

SUSAN MALMSTROM  
**BEYOND WORDS**

Opposite:  
*Loose Ends*



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## BEYOND WORDS: ARCHAIC HERITAGE

Framed by confining oval portals, their backs to the viewer and hands clasped behind them, a man and a woman steal glances at each other through the shadows. Arranged like specimens, they are separated by seemingly identical illustrations of butterflies, one squarely canceled by an “X,” inked in by an omniscient hand. Although the visual cues in *Natural Selection* all suggest a destiny beyond the control of the subjects it affects, the composition more keenly addresses the vast mystery of willful choice. Maybe there’s nothing terribly evolved about mate selection, the piece seems to say, vacillating between embarrassment and ecstasy. Perhaps more mystifying than the incompatible pair is the perfectly matched one.

Is this Darwin’s Eden or God’s laboratory?

Freud’s contention was that human beings share an “archaic heritage,” and he located in Oedipal and repressive impulses what he called “memory-traces.” Denounced as unscientific, the concept of archaic heritage (reductively applied by Freud and, arguably, improved upon by Jung’s collective unconscious) posits that human memory is linked phylogenetically, that is, we inherit directly from our ancestors remnants of knowledge and experiences predating us by generations.

In Freud the “fixed symbolism” of our archaic heritage appears primarily in dreams, triggering a sort of atavistic recognition that the psychoanalyst coaxes the subject into articulating. In Susan Malmstrom’s appropriately titled series *Beyond Words*, we find the ineffable memory-trace displayed in shadow boxes with overtones of western scientific taxonomies and fetishistic collecting and labeling. Clichés abound (Freudian and otherwise), in the clipped and pragmatic titles as well as within the art-history-rich, Belmeresque anxieties of *Natural Selection*, *Hidden Beauty*, and *Maternal Instinct*. More reminiscent of Angela Carter than David Lynch, less so of Gregory Crewdson than David Laundy, these pieces leave us feeling comforted as well as unsettled by what we think we remember when we see them.



*Skin Deep*

Although a Cornelian voyeurism may govern *Beyond Words*, Malmstrom thwarts temptations to cling too personally to an object. Which is not to say she recoils from the fetish entirely. Victims of head injuries seem to hold particular fascination, for instance, expressed by wry references to Phineas Gage's lacerated skull as a "foreign object" on display at Harvard Medical School, and to Eadweard Muybridge's obsession with the fallen woman, a staple of his time and, it seems, his own concussed and checkered past. But

just when the stories seem to have been laid bare, revealing astonishing longings, Malmstrom, more deliberately conspicuous than Cornell in referencing scientific dioramas, conceals the full scope of her personal investment. She dismantles these pieces following digital capture; the Scrabble tiles of the titles are, by definition, modular and meant to be erased, like a chalk board. Thus, like real-time experiences, they disintegrate, leaving only memories. Members of the same family sometimes discover that personal memories alter based on the limited information contained in the record, which we embellish in our respective imaginations. Here among the faintly familiar art reproductions, old maps, household items, and natural history specimens we catch glimpses into someone else's surprising world of personal fears, fantasies, and recollections, to be sure. But the atavistic memory-trace tugs and we find ourselves "remembering" something that happened to us — the conflicts embedded in the Red Queen's *Mood Swing*, the dismaying luck of the draw suggested by *Shared Sacrifice*.

Malmstrom's stories aren't so much narrated as they are dissected into tropes. Witness the deconstructed nature of *Last Call*: literal references like a telephone confront more symbolic elements such as the finite nature of fossil fuels, the former a red herring that leads to simple meanings when, in fact, there's no linear route to a true solution. *Skin Deep* is performed on the classically draped stage of a freak show, artistic and scientific traditions bifurcating and conjoining. *Chaos Theory* might be Malmstrom's most obvious homage to the nonlinear by virtue of its title, where a deliberate tension is struck between the two words when read independently and as a concept. But the piece also engages the science-fiction romance of wildly warped trajectories, nature's terrifying forces masquerading as a thin film of order. Autobiographical works like *Flight Risk*, in which relief from a cold climate and a tyrannical spouse is envisioned for an ancestor, or *Separation Anxiety*, the artist's testament to traditional photography, unfold circuitously, with conflicting plots, because the road signs (primordial landscapes, Adam and Eve) direct us as much to the memory-traces of our archaic heritage as they do to one person's concrete experiences.

Most open to multiple and zigzagging interpretations is, in the artist's mind, *Historical Context*. Inspired, albeit, by a specific event, the piece exploits



*Chaos Theory*

our instinctive recognition of animal remains and the general awareness of ancient cave paintings. Quaintly framed and cradled like a fragile ornament in a pair of antlers, the central figures swim up into view from a murky ground. Whether we should hunt for the true sources of art — or, for that matter, memory — seems to be the question stalling the marksman in his tracks.

— *Carolyn Gray Anderson*, Los Angeles, CA, 2008

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST



*Checked Past*  
(detail)

*Checked Past*  
2007  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Chaos Theory*  
2007  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

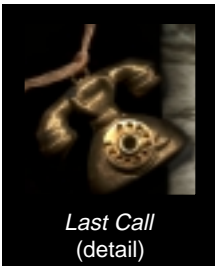
*Flight Risk*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Foreign Object*  
2008  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Hidden Beauty*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Skin Deep*  
2008  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Historical Context*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

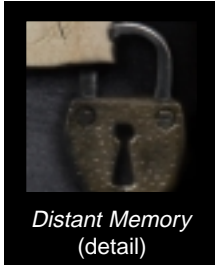


*Last Call*  
(detail)

*Loose Ends*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

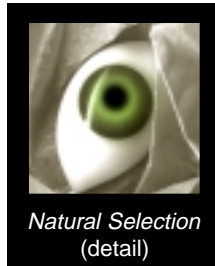
*Maternal Instinct*  
2008  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Mood Swing*  
2008  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"



*Distant Memory*  
(detail)

*Distant Memory*  
2008  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

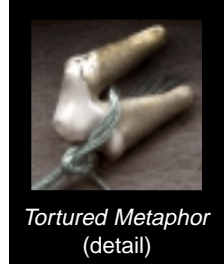


*Natural Selection*  
(detail)

*Natural Selection*  
2007  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Last Call*  
2008  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Sibling Rivalry*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"



*Tortured Metaphor*  
(detail)

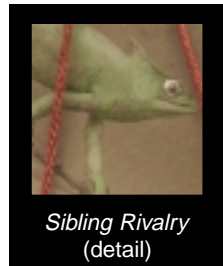
*Tortured Metaphor*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Separation Anxiety*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Shared Sacrifice*  
2007  
18" x 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

*Wishful Thinking*  
2008  
22" x 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

Each piece is produced as an ink jet print on Arches paper in a limited edition of 10.



*Sibling Rivalry*  
(detail)



*Hidden Beauty*

## A R T I S T ' S   S T A T E M E N T

Since the late 1980s, I have been creating still-life photographs, originally using antique processes, such as Vandyke and salted paper printing, invented during the earliest days of photography. In 2004, my method shifted dramatically, and now employs digital technology. Although contemporary media present different challenges than those of the 19th century, my work remains faithful to transforming real objects existing in time and space into non-reality based, allegorical imagery.

I have always liked my still life pieces to look like a kind of “Titanic debris field,” as though they were found scattered at the bottom of the ocean. This stems in part from the first excitement at seeing images come up through the photo chemicals in the tray.

Each work in my series *Beyond Words* begins with a two-word phrase in current, common usage amongst English-speaking North Americans. The compositions, while based on idioms used in contemporary culture, resonate through shared symbology, inviting endlessly varied individual interpretation.

## S U S A N   M A L M S T R O M

Susan Malmstrom was born in Orange, California, and attended California State University, Long Beach, where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a Specialization in Printmaking in 1985. She was awarded a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts from the University of California at Irvine in 1991. Her work is exhibited and collected in the United States and Canada. She immigrated to Canada in 2004, and currently works and resides in the village of Bear River, Nova Scotia.





ARTsPLACE Gallery  
Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, Canada  
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du Canada