

Jennifer Vanderpool  
In/Wetlands  
Cy-Fair College  
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## "Artificial Nature and Back Home Again"

Jennifer Vanderpool's indoor/outdoor installation invites visitors to stand back and contemplate the beauty of the landscape. But that's not all the Los Angeles-based artist's multi-part piece does. "In/Wetlands" simultaneously incites us to stop looking at Nature as if it were merely a pretty picture – a pleasant escape from city life that is primarily experienced in aesthetic terms. Rather than treating Nature as a divine composition, Vanderpool's double-edged mix of media engages the peculiar ways Nature and Culture overlap. To come to terms with her quietly eloquent work is to see that it addresses not Nature, but the ideas people have about Nature, and the conceptual categories through which our perceptions of it are filtered. When this happens, profound similarities between the Nature and Culture come into focus; it becomes impossible to disentangle one from the other; and the idea of viewing the world in purely aesthetic terms gets turned on inside-out.

As an artist, Vanderpool is a radical. This simply means that her site-specific installation cuts to the root of things by getting to the fundamentals of its history. The gallery at Cy-Fair College, not to mention a large part of the campus, is built on what is commonly called "reclaimed land." (When you stop and think about it, what land that humans use isn't reclaimed?) At any rate, in this case what had once been a marshy swamp or undeveloped (and seemingly undevelopable) wetlands is now a handsomely landscaped setting interspersed with new buildings, open spaces, meandering paths, and picturesque vistas.

As a thinker, Vanderpool is not an Idealist. Nor is she a sappy sentimentalist, a back-to-nature extremist, or an organic Luddite. Unlike many contemporary artists whose work is based in the environment, Vanderpool never pretends that Nature is an Edenic world from which Culture has fallen – gracelessly, sinfully, and unnaturally. "In/Wetlands" doesn't presume that the clock can be turned back, nor that there is any point in doing so. Instead, it articulates the multi-layered complexity of the present, in which seemingly simple objects are more nuanced than they initially appear, and our experience of our mundane surroundings are all the richer for it.

To downplay the conventional opposition between Nature and Culture, Vanderpool's supple work includes three components: an outdoor, an indoor, and an in-between. The outdoor consists of rocks and stones she has purchased from a home improvement store, arranged tastefully, and interspersed with abstract birds and insects she has folded, origami-style, from city maps of the surrounding area. Vanderpool's miniature rock garden-cum-landscape sculpture is fragile and vulnerable to the elements. But it follows the logic on which the campus was built: one system atop another it dramatically alters yet remains dependent upon. Rather than returning a tiny fraction of the artificial landscape to its "original" state, this part of her piece piles artifice upon artifice to emphasize the shifting tenuousness of both, especially when they are out of balance.

Vanderpool's in-between component consists of dozens of origami sculptures suspended as if in flight. Hanging on strands of monofilament on both sides of the glass walls that form the gallery's transparent perimeter, these miniature birds and oversized insects link outside and in.

The indoor component consists of six large Cibachrome photographs, each of which depicts an origami swan or two afloat in a setting that appears to be a thriving wetland environment, thick with algae, water lilies, and reeds. In reality, Vanderpool photographed her paper birds in a broken-down fountain on the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara. In her beautifully printed pictures, Nature enacts its own reclamation project, taking back a bit of Culture by flourishing in a decorative fountain built to provide passersby with some respite from an otherwise inhospitable concrete and brick plaza. Installed in the Texas gallery, Vanderpool's photographs take viewers full circle: Back to Nature without leaving Culture behind, where we are able to look at the world both aesthetically and historically, simultaneously in search of pleasure and knowledge.

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