

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Callosum*, an exhibition by LB Buchan, at the Courthouse Gallery from July 9 - October 21, 2021. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.

Pauses in the Continuum

Fertile Confusions

LB Buchan (who uses the pronouns they/them) is a sculptor whose work plays with ambiguities of identification. Their sculptures in the exhibition, *Callosum*, are a sort of hinge, swinging from the familiar to the unfamiliar and back again. Many of the pieces resemble some excerpt of human anatomy, and just at the moment you think you might have identified the organ, it begins to slip away – resembling instead some obscure sea creature, about to swim back to depths that have escaped a thorough cataloguing. There is the suggestion – which could be either disturbing or emancipatory – that your inner mechanisms might have a life of their own, and might take flight to more comfortable habitats.

The piece *Cornusyncerus* is very blatant in its flickering – I saw a cattle skull first, and then the reproductive matrix of ovaries, fallopian tubes, and birth canal. It seems less a study in structural irony (an image of death entwined with an image of birth) than an exploration of common ground. It's a sort of collapsed mirror, where the bilateral symmetry of hard



bone scaffolding finds reflection in soft tissues. The reproductive organs are the rare human organ with such clear symmetry; on the outside, it's easy enough to split us right down the middle, but once you venture inside, it's the wet tetris of one thing piled atop another. The solid fixity of the sculpture's symmetry binds the horned skull and the reproductive system into a mask of strength and power. It also slyly – in an unsettling way – suggests both could be reduced to the status of a wall trophy.

Cornusyncerus, Cherry, 33" x 48" x 8", 2018

Most of the sculptures, however, are less easy to pin down to their referents. One thing shades into another, and it's harder to figure out what those "things" are, or what the precise distance is between them. *Canal* could be a portion of a digestive tract, though it also appears to be outfitted with wings or ears – and the ruffles that flare out from the upper arc could be the



Sensor, Maple, 25" x 14 1/2" x 3 1/2", 2020



Canal, Maple, 20" x 15" x 7", 2021

ragged leaves pulled back by a dissection knife, or they could be a rippling fin. *Sensor* first calls to mind a heart, with its aortic crown – but then the sleek cephalopod-like body turns the tubes into truncated tentacles, or probing trunks, or exhaust pipes. What could be a sheaf of muscle or a rudder could also be an ornamental display – it looks a bit like a dress, suddenly caught in the wind.

LB sometimes refers to their forms as "amalgams" – in their process of conceptualizing the form, LB starts with an image they find absorbing, and then goes down a wormhole of research and associations, chasing other images the first one reminds them of. "It's a long visual journey, and I'm doing sketches all the time, and they're evolving all the time." The forms are not "improvised" or "discovered" through the sculpting process – LB has it worked out in their mind, and their sketchbook, beforehand. "Otherwise you waste a lot of material – you're already turning 40-60 percent of your lumber into dust in the process as it is."

LB pegs themselves as someone constantly "inputting and collecting" visual information. "I'm obnoxious to go on a walk with because I'm constantly stopping to either pick up dried leaves or take pictures of things." Google is a tool, as are books of anatomical and botanical art, and illustrations of fauna. The visual rhymes that LB teases out leap across those disciplines. The

bridges built from one category to the next are, perhaps, related to the title of the show – *Callosum*, an abbreviation of corpus callosum, the bundle of nerve fibers that bridge the left and right hemispheres of the brain so that signals can be sent across the divide.

The sculptures leap past the boundaries of both scientific taxonomy and time – some of the forms added in the process of visual accrual and editing are drawn from extinct species. And some of the disorientation that attends to the end result – the not-quite-rightness – is a sort of haunting, or an invocation of disappearance. Even extant contemporary references are somewhat haunted – a cadaver dissection book LB has been using compiles documentary photographs of the process. Regarding the cadavers, LB said: “There are these ghosts that are part of the story. I don’t know who these people are. But it’s important to not forget that they are people.”

Askew Recognitions

LB’s impulse to create these amalgamated forms isn’t decorative or ornamental – it’s fundamentally philosophical. It’s about placing us – the viewers – in the continuum of living forms. “We’re all made of the same stuff. This idea that we as humans are a superior being, and put ourselves up on this pedestal – I don’t buy that. We’re all of the earth, we’re all made of cells. That’s one of the things I’m trying to say, by pulling all those pieces into the form.”



Transverse, Maple, 17" x 19" x 7", 2020

The sculptures subtly chip away at our certitude that we stand apart. If we mistake some part of us for something else, we can perhaps find ourselves in something else.

When I asked LB if they’d had a personal experience of feeling the sense of continuum – linking themselves to the world in a way that smudged the boundaries between them – it got them thinking about Montana. “I grew up in Montana. I was outside all the time. We had a lot of farm animals. It’s a hunting culture, so you’re seeing animals alive, you’re seeing the process of them being killed, you’re seeing the process of them being skinned and

butchered, and then you’re eating them – all of that was really, really fascinating to me as a kid. I wanted to see every part of the process. That’s really fed the work.”

LB recalled someone who fed the local deer buckets and buckets of corn, and who was against the killing of animals – but who wasn't vegetarian. "I remember her coming down our driveway once, and there was a dead deer that was about to be butchered, and she got really, really upset. But she ate meat all the time, she just bought it in the supermarket." Without being judgmental about the ethics underpinning food choices, the disjuncture stuck with LB. "I always thought the disconnect that people have between the things they're consuming and the fact that these are real beings – it was just really interesting to me as a kid, and remains so as an adult."

I'm not sure that this disconnect between compassion and consumption can be rightly described as a form of sentimentality – but regardless, to my eye, LB's work seems to express a sort of compassion free of sentimentality.

Feeling Breathing

Beyond the impression LB's milieu has left on their work, there are more intimate elements of biography bound up with it, too. Back to internal symmetries, some of the pieces resemble lungs. *Transverse* has that quality, with two joined but separate halves rising up through a kind of



Tributaries, Maple, 19 1/2" x 24" x 9", 2020

collar, where a column juts up in a sort of esophageal cry. *Tributaries*, too, has the shape of conjoined halves, with rough extrusions that could be functional parts of the two lobes, or an inflamed wound boiling up off the surface.

I asked LB if these types of pseudo-organs had to do with the somatic experiences we have of our own internal organs. There's a sharp clarity to organs displayed in medical diagrams, where outlines have been determined by prior autopsies and excavations. This is quite different from our own subjective experience of our internal organs – where the boundaries are harder to mark off, diffused in an opaque and variegated skein of sensation. Having trouble breathing, for instance, has less to do with an

outlined image than with a blurry web of feelings that can permeate the body far beyond the chest cavity. I wondered if this was related to these sculpted "imagined organs" – whether they might diverge from visually accurate depictions of human organs in order to give a sense of how we experience them – not how they're seen, but how they're felt.

Bringing up that question of breathing, LB talked about their deceased eldest brother, Mark – and the echoes of lungs seemed to be attached to their relationship. Mark had health issues, being born with a right pulmonary artery missing. As a result, less oxygen was delivered to his body through one lung – and the fully working lung was hyper-tense, because it had to accommodate a larger influx of blood. “I think that’s one of the reasons why lungs have been a recurring thing that has shown up in my work over the years. How different that must have been for him – in experiencing the world, experiencing different altitudes – he couldn’t play sports as a kid.”

It’s new for LB to talk about these very personal traces in the work – and the work itself is hardly frontal, or confessional, in terms of biography. Part of their prior reticence stemmed from a feeling that, perhaps, it was a big leap for the audience to take, from what they see on the wall to “this inner dialogue of mine that’s more about grief.” But as their work has progressed, the macro level of LB’s concerns – engaging with climate change, species extinction, the Anthropocene – has drifted to this more intimate scale.

When I asked LB why they work in wood, they said “I fell in love with it, really. I started making sculpture when I was 18 in college. It wasn’t something I was interested in at all – I got talked into taking a class. And I just fell in love with it – I quit everything else I was doing.” There is a tactility that’s attractive about it – “Everybody wants to touch them,” LB says of the sculptures. “Sometimes people will ask me in a gallery setting – and [I have to say] I can’t give you permission to touch them. But I do tell people you can make a studio visit, and you can touch the work. They do want to be touched.” There was something sustaining about the sense of physical contact when making this work, under the shadow of COVID – “We were all starved for human contact of all kinds. So that was one of the things I was thinking about [while working].”

The inviting aliveness of wood seems essential to the way these sculptures function. LB has tried ceramics, but hated the kind of mess it made – “The wet mess versus the dry mess.” They’ve carved stone, and briefly tried welding – “Those materials are wonderful for certain things, but they don’t feel alive to me the way wood feels alive.” And in fact, though this work references the fatally still theater of the anatomical exhibit and the taxidermist’s display – where the sense of peace has been won through the application of formaldehyde – the sculptures have none of that sense of the end-point, the terminus. They don’t feel like they’ve been stopped – merely paused for our regard. They’re caught in a moment, and not laid out in an attitude of funereal repose. Their delicacy and sense of flow give them a profoundly transitory air. They seem like they’re on their way to somewhere else – some other place, or some other form.

Chris Lanier
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LB Buchan,
photo credit Richard Darbonne

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