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Features

Deborah Butterfield:
[It All Adds Up](#)

Progressive Destinations:
A Conversation with Dawn DeDeaux

From the Smallest Scraps of Nothing:
A Conversation with Alice Momm

Shifting Sand:
A Conversation with Connie Zehr

Fictions in the Natural World:
Cristina Iglesias

Reviews

Chicago:
[Nick Cave](#)

**Catskill, New York, and
North Adams,
Massachusetts:**
Marc Swanson

London:
Virginia Overton



On the Cover:

Deborah Butterfield,
Storm Castle, 2012. Cast
bronze with patina, 99.5
x 11.5 x 88.5 in. Photo:
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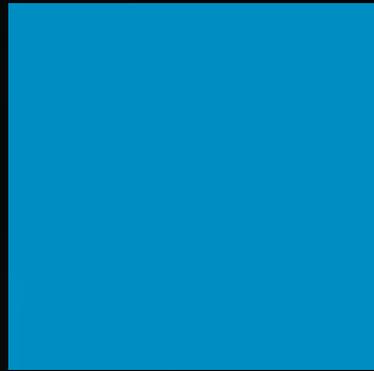
Progressive Destinations:

A Conversation with Dawn DeDeaux

by Leah Triplett Harrington

For multimedia artist Dawn DeDeaux, “between” is a place. Toggling media (video, performance, installation, sculpture), dimensions (two and three, object and experience), and time (past, present, and future), her work occupies spaces between things, ideas, and people. “The Space Between Worlds,” the title of her recent hometown retrospective at the New Orleans Museum of Art and an accompanying catalogue from Hatje Cantz, captures the ambiguity of betweenness at the heart of more than 40 years of genre-bending work. This is not to say that DeDeaux is neutral; on the contrary, her work quite resolutely reminds us that our planet is changing, and we must act. Social issues have long been her focus (she is an early pioneer of what is now known as “social practice”), and her work, now more than ever, demonstrates that humans must plan for the future with new urgency.

q/a



Parlor Games:
Aleppo, Palmyra,
Rome, Luxor, Athens,
Siena to New Orleans,
2016.
Medallion, chain,
wrecking ball,
chair, and columns,
dimensions variable.

Leah Triplett Harrington: Let's start with *The Mantle (I've Seen the Future and It Was Yesterday)* (2016–17), an ornate, antebellum-style mantel encased in silvery metal and topped with an excess of small memorabilia—everything from cartoon figures to classical busts, all covered with metallic sheen. What is this work, and what does it mean?

Dawn DeDeaux: It's an outgrowth of "Souvenirs of Earth," an ongoing series that began in 2014. It imagines that we humans will have to take sudden leave of the planet. The concept assumes that we will need available cargo space to transport people, likely placing human lives over inanimate objects. This presents tough decisions. Would we leave behind our greatest works of art and evidence of life on earth? There may not be room to bring sections of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel or his sculptures, but maybe the *Book of Kells* and the *Venus of Willendorf* will make it onboard. As a compromise, I posit that we are only allowed to take artifacts that we can carry in our hands, and a backpack filled with family photos.

The Mantle is a combination of these thoughts and a collection of such miniature "things"—mementos of art, architecture, and historical events—mostly belonging to the souvenir trade: the Eiffel Tower, the Twin Towers,

the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Andy Warhol's soup cans and Jasper Johns's ale cans, a Mayan deity, Michelangelo's *David* and *Pietà*. For me, these souvenirs conjure Warhol's conceptual investment in the hierarchal assessments of machine and replication, the critical discourse surrounding the properties of originality, and the qualitative measure of "the shock of the new."

What in the end is most valuable? Originality? Authenticity? Memory? How ironic that souvenir replicas might become the last surviving vestige-treasures from an earthly past. (Of course, we would likely have the capacity to re-create works to scale from 3D scans on a distant planet or within a roaming space colony, but these souvenirs are the last "made on earth" artifacts and thus revered). In sum, *The Mantle (I've Seen the Future and It Was Yesterday)* is an ensemble of culture's kitsch. One hopes it preserves humor and irony as well.

LTH: In many of your pieces, you collide past, present, and future. How do you think about time in your work?

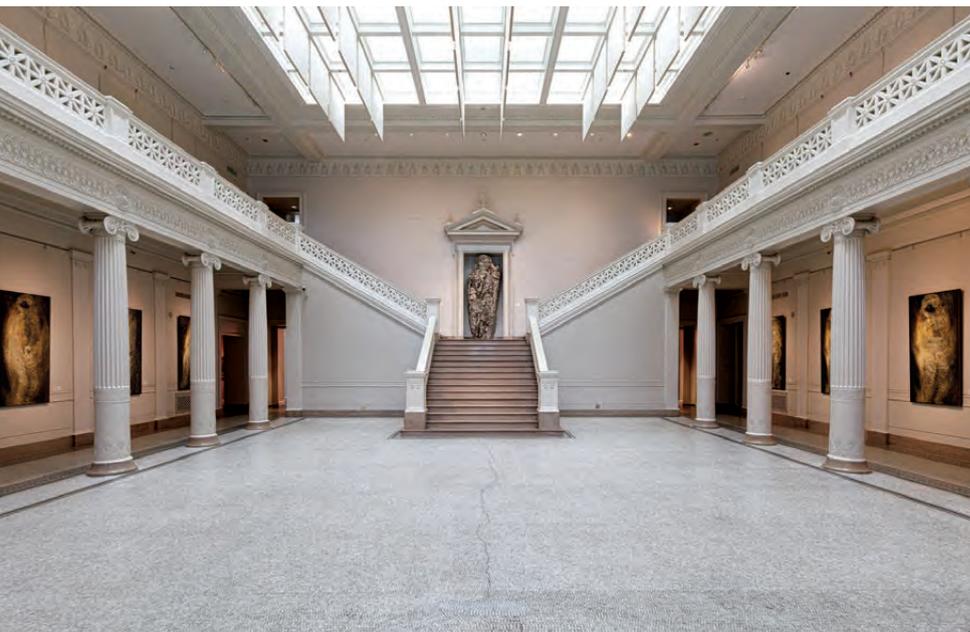
DD: I think in long time, and in vistas where the present is connected to the past and future simultaneously. I don't know when it happened, maybe while witnessing the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, but I now fully experience life in both geological and contemporary time. In my mind, I merge the two, something akin to stereo vision. I think constantly about our vulnerability and the possibility that our destiny could return us to stone atop this spinning rock.

This is coming more literally to the fore of my current work. During the retrospective, the Great Hall at NOMA featured an installation of 10 two-dimensional, life-size figurative works from "The Vanquished Series" (2016–17), together with *Between Time* (2021), an 11-foot sculpture of an asteroid made of various metals, which was installed in the central niche of the grand staircase. It constitutes this collision of time. The sculpture takes on an anamorphic shape to acknowledge the surrounding figures, which also appear to be breaking down into bits of meteor.

LTH: Your work is very multidisciplinary—spanning writing, photography, painting, sculpture, video, and installation—and multidimensional. How do you begin?

THIS PAGE:
Installation view
of "The Space
Between Worlds,"
New Orleans
Museum of Art,
2021–22.

OPPOSITE:
**The Mantle: I've
Seen the Future and
It Was Yesterday**
(detail), from
the "Souvenirs of
Earth" series,
2016–17.
Cast aluminum
mantle and objects,
61 x 82 x 9 in.





“ I don't always feel or care to be contemporary, and the thematic thrust of my work is not always cutting edge, but it does time-travel. I like working in a microscopic way to reach the macro. ”

DD: It starts with a burning curiosity and generally documents my journey into a particular subject of interest. I think sequentially, and often the work can be a page-turning tale. I choose media to best deliver the concept rather than confining the investigation to a predisposed medium. The options are fluid and forever changing. I came up in a post-Duchampian time; the matrix of art keeps expanding and being redefined with new technologies—for example, the bold new crossroads of today with the emergence of NFTs. Art practice is a progressive destination.

LTH: How do you know when a work is successful or finished?

DD: I very seldom have a sense of closure. There have been only a few times when I've looked at a piece and didn't see something I might have done differently. Having just spoken of "time"—each piece is somehow collaboratively impacted by its time, place, and available resources. When I cut the cord, it's because I'm fully exhausted. It's never finished, just time to move on. As a fellow artist said to me recently, you can never step into the same place of a river twice. But we have opportunities to re-engage or resume with new works.

Seeing the retrospective, I was struck by the fact that I have varied interpretations of common themes. Media are fluid, yet the mysteries of our story often remain the same, as constant as our singular fingerprint and the moment of our birth. "Cause" is the constant, and the "effect(s)" change in the stream. I also noticed a formal "theatrical" device I've often turned to—the familiar domestic object or motif as a recognizable prop that serves as a portal into less comfortable investigations. It can be a door, a window, a bed, a ladder, a mantel, a chair. Just beyond the door, a new terrain is revealed from different time perspectives. The story continues.

LTH: That continued story, object-wise, is fascinating to me. Many of the works in the exhibition were re-creations of originals destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. I am thinking of works like *The Face of God, In search of* (1996/2021), which is what you call "an immersive, synchronized media environment." A twin bed is set within a video that cycles through underwater scenes, moving between darkness and light. A large sea turtle eventually emerges,





DAWN DEDEAUX

The Face of God, In search of, 1996/2021.
4-channel video and three walls (2021 installation), dimensions variable.

facing us head on, before X-rays of lungs and human hands appear. What was it like to re-create these images after so many years?

DD: With *The Face of God*, I was really trying to re-create, as closely as I could, a facsimile of the original 1996 piece. Some sections of the master tape were destroyed, so I turned to stock footage from a similar time period to replace them. For this work, I didn't feel that I should take great liberties. However, I did alter the original floor plan. *The Face of God* was among the very first fully immersive media environments. Viewers walked into an enclosed six-walled space created for its debut presentation at the 1996 Olympics. Projections filled the environment "in the round," surrounding viewers who stood around the central bed. The bed surface was activated with the moving image, as was the floor. But in the retrospective, that original, fully enclosed presentation would have disrupted the flow and cohesiveness of the overall exhibition. Instead, I presented the work in a reduced triangular structure of three walls, with open ceiling, to envelop the bed. This allowed for long dramatic sight lines and linked the domestic objects scattered throughout the space, somewhat unifying the exhibition as though it were one large installation work spanning decades.

LTH: **There was a sense of a progressive destination in the exhibition, too.**

DD: The floor plan change and placement of *The Face of God* broke with a previously designed chronological footprint, as did the video work *Where Mary*, but it was a better aesthetic plan. The changes to *The Face of God* gave me the big corridor and a long view of the video installation *One Drop* (2010). The water imagery in both installations created an underworld environment, with one addressing the 1996 environmental challenges that threatened extinction for a turtle species, and the other addressing the chemical pollution released into the Gulf of Mexico by the 2010 BP oil spill, further complicated by the use of Corexit in the cleanup. In the distance, a series of doors glowed in the dark at one end; glass ladders, to escape the rising tide, accented the opposite far side, prompted by Louisiana's place as the fastest-eroding landmass in the world. In the middle of the corridor, *Water Markers* (2006–ongoing), a group of image-embedded



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In my mind, I merge the two, something akin to stereo vision. I think constantly about our vulnerability and the possibility that our destiny could return us to stone atop this spinning rock.

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sculptures, brought the water line above the heads of viewers, contributing to a visceral experience.

LTH: The feeling of being in space and enveloped in a space was palpable in the exhibition. It felt both familiarly domestic and industrial or institutional. Did you want to have a similar feeling for the catalogue?

DD: I had also wanted the catalogue to be very experiential. There's physicality to a book. But in the end, it is a text-driven documentation of a specific exhibition, with a number of essays covering different aspects of my work. So, while it is not fully an artist's book or fully immersive, I am exceedingly grateful to Hatje Cantz and NOMA for the generous survey. Another book, coming next year, will include projects that we were unable to present in the retrospective, and it will be more specifically an artist's book or a "dreamscape" presentation.

LTH: Is writing part of your process? When did you turn to making things?

DD: As a young girl, I lost a few siblings. I got a little bit mute and went to live with my grandmother. Her

OPPOSITE:
Where Mary,
2020–21.
4-channel video on
70-foot wall and marble
sculpture,
11 min.

THIS PAGE:
Water Markers Highrise,
2006–21.
Polished 2-inch
acrylic slabs with
embedded images,
144 x 192 x 28 in.
overall.

house was right next to the Degas House, where Edgar Degas came to visit his blind sister, who lived in New Orleans. A friend of my grandmother's in New York had a young artist friend who was a big fan of Degas. She wanted to visit New Orleans, and so, all of a sudden, my grandmother offered her a room, and this painter from New York moved into our house, just down the hall from my room.

The gardener and I started spying on her through a keyhole, and she caught us. It was a big trauma at first, but it resulted in over two years of art lessons. The artist, Laura Adams, brought me to New York for two summers in a row and took me to museums and galleries. She introduced me to art books. It took me a while to realize that I also had a propensity for writing. In some of my work, a sequential narrative creeps in. Sometimes I put the brakes on that, but sometimes I let it rip.

I don't always feel or care to be contemporary, and the thematic thrust of my work is not always cutting edge, but it does time-travel. I like working in a microscopic way to reach the macro. Maybe it's similar to

the way that I create entryways with familiar domestic motifs; it's a starting point for a new journey. I actually think of myself as a globalist. I don't mean to imply that I'm recognized globally, but I always address this spinning earth in my work.

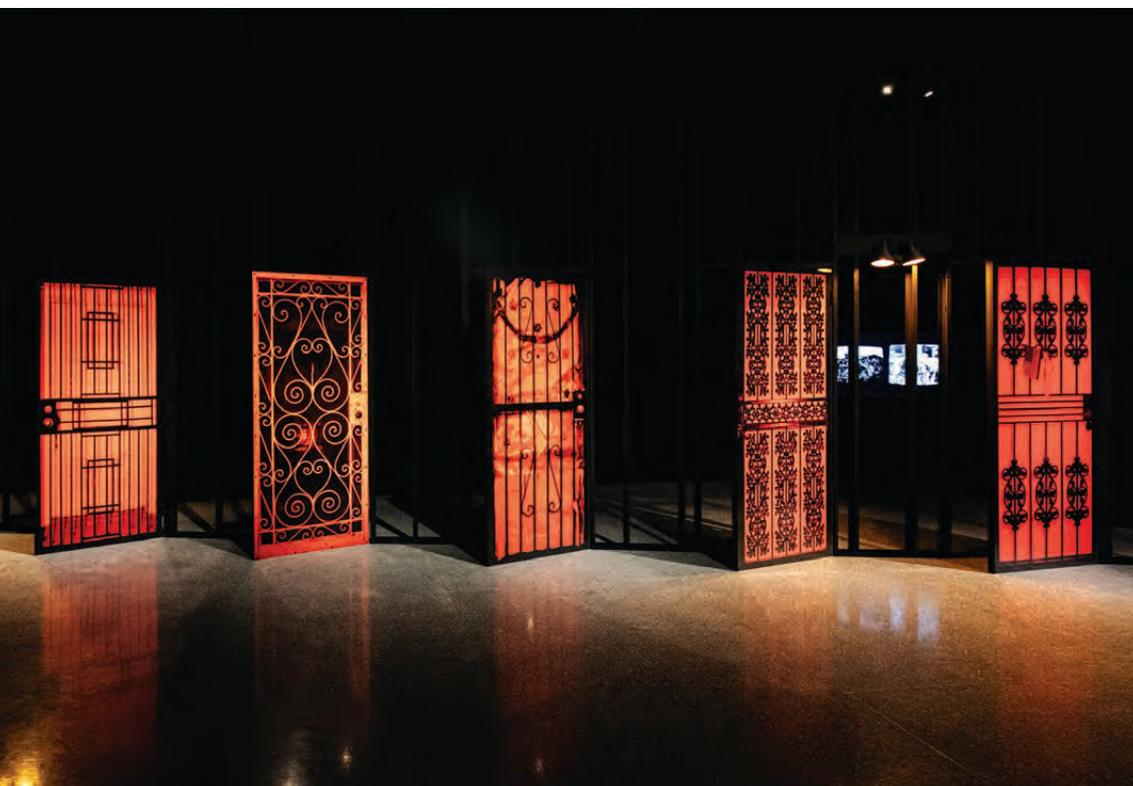
LTH: I've learned from my experience with public art that having a recognizable element immediately disarms people. Even if the work is challenging, the sense of familiarity is inviting. Thinking of that, you often juxtapose humor and tragedy. For instance, in the life-size video sculpture *Almost Touching You* (1991), a nude woman tries to dance with a man wrapped in plastic while Chet Baker's "Almost Blue" plays. The crinkle of the plastic, alongside the sincerity of the gesture, despite its futility, could almost be read as humorous. But this is a sad work, made during the AIDS crisis. How do you think about humor in your work?

DD: Comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin. I integrate humor because it is a soft landing for hard truths—a safe platform for deep-diving into complex societal issues. It can circumvent the divides of politics and engage human emotion in surprising ways. It softens predisposed rigidity and broadens the audience. Polemics only nail doors shut before you even begin.

I crossed comedy and tragedy in *Almost Touching You*. AIDS, of course, is not a gay disease, but early outbreak demographics created discrimination and fear. AIDS afflicts all humanity, much like the Covid pandemic. I thought it important to feature a man and a woman impacted by the crisis. We all wish to be loved. We all long for intimacy. We all laugh. We all cry. Perhaps such a dance reveals more of our human commonalities, wedging a wider space for empathy.

LTH: What are you investigating now?

DD: *Where Mary*—another recent piece in the retrospective, which I





completed in October 2021—is a video installation that presents an object on a pedestal in front of a 70-foot-long video projection. The object is an early marble sculpture of a Virgin Mary with broken arms, and she has lost her child. In the film, the statue deteriorates further, becomes nameless, and floats wanton into the void of space as debris. The piece is a final extension of *The Mantle*. Mary is the very last souvenir. In that regard, she spins in a post-human space, rejoining the universe matrix. This work is also a final note to “The Vanquished Series” and the asteroid sculpture *Between Time*.

I’m still in a post-human mindset, so I want to continue with corresponding sculptures. I recently returned from a visit to Scotland and Ireland where I sought out ancient stone markers. It was good inspiration. I’ll continue now in a sculpture state of mind. ■■■

Dawn DeDeaux’s book Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys and the Mystery of the Golden Coffin, featuring significant projects not presented in the retrospective and an accompanying essay by Joe Lewis, is scheduled for publication in spring 2023.

OPPOSITE:
America House,
 1990–91/re-created 2021.
 Life-size image doors
 within metal stud framing,
 installation view.

THIS PAGE:
 Installation view with
 (front to back): **Alpha
 Omega Ring, MotherShip
 Series**, 2013, aluminum
 ring, 30 ft. diameter;
 and **The Day Ole Forster
 Tree Fell into the Ring
 Landscape**, 2011–12,
 ink on aluminum panels,
 10 x 36 ft.