IMAGINE IT THICK IN YOUR OWN HAIR: SCULPTURES AND A UNIQUE ARTIST’S BOOK

HEIDE HATRY

We have come to accept and live with the fact that the world is seriously wounded, and even now, when it is bleeding to death before our eyes, we are largely content to put the matter into the hands of the doctors, the experts who we believe are taking care of such things.

But the whole technological complex and our relationship to it, as Heidegger pointed out long ago, is the problem, not the solution. Human beings acting in human ways—concerned, involved, aware—are the solution.

My solo benefit exhibition at Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts—*Imagine It Thick In Your Own Hair*—was intended to make people aware of the tragedy and motivate them to help clean up the disaster BP created in 2010.

Pouring oil and tar over dead birds, opossums, rats, mice, moles, or whatever I found by the side of the road or in the trash bins of pet stores, and which I had first preserved using taxidermy techniques, I created scenes of dead animals enmired in black viscosity to give viewers an intimate feeling for the way the spill in the Gulf of Mexico has doomed and destroyed wildlife.

It is difficult to not look away when you see an actual animal suffering, but in showing the effects if not the process, I felt that I at least put the harsh truth as directly in front of the viewer and as unmitigated by distance as I could.

As in all my work, my materials were animals that had already died—sometimes by means that are just as ethically problematic as the mass torture and slaughter of those we raise for food and clothing, or which are collateral casualties of our greed—but I somehow feel that the fact that they have been put to some purpose, a dignified one, I hope, confers some measure of redemption upon them.

In collaboration with Robert Kelly I made several unique artist's books. This is one of my treatments of his poem *Imagine It Thick In Your Own Hair*:

THE BLACK SNOT
WON'T COME OUT
YOU BREATHE A
LITTLE, IT WHISTLES
IT'S IN YOUR EYES
NOW, BURNING
AND YOUR EARS ARE
STUFFED WITH SLUD
GE NOW TOO

YOU CAN'T EVEN
HEAR YOURSELF
SCREAM AND WHILE
YOU'RE SCREAMING
YOU'RE THINKING IF
YOU CAN STILL THINK
THAT ALL THIS OIL
WAS LEAF AND MEADOW
ONCE, TURF AND
FOREST WAVING

MILLIONS AND MILLIONS
OF YEARS
ALL THIS WAS GREEN
LIFE ONCE
AND EVEN NOW THE
GLISTENING BLACK
SLUDGE HAS A SHEEN
OF TREE-BROWN IN IT
A SHEEN OF GREEN →
FORGET THE PELICANS
AND PRETTY DUCKS

YOU WORRY ABOUT
THE DUCKS AND
CORMORANTS
THE BEAUTIFUL
ANHINGA
BUT THIS IS HAPPENING
TO YOU
A TAR BLACK SEAGULL
WINGS STILL FLAPPING

IS STUCK TO YOUR
SHOULDERS
YOU CAN'T BREATHE
ANY MORE
YOU PRAY FOR THEM
PELICANS
ARE YOU PRAYING FOR
THEM OR TO THEM
AND YOU ARE THE
PELICAN NOW

Imagine It Thick In Your Own Hair

Imagine it thick in your own hair
your eyes stuck shut

you gouge your scummy finger
in your nose to break a way for air
the black snot won't come out
you breathe a little, it whistles
it's in your eyes now, burning
and your ears are stuffed with sludge now too
you can't even hear yourself scream

and while you're screaming
you're thinking
if you can still think
that all this oil was leaf and meadow once,
turf and forest waving
millions and millions of years

all this was green life once
and even now the glistening black sludge
has a sheen of tree-brown in it
a sheen of green—

forget the pelicans and pretty ducks,
this is happening to you

you are the one
sealed in scum

you feel your scalp aching
your head trying to breathe
did you know we breathe through the skin?
only you can't, not any more,
never again,

your skin belongs to business now
this is the Midas touch of money
they trade in your skin on the bourse,
there is nothing left of the original you
you still are screaming
you make hardly any noise
your throat is choked with oil
you make only a little shushing noise
like money changing hands

you still worry about the pelicans and the sea turtles
you worry about the ducks and cormorants
the beautiful anhinga
but this is happening to you

a tar-black seagull
wings still flapping
is stuck to your shoulders

you can't breathe any more
you pray for the pelicans
are you praying for them or to them
and you are the pelican now

Robert Kelly