



From the Valley of the World

By Al Harris-Fernandez

I woke up just as we were rolling down the Rio Grande valley through Clint, Ysleta and El Paso.... To our left across the vast Rio Grande spaces were the Moorish-red mounts along the Mexican border, the land of the Tarabumare; soft dusk played on the peaks. Straight ahead lay the distant lights of El Paso and Juárez, sown in a tremendous valley so big that you could see several railroads puffing at the same time in every direction, as though it was the Valley of the World. We descended into it.
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*



The contrast between sections of El Paso and Juárez— of the First World butting up against Third World conditions— can be startling. It's there as you drive along US Interstate 10 parallel to the Rio Grande. On the left is the beautiful campus of the University of Texas-El Paso, on the right, over a gleaming guardrail, you see a Mexican neighborhood: brightly painted adobe homes sitting next to shacks made of recycled tin and cardboard perched on the side of a bare, bleached brown hill. Looming over this scene is Mt. Cristo Rey, a rock and cactus-covered peak topped by a huge stone crucifix set on the imaginary line separating the two countries.

The drama of this environment is startling to newcomers. Employees of the Fortune 500 companies transferred here are given hardship pay to cushion the jolt. Some fall in love with the area and don't want to leave. An artist from Indiana once told me that life in this area of the country seemed bare and raw, closer to the surface than he had ever experienced.

This is the environment in which James Drake spent his formative years, and in which I also grew up. Drake's involvement in the bicultural milieu of the region is more intimate than most due to his family's Mexican import business.

As border towns, El Paso and Juárez exist in a comparatively comfortable level of lawlessness. Not necessarily a violent place, its

COVER: *Valley of the World*, 18" x 35", Lithograph and python skin, 1994. One of a series of seven.

LEFT: *Blue Love Seat*, 84" x 76" x 18", Welded steel, paper and engine, 1990.

RIGHT: *Artificial Life in the Valley of the World*, 116" x 83" x 138", Automobile engine, python skin and lift, 1994.



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lawlessness is based on a history of smuggling, in both directions, and in the free movement of its citizens. The niceties of paying duty and adhering to proper immigration and work permit regulations are regularly overlooked. This lawlessness reinforces the cowboy/macho culture of the region, celebrated in snakeskin boots, snakeskin skirts, cockfights, gunracketing pick-up trucks on the US side and an occasional machine gun execution of a drug kingpin on the Mexican side.

Drake explored this aspect of the region in earlier works. In *The Trophy Room* (1985), the artist fabricated a complete, larger-than-life environment of welded raw steel. The installation featured a self-contained room furnished with a fireplace mantel, chairs, tables, assorted weapons and stuffed animal trophies. Later this reflection on male culture would take a more minimalist form. In *Machine Gun Bench* (1987), Drake fabricated a large steel bench with

two larger-than-life machine guns tucked away in a face-off beneath the bench's seat.

These works explored the subject of knives, guns and animal trophies through the material of welded and riveted steel, reflecting the severity and harshness of the El Paso/Juárez environment. A later body of work would combine the unpolished steel with more direct reference to the visual environment of the area.

In *Blue Love Seat* (1989), two open-sided steel boxes flank another, slightly larger box containing a motorcycle engine. These are lined up in front of an altar-like panel: a monochrome field of cobalt blue pigment framed in steel. Drake notes that the fields of powdered pigment that distinguish the works of this period bring to mind the intense colors commonly used to paint area homes and small businesses.

Blue Love Seat is the first work in which Drake employs a found object—the motorcycle engine—

instead of fabricating one out of steel. Incorporated into the shrine-like work, the engine functions as a religious object. This could be interpreted as mirroring the Christian cosmology of Jesus as God incarnate, but with the engine as the incarnation of the human body in the form of technology.

In *Artificial Life in the Valley of the World*, Drake takes this idea further, carefully encasing an automobile engine in snake skin, then hanging it like a carcass from an A-frame lift. In another work from the same period, *Snakeskin Engine*, Drake resurfaces a motorcycle engine with python skin. In both these works Drake synthesizes animal and machine, creating a “snake-engine,” conjuring the primitive and the modern, the familiar and the alien. Hanging like a carcass, the snake-engine suggests that we are not as far from our primordial roots as the mediation of our modern technologies might have us believe.

The connection between the snake

and technology is ancient. The snake is a powerful and possibly most rudimentary of all our symbols. While it represented infinity and rebirth in ancient times, today, at least in the Judeo/Christian cosmology of the West, it has come to symbolize evil and our estrangement from paradise; that is, nature.

After banishing Adam and Eve from the garden, separating them from nature, God provided them with clothing in the form of animal skins. Thus the story of Adam and Eve is also the story of the invention—as either gift or curse—of technology. According to this interpretation, humankind's first technology was an animal skin, extending our own skin, protecting us from the elements and hiding our nakedness.

In addition to these two obsessive works combining the mechanical and natural, Drake has also produced a series of diptychs featuring snakeskin.

These works are less brutally direct than previous works. They are more poetic and formally elegant, revealing a complex attachment to the subject matter.

In the seven diptychs comprising *Valley of the World*, the artist floats two rectangles in the center of a large sheet of white paper, leaving them surrounded with a generous border. Each diptych pairs a grainy black and white photo-lithograph with a rectangle cut from a python skin. Five of the photographic images appear to be of the same Mexican neighborhood viewed from Interstate 10 previously described. The other two images represent a modest suburban home and a bridge spanning a cement-banked river.

While the images in these works might not be recognizable for most viewers, they are familiar to me. The bridge spans the Rio Grande, connecting El Paso/Juárez, the house typical of modest suburban homes in El Paso. The remaining images

include a close-up of a shack constructed of recycled pieces of corrugated tin, oddly echoing the scales on the snakeskin. Another image is of a pile of what looks like trash, but in this context is definitely a stack of building materials. Yet another image is of a fence constructed of used box springs.

Strangely, while the snakeskin references all that is associated with the snake, particularly its ability to slough off old skin and renew itself each spring, the snake's scales and patterning seem somehow related to the pixels in a digital image.

Between these earlier snakeskin works and his latest, Drake created several bodies of work dealing with sign systems and the universal human will to communicate. In *Tongue Cut*

ABOVE: *Valley of the World*, 18" x 35", lithograph and python skin, 1994. One of a series of seven.



Sparrows, an installation of photographs and video projections, he explored the use of a sign language that was developed by inmates in the El Paso County Jail. From their cell windows on the upper floors, the inmates use this language to communicate with their families and loved ones on the street below.

In his most recent work, Drake combines his interest in language systems with the symbolic power of the snakeskin, producing an especially effective work titled *Then the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they knew they were naked*. The work, whose title is taken from the Book of Genesis, Chapter 3, Verse 7, is a diptych comprised of two individually framed glass panels, each featuring a small photograph in the center. In each panel a single photograph—a close-up of a pair of hands, centered and mounted on a sheet of clear glass with a broad border—is framed in cobra skin.

The first image, a man's hands—a businessman judging from his

white shirt and tie—leans back in his chair, elbows resting on its arms. His hands are folded together as if listening rather than speaking. A woman, dressed in white, holds one hand in a fist while the other lays limp in her lap. Her hands are old and worn.

Both photographs display the gritty pattern of a video image. Drake produced these images by video-taping his original photographs and then re-photographing them from the monitor. The result is a heavily mediated image. It has a gritty quality similar to a newspaper reproduction of a still from a surveillance video. Reinforcing this "real life" surveillance quality is the transparency of the glass and the stark shadows cast by the images on the wall behind them.

The combination— of the title, the snakeskin, the mediated image, the posing of the hands, the transparent glass and the stark shadows— imply multiple dualities: unequal powers, intimacy and

distance, the mechanical and organic, the particular and the universal.

While Drake's work has been criticized for its macho qualities, it surveys an inescapable truth of the artist' formative experience in El Paso/Juárez. Drake's work succeeds because it couches the universal in the vernacular of a specific place and experience. He balances the symbolic power of the snake with the formal qualities and the emotional reality of the El Paso/Juárez environment, which is harsh, powerful and starkly beautiful.

ABOVE: *"Then the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they knew they were naked."*, diptych, each 37" x 38" x 2", Cobra skin, glass and photographs, 2000.

RIGHT: Installation view at the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, February, 2001.

BACK: Detail of *"Then the eyes..."*

Exhibition Checklist

"Then the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they knew they were naked.", diptych, each 37" x 38" x 2", Cobra skin, glass and photographs, 2000

Artificial Life in the Valley of the World, 116" x 83" x 138", Automobile engine, python skin and lift, 1994

Snake Skin Engine, 20" x 14" x 30", Python skin and motorcycle engine 1994

Valley of the World, 18" x 35", Lithograph and python skin, 1994

Blue Love Seat, 84" x 76" x 18", Welded steel, paper and engine, 1990

Machine Gun Bench, 20" x 64" x 16", Welded steel, 1987



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