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ARTISTS

Featuring: Jon Kerpel

by LIBRARYASINCUATORPROJECT on Feb 3, 2015 - 7:00 am

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I'm delighted to introduce Jon Kerpel to the site today to share his work, which he considers a form of activism. The best place to show such work and spark conversations? The Library, of course. Don't miss his ideas for the ideal library space for artists! ~Erinn



From "Earth Temples," a 2010 show by Kerpel at the Alameda Free Library. Photo by Michael Singman-Aste.

Library as Incubator Project (LAIP): Tell us a little bit about yourself and your work.

Jon Kerpel (JK): I received my formal art education with a sponsorship to the School of Visual Arts. In 1980 I had a life-changing experience when I attended a workshop at Arcosanti, an experimental city combining architecture with ecology in the Arizona desert. I then made a decision to leave New York City permanently and lived near Arcosanti for two years. As a result, my art form began to depart from a formal figurative style to more of an exploration of animals and assorted creatures in their relationship to the environment. After moving to the Bay Area in 1982, I took classes for three years at Laney College, immersing myself in ceramics and printmaking. My current medium is sculpture and assemblage on shaped panels that are crafted with found/recycled objects and focus on affirmative animal imagery.

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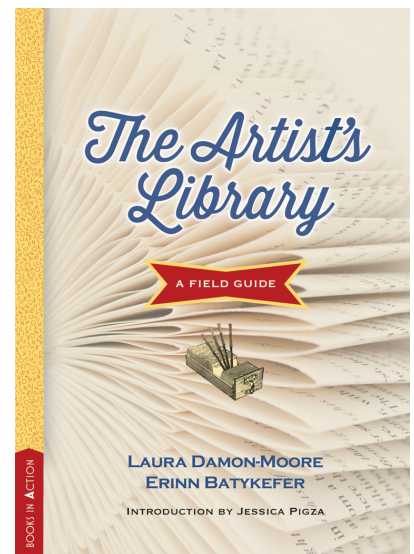
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"On The Edge," from "A Page from the Great Book of Nature" 2014 show at the Alameda Free Library.

LAIP: What are you working on right now that you're excited about?

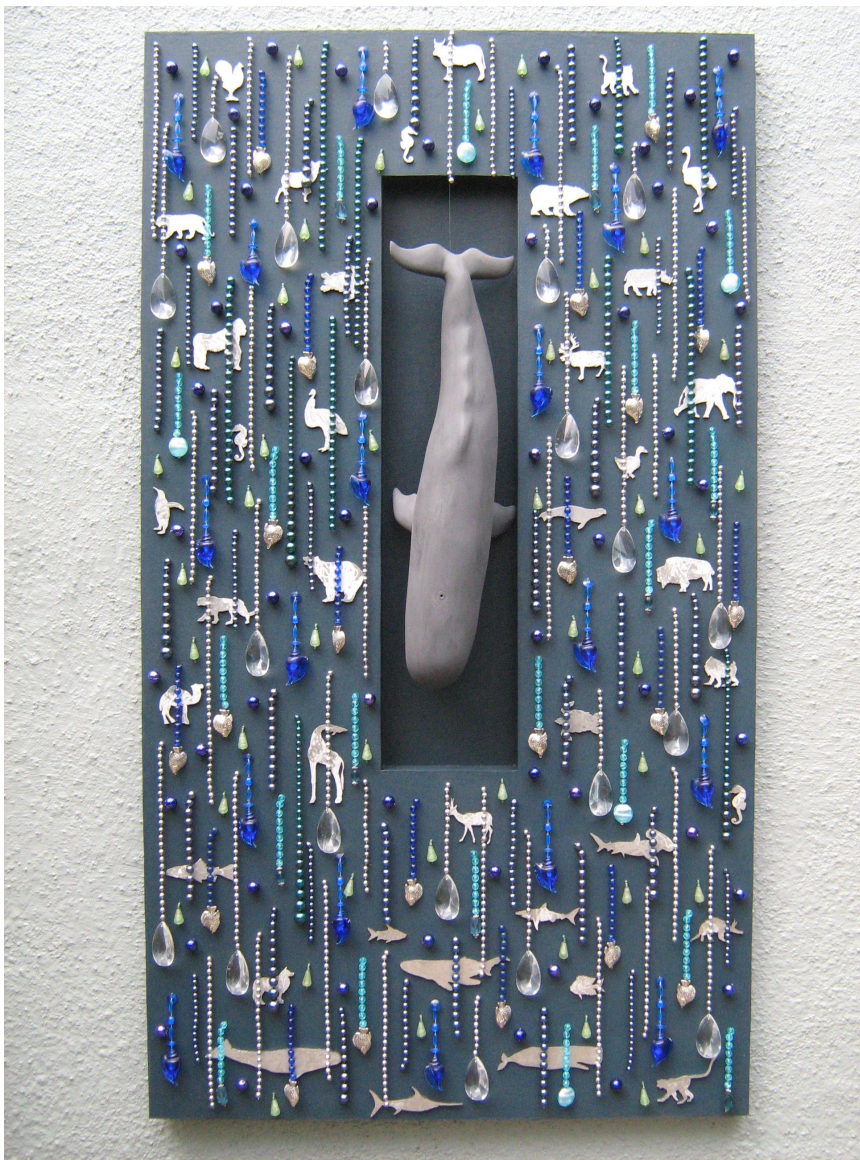
JK: In 2014, I received a grant from the Puffin Foundation, an organization that provides funding to artists outside the mainstream. My public interest project, "The Good Earth Project", addresses environmental issues. It involves creating visual installations that illustrate the beauty and importance of animals and creatures that connect to the web of life as well as speaking to school groups and the general public about related environmental concerns. The project has four venues. Thus far I have exhibited at Redux Gallery (a social enterprise of St. Vincent de Paul) and the Alameda Free Library to great success. In May, I'll have a show at Gallery Route One in Pt. Reyes Station, an alternative art gallery promoting community service through visual art, as part of their "With the Earth" series. The final exhibition will be in September at the Hayward Shoreline Nature Interpretative Center, a visitor center and gallery focused on the ecology of the San Francisco Bay-Estuary.

This is in addition to working in my studio on new "earth temples" and assemblages that will of course be tributes to our fragile environment.

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"North Bay." From "Views of the Environment", 2012 show at the Alameda Free Library.

LAIP: You mentioned that you feel the imagery of your work is important at a time of climactic change. Do you see your work as a form of activism?

JK: Yes. Imagery is one of the most powerful sensors humans have and everything we see, hear, and smell is stored within the brain. What we as artists create can leave a deep and lasting impression, hopefully for the better. Visual imagery affirming of our natural world is desperately needed at this point in history because the environment is in severe decline. The stripping of the Amazon, fracking, the huge garbage patches in the ocean, radiation leaks, chemical dumping, GMOs and global warming are just some of what affects all living entities. It is with my art form that I hope to create awareness and focus on what really matters. No matter what nation, race, religion, or culture, our survival depends on our environment and the creatures that inhabit our land, sea and air. Even though my medium itself is visual, my message is clearly focused on animals, which is a subject everyone can relate to. We all want a healthy environment for ourselves and for future generations. My work exposes ordinary people of all ages and varied backgrounds to this idea, educating them about the environment we all live in.



"Farewell." From "Earth Temples," a 2010 show at the Alameda Free Library. Photo by Jon Kerpel.

LAIP: You say you show your work in both galleries and alternative spaces (like the library). What do you feel are the advantages of showing in a library? What happens there that doesn't happen in a gallery?

JK: The average person doesn't visit art museums or formal art galleries on a regular basis. Libraries are completely accessible, have no admission fee and make no demand that the ordinary pedestrian be an expert on art. They are truly democratic and non-demanding spaces that can be taken in by anyone. Sometimes a spark occurs in a person's life by something or someone he/she is inadvertently exposed to. When people come to the library in our town and many others across the country, they never know what kind of art will be presented, thus it's always refreshing and informative. Also, many artists never get a chance to show in galleries because of the politics involved in the art world and library exposure avoids that problem.

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"Back to the Future," from "A Page from the Great Book of Nature", 2014 show at the Alameda Free

LAIP: You've collaborated with Alameda Free Library for some time on your shows. How has that relationship informed your process?

JK: Through the library I have met many people who have shared what they're thinking with me, thus helping me to better understand myself and what I'm doing. We don't really know ourselves until we see ourselves in relation to others and the world we live in. My part is to create, the second part is for the viewer to process the creation and the third part is the feedback. Exhibiting artists at the Alameda Free Library have the opportunity to hold a reception and present a lecture about their work with a discussion following. These events are always helpful and informative for both the artists and the audience. There is a level of growth that occurs through this process.



"Bird of Paradise," from "A Page from the Great Book of Nature", 2014 show at the Alameda Free Library.

LAIP: Have libraries always been part of your creative life? If so, could you tell us about the first library you remember playing a part in your artistic development

JK: I can remember in high school spending many hours reading, looking and reflecting on the art books in our library. We had a very good art teacher who presented as much about art as he could, but this only led to more questions for an inquisitive and thirsty mind such as mine was. The school library was well equipped and it became a universe unto itself, where, once I entered, I could live on the planet of my choice. Other artists entered my life through these books and in fact one of the artists I read about in that library turned out to be one of my instructors at the School of Visual Arts several years later. Small world.

The school library was well equipped and it became a universe unto itself, where, once I entered, I could live on the planet of my choice.

Most recently, because of my seven years of activity and involvements as an Art Board Member at our library, I've been elected Chairperson to help steer our committee in its efforts to present exhibitions and museum docent talks on an ongoing basis. I find myself in a unique position to give back to the community what has been given to me.



"Ballerina." From "Views of the Environment", Kerpel's 2012 show at the Alameda Free Library

LAIP: As an artist, what would your ideal library be like? What kinds of stuff would you be able to check out, and what could you do there?

JK: In our local library we have an area where one can drop off or take magazines at will. I really like that because it incorporates recycling and reuse. We also have an adjacent area where donated books can be bought cheaply on the honor system. If I had my way, I would expand it to incorporate quality art books and allow people to give away videos and DVDs. Tools are essential for work and creative flow, but are expensive for many. It would be marvelous if all libraries could have a tool lending system.

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Our library, as well as others, would be far more efficient at program presentation if we had funding to help pay for dedicated staff who could handle the enormous work involved with art and music programs, freeing up volunteers to focus on more shows, lecture series and community outreach. In the past we have had concerts at our library. Every library should have concerts on an ongoing basis. It seems to me that "libraries" are becoming more like community cultural centers. Once you embrace that thought, many doors open. Another idea related to art presentation would be traveling exhibitions, shows that move from one library to another, and again all of this takes financial and human resources. I think Andrew Carnegie gave our society a good start by recognizing the need for libraries in every city and then building them. With each generation comes new needs; the computer is a good example. It's up to society to adjust to the needs of its citizens within the times they live in and bring forth programs that fill those needs, especially regarding the arts.

Jon Kerpel was born in New York City in 1950 and attended the School of Visual Arts. After attending workshop at Arcosanti, an experimental city combining architecture with ecology in the Arizona desert, he left New York City permanently and lived near Arcosanti, where his work became focused on animals and their relationship to the environment. In 2014, he received a grant from the Puffin Foundation for my proposal entitled "The Good Earth Project, and currently serves as Chairperson of the Alameda Free Library Art Board. Visit Jon online at www.jonkerpel.com.

Tags: Alameda Free Library, environmental activism, Exhibitions, found objects, Gallery, Jon Kerpel, sculpture, Visual Arts

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2 comments



RICHARD WHITTAKER says:
Feb 3, 2015

Pretty inspiring! It would be wonderful if Jon's words were to lead to library expansions in the directions he describes.



DON CUNNINGHAM says:
Feb 4, 2015

Great interview and exhibit, making urgently needed points.

What do you think?

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