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A CURATED FORUM FOR ART & CULTURE

frameworks of absence

Brandon Ballengée in conversation with Sarah Allen Eagen

Tears of Ochún. 2012. Cleared and stained Grass shrimp (Palaemonetes species) collected in the Gulf of Mexico in fall 2012. Unique specimen as biological sculpture in a series of 500, examined as part a pilot study by the artist/biologist. Photograph by Laurence Godart. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

by Sarah Allen Eagen

BRANDON BALENGÉE IS A VISUAL ARTIST, BIOLOGIST, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST BASED IN NEW YORK. I FIRST MET HIM AT THE SCHOOL OF VISUAL ART'S NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY LAB. BRANDON WAS AN INSTRUCTOR AT THE BIOART SUMMER RESIDENCY PROGRAM THAT I WAS PARTICIPATING IN. HE HELPED TO INTRODUCE RESIDENTS TO BIOART – A TERM REFERRING TO INTERSECTING DOMAINS OF THE BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES AND THE PLASTIC ARTS – AND THE WAYS IT CAN PROMOTE AWARENESS OF HOW BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES ALTER SOCIAL, ETHICAL, AND CULTURAL VALUES IN SOCIETY. HE ALSO WALKED PARTICIPANTS THROUGH SCIENTIFIC PROCESSES (SUCH AS PRESERVING OCTOPI) THAT HELPED THEM REALIZE THEIR PROJECTS. BOTH BRILLIANT SCIENTIST AND ESTABLISHED ARTIST, HE WAS VERY GENEROUS WITH HIS TIME AND ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SHARING HIS EXPERTISE.

DFA 186: Hadēs, 46 x 34 inches, 2012. Unique digital-C print on watercolor paper. Cleared and stained Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

Eagen: Can you tell me about your research background and what inspired you to expand your work from the fields of biology and activism to art?

Balengée: For me art and biology have always been connected. Growing up in rural Ohio I always drew and recorded animals. As a teenager, I had a full wetlab in my parents' basement to study and breed South American electric fishes and other aquatic species. Also during this time I made giant paintings in our barn turned art studio. So it has always been natural for me to understand the world through the lens of art and science. Likewise growing up with a love for nature gave me a strong desire for conservation.

My practice as a scientist informs and inspires my art. While conducting primary research biological studies scientific methods and standards are rigorously followed. The art is an expression derived from these research experiences. While making art, I work more intuitively and reflect on the science questions in a different, less objective way. This looking from a different viewpoint inspires new questions, experiments and more science. So the practices inform one-another. However the results reach different audiences. Through science, I can achieve a better understanding of biological phenomenon and share the findings with the scientific community. Through art, I can reach audiences at different sensory levels. By seeing images or experiencing installations, viewers connect with organisms at an intimate, one to one level.

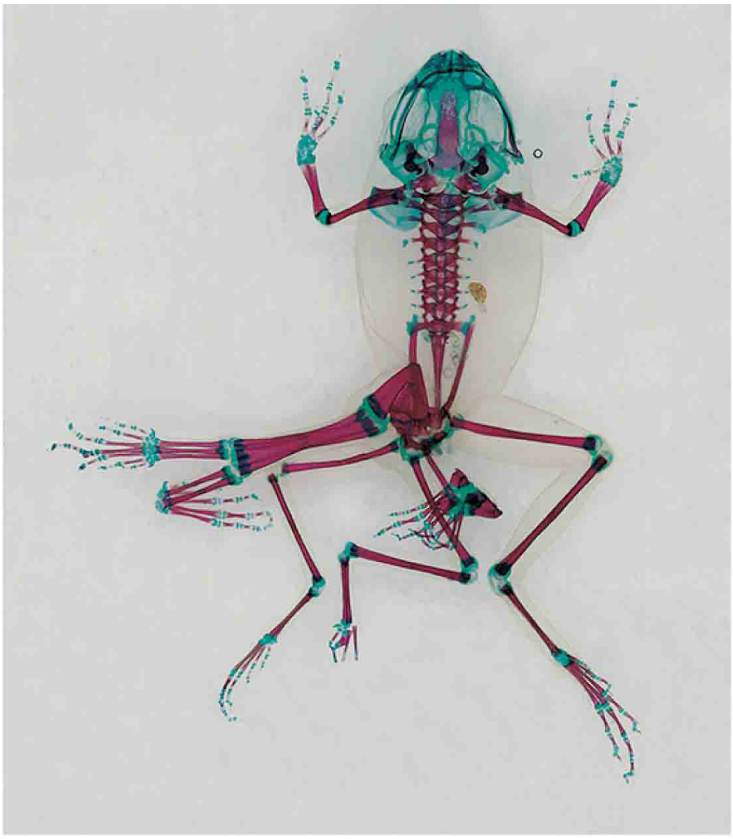
I also organize scientific field surveys open to the public called "Eco-Actions" where participants join in the sampling of aquatic species, observe wetlands and learn about the ecology of their backyards. Likewise I create wetlabs open to the public and encourage people to volunteer to aid in running experiments, collect data and make art about the experiences - so the process of science becomes transparent, participatory and reflective. In combination with my artworks, this forms my approach for ecosystem activism.

Styx: Variation III, 2008. Hasselt, Belgium. Mixed media installation with 9 cleared and stained Pacific treefrogs on sculptural light-box. In scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Photograph by Kristof Vrancken. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

Your work is part of the field of "BioArt." Can you explain what BioArt is, and how it blurs the lines between art and science?

Largely BioArt or Biological Art remains a nebulous term as the field is still emerging and defining itself. I define BioArt as works of art that involves working directly with living (biological) materials as media and incorporates living processes (growing, cellular mitosis, blooming, cloning, whole organism reproductions, healing) into the process of the art making. Such works must allow for molecular (genetic or cellular) or whole organisms responses to artist generated stimuli/manipulation/perturbation/environments. As such these works are open to a degree of chance/changes that occur post-artist involvement. Chance and change beyond the control of the artist is fundamental to BioArt.

The art to science/science to art cross-over is natural. Both are a means of making sense of the world around us and it is only recently that art and science have become so divided. Historically many scientists created art: Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin was a physician and poet; John Gould, John James Audubon, Alexander Wilson, Edward Lear were visual artists and early ornithologists; Ernst Haeckel described countless microbes through his beautiful drawings which informed his science; Leonardo da Vinci of course and many others. It is only recently (mostly after WWII) that academically restrictive boundaries between art and science have been so solidified. However these divisions appear to be eroding as there are numerous new academic initiatives involving the integration of art and science. It also very encouraging that several Bio/Eco-artists have made scientific discoveries resulting from their art practices, such as Helen and Newton Harrison, Tissue Culture and Art, Mel Chin, Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, myself and others.



DFA 18: Triton, 46.5 x 34.5 inches, 2001/07. Unique digital-C print on watercolor paper. Cleared and stained Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California. In scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Title by the poet KuyDelair. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

Your series Malamp: The Occurrence of Deformities in Amphibians depicts photographs of the bodies of terminally deformed frogs that have been chemically cleared and stained. Can you tell me about what inspired this project, and what the process behind these captivating images entails?

In the late 1980's, news started to come out about the global decline of amphibians and later malformation in their populations. I was immediately concerned and wanted to do something. So I began making art about them to get the message out and studying amphibian biology.

The Malamp artworks first started in 1996 with life-sized portraits of deformed frogs made from ash, coffee and polluted pond water where the animals were found on paper recycled from my old artworks. Between 1996 and 2000, I travelled extensively around North America conducting field studies and making these tiny portraits. Over time, these aesthetic choices evolved through trial and error, and today I respond to this issue artistically through the making of printed portraits or reliquaries of the individual deformed amphibians, sculptures involving actual specimens, videos, and participatory public field and laboratory studies.

The portraits, called *Malamp Reliquaries* (2001-current), are created from young frogs and toads found in nature with abnormalities so severe that they could not survive to adulthood. Predation and parasitic infection is natural among frogs, however my research and those of colleagues suggests these phenomena increases at wetlands impacted by environmental degradation. So it is nature made preternatural from human impact. My artwork attempts to give form to this idea as well as a presence to the lost deformed individuals.

The *Malamp Reliquaries* are high-resolution scanner photographs or chemically cleared and stained specimens. They are printed as unique watercolor ink prints (Iris) – so the color pallet is soft but rich, like a 19th century watercolor painting. In the artworks each individual frog is centered, appearing to "float" in what looks to be clouds or night skies. This otherworldly quality is reinforced by the titles named after Greco-Roman mythological characters. In the artworks, the frogs are scaled to appear approximately the size of a human toddler in an attempt to invoke empathy in the viewer instead of detachment or fear: if they are too small they will be dismissed, if they are too large they become monsters repelling viewers. Each finished artwork is unique and never editioned, to recall the individual animal and become a reliquary to a short-lived non-human life.

DFB 44: Pandora, 46 x 34 inches, 2013. Unique Iris print on Arches watercolor paper. Cleared and stained Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

The process you use of chemically clearing and staining the bodies of these amphibians both obscures direct representation, and makes their developmental deformities more visible. The images are at once beautiful and disturbing. Can you talk about your decision to show them in this way?

Literally clearing and staining is a chemical process, which means staining bone and cartilage with brightly colored dies while digesting surrounding tissues to transparency. The finished, chemically altered specimens look almost like x-rays, which enables a level of abstraction or distance yet simultaneously reveals the complex configuration of malformed development. Aesthetically, the colors of the dyed tissues are vibrant – very direct in contrast to the skin, which is semi-transparent and meant to look ephemeral. From the scientific standpoint, this enables a way to see subtle abnormalities in morphology, which could be easily missed prior to chemical treatments. From the artistic standpoint, the cleared and stained specimens are aesthetically compelling and show the delicate complex architectural anatomy of these tiny creatures.

Collapse, 12 x 15 x 15 feet, Installed at Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 2014. Mixed-media installation including 26,162 preserved specimens representing 370 species. Glass, Preffer and Carosafe preservative solutions. In collaboration with Todd Gardner, Jack Rudloe, Brian Schiering and Peter Warny. Photograph by David O. Brown. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

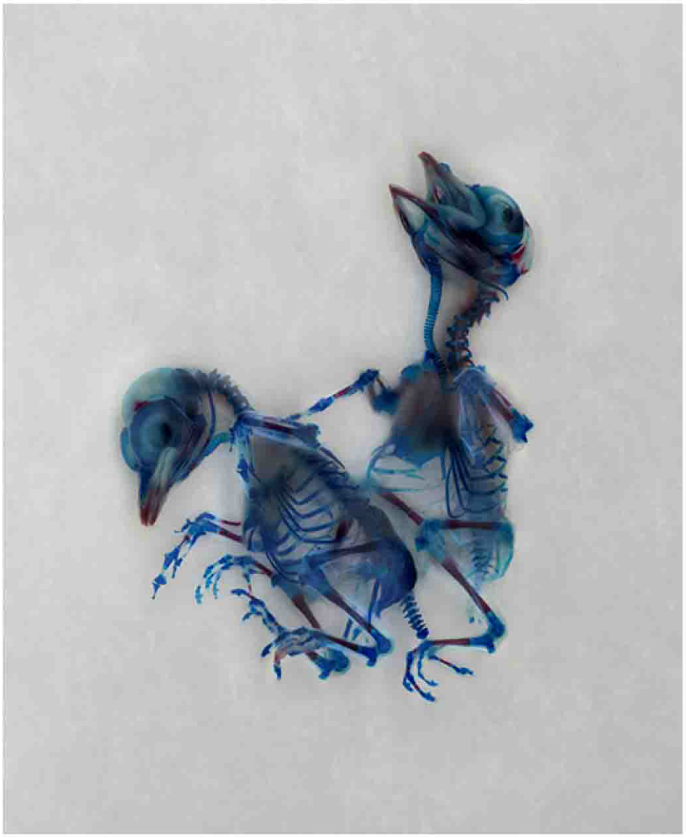
Your collaborative installation Collapse presents the viewer with 370 species of fish and other aquatic animals in gallon jars. Some jars are left empty. Can you talk a bit about what this work is about, and what it took to put such a large-scale installation together?

The 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon (DWH) oil spill was the largest environmental disaster in the history of the United States. The installation *Collapse* responded to the unraveling of the Gulf of Mexico's food-chain following the spill and use of teratological dispersants used to "clean" the oil. Physically, "Collapse" was a pyramid display of hundreds of preserved fish, other aquatic organisms and DWH contaminants in gallon jars. It was meant to recall the fragile inter-trophic relationships between Gulf species, and the way the spill has altered this ecosystem.

There were over 26,000 individual specimens in *Collapse* – from huge deep sea roaches (isopods), to oil stained shrimp with no eyes, to jars packed with tiny sea snails- it was really meant as a sketch, literally less than 5% of the biodiversity of the Gulf. Empty containers represented species in decline as a result of the disaster – visually this was a way to frame absence and suggest the ecosystem collapse. British Petroleum claims that all is well with Gulf ecosystems, however, numerous species continue to show the devastating effects of the DWH disaster.

Collapse took more than two years to create and was made in collaboration with fellow biologists Todd Gardner, Jack Rudloe, and Peter Warny and with two former student artists Mike Madden and Brian Schiering. Together we worked to collect, identify and preserve the numerous specimens as well as keep up with research to make certain the piece reflected the reality of the Gulf environment. Numerous others helped in the Gulf states by sending specimens from their fishing catches, oil stained sediment samples and up to date data.

Currently, *Collapse* is on display at the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University through June 8 as part of the Beyond Earth Art exhibition. *Collapse* will travel to the National Academy of the Sciences Gallery in Washington DC this fall.



*Touch of Light in the foggy Night that reverberates the Desire calls Death, Madness, Motionless...Voluptuousness rounded in an arch bombed....*85.5 x 70 inches, 2010/12. From series "Season in Hell". Unique digital Chromogenic print. In scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions with titles from a poem by KuyDelair. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

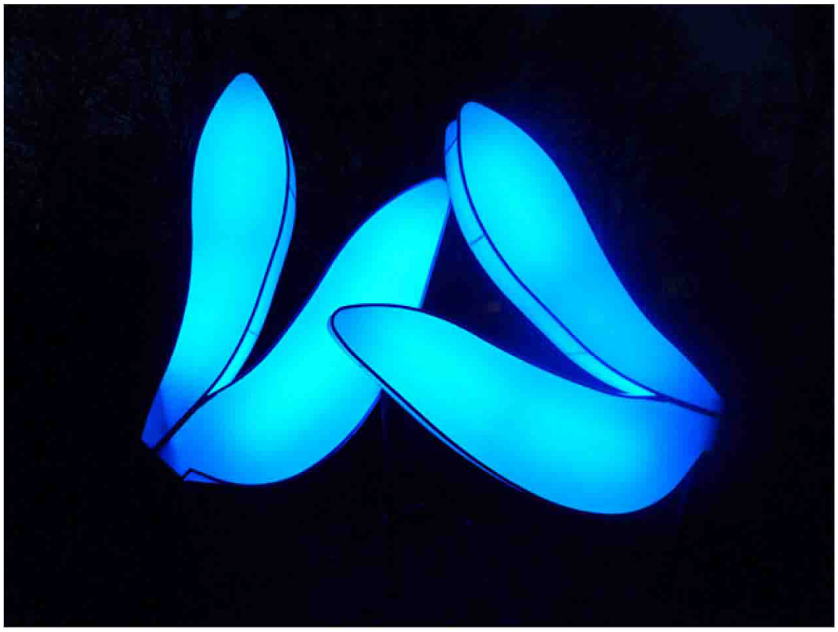
Can you talk about the role of collaboration in your work?

In scientific research, collaboration is normal. However, in art, we are trained to work alone and express our individual ideas. Yet, since the 60's, artists have increasingly been working collaboratively with people from different professional backgrounds – scientists, engineers, farmers, software designers as well as with the public or groups of students. As such, collaborations can implement increased complexity of ideas in art projects. Instead of one author or one perspective, in genuine collaborative projects, people come from different skilled backgrounds and work through different models of approach. During the working

process, natural blurring or overlaps occur between disciplines - a kind of cross-pollination of knowledge and skills. Innovation happens precisely because participants approach problems differently and may express results in divergent ways.

When I first began the amphibian studies, most other researchers I contacted were open to collaborating. Some sent papers, some sent specimens, while with others, we just discussed ideas. In 1996, Peter Warny (biologist with the New York State Museum) was the first to nudge me towards conducting quantifiable field-surveys. Within a couple of years, I was working on amphibian field-research for the North American Reporting Center for Amphibian Malformations (a former United States Geological Survey program). My findings were shared with the amphibian research community. As the projects have become larger and more members of the public have been involved, this sharing of collected data has continued. If enough quantifiable data is collected to suggest a phenomenon, it is shared with a larger-scientific community through publishing in peer-reviewed journals. Since 2009, I have been a visiting scientist at McGill University studying deformed amphibians with numerous collaborators.

Almost all of my art and science projects involve, to some degree, collaboration with other scientists, even sound artists, sometimes poets, sometimes other visual artists. As today's environmental problems are often large-scale and complex, we need creative people working together to look at issues from different angles, jointly problem-solve and find solutions.



Love Motel for Insects: Anax Junius Variation, 2 x 30 meters, summer 2012, Smithsonian National Zoological Park, Washington DC, USA. Outdoor installation and Eco-Actions (public field-trips) with: Black Ultra-violet lights, steel, fabric, native plants, invited insects. Photographs by Brandon Ballengée. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

I am particularly fascinated with your on-going series of outdoor installations Love Motel for Insects. These works consist of ultraviolet lights on enormous canvases and are designed to construct situations between humans and nocturnal arthropods. This series started in 2001, how have these installations changed over time?

Love Motel for Insects is intended to construct situations between humans and nocturnal arthropods – a huge diverse group that most of us never see. The works use ultra-violet lights to attract, but not harm, insects. At each site, the bugs breed and create pheromone paintings. I invite people to come watch, collect data and explore this fascinating side of nature.

These works have become the backdrop for vibrant community events, such as picnics, graffiti jams, political rallies, scientific investigations, musical events, and even local film screenings relating to local species, and collaborating members of the public are invited to participate in activities they help to create.

This series of works began over a decade ago in Costa Rica when I placed bed sheets and a portable black-light on the jungle floor. Within an hour, hundreds of arthropods were attracted – moths, Hemipteras, beetles, caddisflies, mantids, and many more – so much diversity of colors, shapes, and sizes. The next night, I invited others to join in this insect watching and found they were just as interested as me.

Fascinated and inspired by this initial experience, I began creating black-light sculptures and public nocturnal field-trips around the world. Over time, the *Love Motel for Insects* has evolved from very minimal forms to shapes inspired by the insects themselves.

To date, the sculptures have appeared in New York's Central Park, on a boat in Venice, on bogs in Ireland, on isolated moors

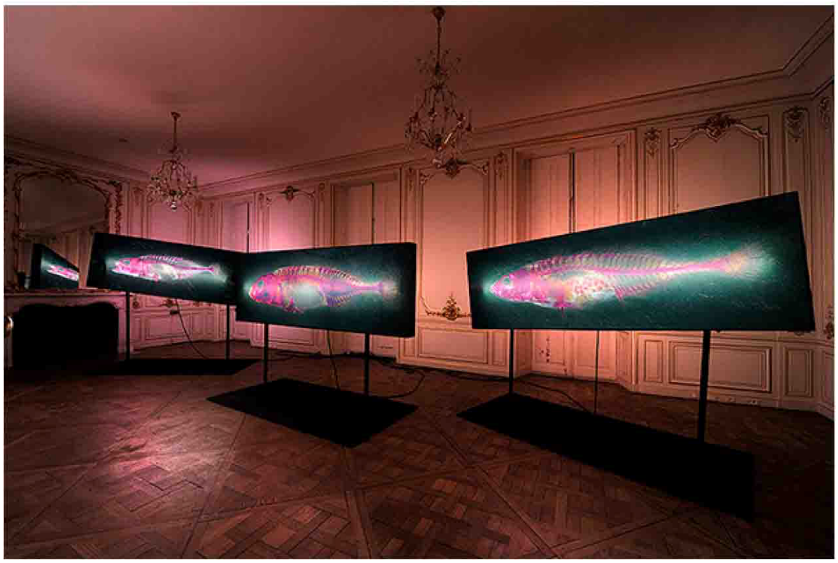
in Scotland, in a bustling Delhi shopping mall, in a Mexican desert, on a New Haven inner-city bus stop, on a London roof top, in Korean mountainsides, on Louisiana bayous. Currently, the entire Museum Het Domein in Sittard (Netherlands) is one enormous sculpture.

Dying Tree, Summer 2012. Domaine de Chamarande, France. Photograph by Laurence Godart. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

Your project Dying Tree involved placing a dying tree into a museum and embedding highly sensitive microphones into the outer cellular layers. The sound of water evaporating from the layers of wood tissue was amplified. As the cells dried out and died, they gave a voice to a slow death that might otherwise go unnoticed. This is such a compelling idea. How did the audience react to this exhibit?

As humans, our individual sensory processes and ability to recall memories largely governs our perception of time. We view the world (nature, time, environment, other organisms) through an anthropomorphic lens. Yet what if we were confronted with the slow death of another species? How could this alter our perception of time and what living/dying/extinction means for our own species and others? These were among the questions that prompted *Dying Tree*.

Dying Tree was meant to an audible ghost, allowing people to hear time through the slow death of a tree. The concept consisted of implanting highly sensitive transducers into the outer cellular layers of a terminally ill tree. The transductive microphones amplified the sound of water evaporating from the varied layers of wood tissue, as the cells dry as they are dying. The first experiment of this project debuted last summer at the Domaine de Chamarande in Essonne, France. Sadly, it is impossible to gauge what visitors received from this experience. I hope to create a larger longer term version of this project someday, for which the sounds are recorded over several decades.



Ti-tânes, 1 x 3 meters each, 2012/2013. Duratrans prints on double sided light-boxes. Photograph by Laurence Godart. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

What is next for your work?

I am working on several projects including new *Frameworks of Absence* and continuing my *Ti-tânes* series. With the *Ti-tânes* series, I aim to portray ancient animal species, which are able to survive (perhaps even thrive) in habitats environmentally impacted by human activity. Such organisms have endured millions of years and are now adapting to today's ecological degradation. Symbolically the series is meant to link such animals to archaic lingering nature deities surviving, banished, in now degraded environs. It also references time in the ecological sense through species who have existed for much longer, and perhaps will survive much longer, than our own.

My complete *Ti-tânes* series will consist of twelve finished works, in reference to the twelve historic Titans mentioned in Greek mythology. To date, I have completed three. These initial artworks depicted Nine-spine stickleback fish collected in the polluted canals of Essonne, France in 2012. This species, though ancient, appears to be thriving at least in part due to warming waters and their ability to survive in contaminated wetlands.

Though the actual fish were small (approximately 1.5 inches each), in order to create the mythical portraits, each image was printed on transparent film measuring at over 10 feet each in length. The films were then exhibited on double-sided freestanding light-boxes. As three-dimensional units, each portrait depicts the side views of each individual fish, as they are as unique as each of us. They are scaled so that the human viewer sees them at a magnitude beyond our ordinary bodily scale-grandiose and sublime like nature herself. Viewed as skeletons they are not meant to represent death but instead life persisting in ecosystems made preternatural by human activity.

Lough Boora Parklands, Ireland, 2010. Photograph by Kevin O'Dwyer. *Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY*

BRANDON BALLENGÉE'S ART HAS BEEN EXHIBITED INTERNATIONALLY AND IN THE SUMMER OF 2013 THE FIRST CAREER SURVEY OF HIS WORK DEBUTED AT THE CHÂTEAU DE CHARAMARANDE IN ESSONNE (FRANCE), AND RECENTLY TRAVELLED TO THE MUSEUM HET DOMEIN IN SITTARD (NETHERLANDS) IN 2014. RECENT SOLO EXHIBITIONS HAVE BEEN THE SCHUYLKILL CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION (PHILADELPHIA, USA: 2013); RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS (NEW YORK CITY, USA: 2012); LONGUE VUE HOUSE AND GARDENS (NEW ORLEANS, USA; 2011); PAV, CENTRO D'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA (TURIN, ITALY: 2010); NOWHERE GALLERY (MILAN, ITALY: 2009); YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK (WAKEFIELD, ENGLAND: 2008); CENTRAL PARK'S ARSENAL GALLERY (NEW YORK CITY, USA: 2007); PEABODY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, USA: 2007); AND OTHERS. HIS WORKS HAVE BEEN INCLUDED IN SEVERAL INTERNATIONAL BIENNALES AND FESTIVALS INCLUDING DOCUMENTA 13 (GERMANY: 2012); PROSPECT 2 NEW ORLEANS (USA: 2011); TRANSMEDIALE 11 (GERMANY: 2010); 3RD MOSCOW BIENNALE (RUSSIA: 2009); BIENNALE FOR ELECTRONIC ARTS PERTH (AUSTRALIA: 2007); VENICE BIENNALE (ITALY: 2005); GEUMGANG NATURE ART BIENNALE (SOUTH KOREA: 2004); AND OTHERS. IN 2011 HE WAS AWARDED A CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP FELLOWSHIP FROM THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY'S TOGETHERGREEN PROGRAM (USA). SEE MORE OF HIS WORK AT BRANDONBALLENGEE.COM.