place blame on the viewer for the evils of our long-established food culture, but pushes a cultural change via a proactive approach to communication. The stories suggested by the naturalistic dramas that play out in the imagery of the vessels invite the viewer into this world, to learn more, and to care about what happens to it.

## PARTS OF A WHOLE

### *The Decorated Casserole*

The decorative casserole arose from the previous medieval tradition of the decorative pie crust. These crusts, or coffyns, were tough and nearly inedible and were used as the baking dishes for what we would recognize as fruit and meat pie fillings. The flour mixture used in the coffyn was sturdy enough that it could be reused, returning to the kitchens several times during a meal to be refilled, and making several trips through the oven, further hardening the crust. Because they were not eaten, the coffyns were elaborately decorated in reliefs of pastry or in the skins of the birds and game which they contained. Almost any living thing could find its way into the medieval pie filling, not just the few domestic species we consume today, so the decoration of the coffyn showed the abundant diversity of the European countryside.

Two explanations exist for the origin of the word 'pie'. The eclectic combination of meats, fruits and spices which fill a coffyn bring to mind the collections of the Magpie bird, which adorns its nest with any number of interesting objects it finds. A competing theory is that the Magpie Pigeon, a domestic bird which was commonly raised in England and found its way into most pie fillings, is the origin of the term. The word 'pie' or 'pye' is uniquely English in origin, and has no other closely related words, the true meaning of the term having been lost over time. Not so with the original word for 'crust', 'coffyn'. Today we may first think of it as a container for the dead contents of the pie, but the original meaning of the word was simply 'box'. The coffyn acted as the box in which the pie filling was cooked and served.

The feasting table was a place for theatrics, where guests were entertained while they dined with music, acrobatics and the elaborately presented foods. The pie itself was often used as a vehicle for entertainment before it was consumed, with the crusts sometimes concealing a dwarf, dancing maidens, or bursting with songbirds when the crust was lifted. The poem "Sing a Song of Sixpence" is one example of a truly breathtaking pie display in which blackbirds were concealed in a coffyn and released in front of the dinner guests. These feats were accomplished by baking the heavy pie crust ahead of time, and placing whatever was to be concealed in the coffyn after it was removed from the oven, bringing no harm to the live humans and animals in the pie. After the display, the coffyn would be taken back into the kitchens and filled with the contents to be eaten.

It was not until the late 1700s that the first ceramic baking dishes appeared. The Industrial Revolution lured farmers away from the countryside and into the city with the promise of new prosperity, causing a shortage of wheat worldwide. The British monarchy placed a ban on the use of flour for pie crusts, even within their own household. Seeing an opportunity for innovation, Josiah Wedgwood introduced his new, lidded and double-walled ceramic pie dishes. Like the familiar coffyns, he decorated these new vessels with applied imagery of the plants and animals that commonly went into pies. The new innovation of baking a pie in a ceramic container freed the baker to experiment with the crust and stretch the ingredients. Pastry shells became thin, light and flakey, no longer able to support the elaborate decorations of the medieval feasting table, while the new decorative ceramic dishes now referenced the hunted wildlife and domestic animals which were consumed.

My use of functional vessels references the medieval feasting table and our culture of consumption. The lavishly decorated food items informed the viewer of the contents of the dish,

whetting the appetite in anticipation of the meal. The food culture which went along with this display was one of consuming anything that would not kill us and could be made to taste good. Everything went into the cook pot, including songbirds, herons, large and small game and any fishes that were caught from the ocean. Using the language of medieval food display and of the first decorative casserole forms, I juxtapose idealized imagery meant to remind the viewer of long-forgotten science textbooks, which taught about the importance of a balanced ecosystem. While the imagery from the medieval table was of dead and hunted animals, the creatures presented on my vessels appear very much alive, caught in the act of hunting, spawning and living.

### *Aquaculture and Sustainability*

Many who keep a cultivated pond system will already be familiar with the delicate balance that must be achieved in order for the waters to be productive. Plant and animal life must be managed to keep the water oxygenated, manage waste, and feed the various aquatic and semi-aquatic life forms that reside there. This landscape, which may be stocked with favored game fish and cultivated with ornamental plants and koi, is one of the few touched by man which becomes a richer resource for local plants and wildlife, who in turn help to manage the pond ecosystem. It stands in stark contrast to the current trend of mono-culture farmed fish ponds, which must be extensively artificially managed and do a great deal of harm to the fish in the pond and the ecosystem in which the pond is placed.

Current aquaculture practices isolate species of food fishes from other plants and animals, either keeping them in a water corral or in tanks and ponds. This current system has many problems. The fish we most like to eat tend to be carnivorous, requiring that millions of tons of wild fish be caught to feed them, negating any benefits to wild populations as we deplete their food sources. The large quantities of fish kept in a small space produce polluting quantities of waste, harming the local environment when not properly managed. Chemicals and antibiotics, which leach into the environment, must be applied directly in the water to keep such crowded fish healthy. Often, farmed fish escape into our wild waterways, giving non-native species a chance to establish, and allowing the resistant pathogens and parasites that evolve from repeated use of pesticides and medications to infect wild populations.

The integrated aquaculture system is a system which, like the integrated farm, uses plants and animals to create a sustainable, balanced and productive ecosystem. In a healthy aquacultural system, plant life is able to take in nutrients from the fauna, purifying the water in the process and creating new and usable nutrients for the animal life. A domesticated pond landscape might include succulent greenery that is attractive to native animals and fowl as food and shelter, as well as productive plants such as wild rice that can be harvested for human use. These plants provide shelter for any fish which are to be cultivated for later harvest, so that they are able to hide from wild predators such as egrets and raccoons. Able to forage off the landscape, the fishes would be able to nearly sustain themselves, needing little assistance from commercial feed, medication and chemicals. The biodiversity of such an aquacultural landscape is its strength in more ways than one, producing a greater variety of harvestable life for man and wildlife, and making it difficult for any single disease to take hold as is common in a monoculture population.



Like the medieval feasting table, the *Pond Life Series* includes many fishes and animals that we either raise in the pond for consumption and beauty, or attract to the pond for hunting. But it also shows many of the opportunistic wildlife taking advantage of the human presence, preying on the pan-fish which were meant for the dinner table, and finding a home in the ornamental water plants.

This landscape is a fantasy of what could be. It is an idealized system of aquaculture meant to conjure up images from high school biology texts, but the relationships it portrays are not imaginary, and the life forms it utilizes are specific to a particular region of the world, in this case eastern North Carolina. While some of the opportunistic species in this series might be considered pests by pond keepers, such as the Snowy Egrets and raccoons who are happy to pull fish from the water, others are 'environmental indicator species'. These are species like the Leopard Frog, which thrive in a healthy, unpolluted environment and develop physical abnormalities in the presence of chemicals and pollutants. Other species, like the Red-Eared Slider and American Eel, are in need of careful management to avoid problems from overpopulation in the former and overfishing in the latter. Both the Leopard Frog and the American Eel have been on the decline due respectively to man-made environmental problems and harm from fishing.

### *The Process*

We have been able to live as consumers for most of our evolutionary history, but today with seven billion people on the planet we must re-evaluate our tendency to take without giving

anything back. The *Pond Life Series* adopts the familiar language of the decorative feasting table and is set in an environment in which balance between man and nature is essential for both to thrive.

My vessels, like the inhabitants of the cultivated pond landscape, are functional as well as highly decorative. A range of functionality is built in, from the highly ornate, sculptural vessels which are delicate and not appropriate for casual use, to those which are painted with colored slip and can find their way into everyday life. This range of use mirrors what we might find from living off a sustainable landscape - some of what we harvest is abundant and prolific, while some is saved for only special occasions. In discussing this utilitarian landscape, it is important to me to maintain a reference to functionality in my chosen medium.

By keeping functionality in even the most ornate of these vessels, I am encouraging the use of them at events which are meant to bring people together. These vessels are not meant to live their lives on a shelf, where they stand the risk of being overlooked as simply decoration, but are put forth in front of dinner guests, where a dialogue between host and guest may occur. To help ensure that my vessels are used, they are made to function well, even if they must be handled carefully.

I begin each animal, whether sculpted or painted, with a sketch or roughed out basic form. This individual attention is important for the feeling of individuality which every being on a vessel possesses. Just as no two people are the same, no two of my animals are the same, either. Only roughly planned out, I allow spontaneity during the sculpting and carving processes, adhering to the basic traits of a species but encouraging a sense of individuality to emerge from the immediacy of the building process.

The atmospheric variation from wood firing provides the environment for the inhabitants of my work. Often unpredictable, the ash and flashing become murky waters and foggy haze, which obscure and reveal the inhabitants of this world. Much of my 'glazing' process is done in colored slips, which allow more of the natural variation from the wood kiln environment to leave its mark on the pots. In order to never lose the image entirely, I redefine my painted lines with sgraffito and take the time to carve in feathers, scales and fur. I use glaze as a method of highlighting, to bring out extra color in some of the slips and create an effect of sunlight flashing on luxurious feathers and colorful scales.

Throughout my firing process, I am mindful of the impact my actions have on the environment. I choose to use only trees that have already died, becoming carbon emitters instead of carbon sinks, or trees that need to be removed for construction or because they have become a hazard. Choosing to harvest only unwanted or already felled trees helps me to minimize my own footprint on the environment.

In the kitchen, as in an integrated landscape, different vessels are meant to serve specific purposes. Clay is best used in baking and storage, having good heat retention and water resistant properties. The glazed surface resists the absorption of bacteria, rendering the vessels safe for reuse. The limitations of ceramics as a material come in its ability to withstand direct and rapid heating, making it best used in slow cooking processes.

The cast iron vessels in this series fill a niche where the use of ceramic, as a material, is unsuitable. Clay is unable to safely withstand the direct heat from the burners of a stove top, which can cause a vessel to crack through heat shock. Iron, able to expand quickly, has no such problems and the cast iron skillets and tea kettle complete my culinary environment. Casting

iron is a new process to me, and it has been exciting to work with a material which can bridge some of the gaps in usefulness that clay has.

## FROM DISCUSSION TO ACTION

As the vessels in this series pass from the artist to the consumer to the dinner guest, a dialogue takes place about the importance of every link in this environmental web. The stories suggested by the naturalistic dramas, and the exacting details of the carving, are meant to spark discussion and provide an educational opportunity that will spread to each curious user of a cup, casserole or tea kettle. Sensing that there is more to this vessel than meets the eye, the viewer and artist engage in conversation, providing the opportunity to discuss the ways in which our agricultural system needs to change, the importance of managing biodiversity within agriculture, and how we can all participate in this new agricultural system.

The pro-active quality of this communication will continue long after a vessel is sold, perhaps prompting the consumer to take helpful steps in managing their own use of the environment and encouraging a fundamental change in the ways we view our rights to use the land. A cultural shift from the current idea of food and land use, which has remained unchanged since medieval times, to a desire to preserve and sustain what we have in order to continue using it is needed. Through opportunistic education, this series seeks to replace blind consumption with conscientious, sustainable use.

## CONCLUSION

The idealized landscape I have proposed in the *Pond Life Series* is one of many possible solutions that need to come into use in order to begin to correct the environmental harm monoculture has caused. The movement towards sustainability, and farming alongside nature, is one we can all participate in through different sustainable agriculture systems. The dramatic pieces in this series are meant to be used, shown and shared; the discussion of integration and agriculture passed from me, to new owner, to guest. You do not change a person's mind by telling them they must change, but by making them believe they wanted that change all along. By creating something for other people to take pride in, I plant a seed of change that will spread beyond me.

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## APPENDIX: WORKS



*I. Snowy Egret Pitcher with Waters Surface Basin and Tumblers*



The creatures and plants represented in this grouping are among some of the most ornamental visitors and inhabitants of the cultivated pond landscape. Koi and Water Lettuce are commonly kept as attractive additions to the pond, but as domestics and non-natives, they must be managed with care. Water Lettuce, along with other floating plants, does provide shade and shelter against predators such as the Snowy Egret, which are happy to prey on stocked fish. If floating plants such as Water Lettuce are allowed to overpopulate, they can decrease the oxygen and mineral content of the water, out-competing other organisms. Koi and other fish help to keep it under control as they nibble on the roots of the plants.

Red-Eared Sliders, which are native to regions of the United States, have spread beyond their territory due to the pet trade and happily take up residence in this landscape. If kept from overpopulating, they can be a benefit to the ecosystem, eating insect and vegetative pests. In areas where they are overpopulated, they can be harvested as part of the wild bounty that visits the pond.



*Snowy Egret Pitcher*  
22.5"x13"x7"  
Wood-fired Ceramics



*Waters Surface Tumblers: Koi*  
6"x3.5" each  
Wood-fired Ceramics



*Waters Surface Tumblers: Red-Eared Sliders*  
6"x3.5" each  
Wood-fired Ceramics



*Waters Surface Basin*  
4.5"x11.5"  
Wood-fired Ceramics

## *II. Fine Basket of Fish Casserole with Panfish Bowls*



The variety of panfish here are a selection of native sunfishes, which include Bluegill, Green, Redear, Pumpkinseed, Warmouth and Fliers. All of these fish species, with the exception of the little Fliers, breed easily and are good to eat, but can quickly overpopulate the confines of their habitat, leading to stunted individuals. A population can easily be maintained through harvesting some of the fish for the table. The water lily imagery on the exterior of the bowls conceals the fish inside, which may or may not be considered a good catch. The species of fish is revealed only at the end of the meal.



*Panfish Bowls*  
2.5"x6" each  
Wood-fired Ceramics



*Fine Basket of Fish*  
6.5"x10"x7.5"  
Wood-fired Ceramics



### *III. Carolina Wood Duck Casserole with Call Duck Gravy Boat*



One of the oldest breeds of domestic duck is the tiny Call Duck. Bred to their current state in the Netherlands during the 1600s, they were once known as the Coy or Decoy Duck, from the Dutch 'de kooi' for 'trap'. As their name suggests, the original purpose of these tame ducks was to lure in wild birds with the loud and persistent call of the female. They were highly successful at their job, so much so that it is no longer legal to use the Call Duck for its original purpose, as irresponsible hunting with Calls was rapidly depleting the wild populations. This grouping, featuring a Call Duck female and a family of the beautiful Carolina Wood Ducks, is a reminder of the responsibilities we take on when we become the hunters in a landscape. While this landscape is a temporary haven for the wild waterfowl to raise their young, there are still perils from hunters such as the Muskellunge which may be introduced as a harvestable fish.



*Carolina Wood Ducks Casserole*  
9.5"x11.5"x7"  
Wood-fired Ceramics



*Call Duck Gravy Boat*  
8"x14"x5"  
Wood-fired Ceramics

#### *IV. Muddy Bottoms Mugs and Saucers*



These mug and saucer sets depict the relationships between the bottom dwellers of the pond landscape. Predatory American Eels and Brown Bullhead Catfish weave through the stems of floating water plants, hunting for the small creatures who live and breed there. These fish are native, and when waterways are connected, may be able to find their way into our cultivated ponds over time, but because they are good food fish, they are often introduced into the environment to later harvest. While they mature in the pond, they feed on populations of crayfish, insect larvae (damselflies) and amphibians. The Southern Leopard Frogs depicted here are an important indicator of a healthy water system, and have been in decline due to pollution from fertilizer and insecticide runoff.

The saucers represent the very bottom of the pond, with a bed of Freshwater Mussels doing the work of filtering and cleaning the pond water. While sitting in the saucer, the mugs conceal the Eastern Newts and young Snapping Turtles from the hunting predators. The Medicine Leeches are both parasite and prey to the fish, and Magnificent Ramshorn Snails may help to keep water weeds from choking the pond before becoming food themselves.



*Muddy Bottoms Mug and Saucer: Brown Bullhead and Eastern Newt*  
5"x6"x4"  
Wood-fired Ceramics



*Muddy Bottoms Mug and Saucer: American Eel and Common Snapping Turtle*  
5"x6"x4"  
Wood-fired Ceramics

*V. Opportunistic Raiders Tea Kettle*



10"x9.5"x6"

Cast iron and wood-fired ceramics

Well adapted to take advantage of a human presence, raccoons are quick to discover an easy food source and highly destructive to the plant and animal life of a cultivated pond. The three bold raiders on this tea kettle are the only creatures in this series to be shown interacting directly with the unseen human presence. While many other opportunists keep their distance, raccoons are the visitors who will exploit any moment of carelessness, as they do with this unattended bounty of fish.

## *VI. Predator and Prey Iron Skillets*



14", 9", and 7" in diameter  
Cast iron

The three cast iron skillets which are part of this landscape depict relationships between predators and prey in the cultivated pond. The three fish represented on these vessels, the Muskellunge, Brown Bullhead Catfish and American Eel, are all large fish that can be kept in a pond to mature to a harvestable size. In a healthy system they will take care of themselves, feeding on amphibians and crustaceans (represented here by the Southern Leopard Frog and crayfish) as well as keeping down populations of pest mollusks and prolific panfish.