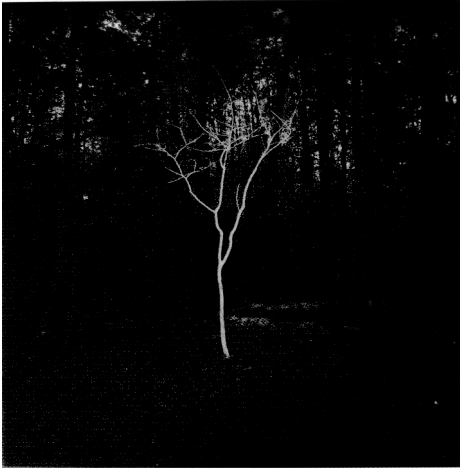


THE FANTASTICAL AND EXTRAORDINARY

The juxtaposition of works by Michelle Droll and Barry Underwood generates a discussion about places and situations in unusual and unexpected ways. Michelle Droll's brightly-colored, mixed media objects are made with found materials, such as paint remnants, Styrofoam™, plastic, and paper. An effervescent fusion of both painting and sculpture, these physically awkward structures evoke invented environments infused with imaginary thoughts and otherworldly narratives. In these works, Droll delves into conceptual flights of fancy and postulates questions such as: "How would one build or depict the impossible or the unachievable?"



In contrast to her former, more abstract works, Droll's most recent sculpture, presented in *Side by Side*, assumes figurative elements as she ventures into an exploration of what a landscape might dream of becoming. In a loud, cluttered, rather defiant take on the genre of landscape painting, *Site Bite* (2007) (fig. 10) depicts landscape as a huge golden mass of hair and wide open jaws with a base that resembles oceanic bedrock. Furry areas of blue and pink paint and fabric dominate the structure, a gold tooth adds "bling" to the gaping centralized void, and quills defensively ward off unwanted confrontation. In this excessively opulent work, Droll piles, balances, and weaves together paint, debris, and other materials to produce a big, whimsical object. The "junk" comes together for a moment, and its splendor coalesces. The mundane is embellished and transformed into an amusing, enticing, and extraordinary structure but in the end it is burdened by the true identity of its components—leftovers.

Barry Underwood's oeuvre consists of super-saturated color prints that capture secret or unusual moments in the natural world. Underwood emphasizes extraordinary events, orchestrating light, color, and framing to produce theatrical, almost mythical images. In *Little Blue Tree* (2006) (fig. 11) one is confronted by a radiating fluorescent tree that stands apart from the crowd, taking the place of an actual performer and begging



ABOVE (FIG. 11) Barry Underwood, *Little Blue Tree*, 2006
Chromogenic Print
28 x 28 inches

RIGHT (FIG. 9) Michelle Droll, *California Nowhere* (detail), 2006
Mixed media
47 x 41 x 11 inches

the question, "What is this image and how was it made?" Underwood's background in theater is clearly an influence and catalyst for works such as this one, which engenders a suspension of disbelief.¹⁶ Photographing these constructed scenes is comparable to a type of performance that involves enlisting the help of assistants and volunteers to construct massive sculptures within the landscape.¹⁷ The fabrication often takes weeks, and the photographs frequently must be taken in a single evening performance with the director, his cast, and crew. These photographs have long exposures, ranging anywhere from 30 minutes to four hours and once the image is recorded, the sculpture is destroyed. Underwood explains, "in this way, the work relates back to theater, to the concepts of temporality and ephemerality."¹⁸ As we are numbed by the over-abundance of digital manipulation in contemporary society and popular culture, these "purist" photographs—completely unaltered in the photographic or darkroom process—are a surprising and welcomed change.

In another body of work that addresses people and places, Underwood further investigates narrative and the psychological response of viewers to unusual circumstances.¹⁹ Connections between the image of the peculiar blue tree and a photograph of a stoic triathlete seem unlikely. In *Runner* (2006) (fig. 12), Underwood abandons his staged scenes in the woods for an examination of the everyday. The photograph captures an athlete upon completion of a physically demanding feat. Though an actual event, the scene of a woman adorned with a medal moments after she swam, cycled, and ran, is just as miraculous and awe-inspiring



as the scene portrayed in *Smoke* (2006) which captures a plume of smoke with self-combusting sparks in the tranquil forest. This work, and Underwood's sensibility as a whole, posits the question: "What constitutes an event, where the ordinary becomes the extraordinary?" Drawing inspiration and subject matter more from his immediate surroundings than the realm of fantasy, Underwood's camera absorbs many different sequences of events—staged or authentic—that take place within the field of his lens. The artist states, "[the work is about turning] the ordinary into the hyper-real, a banal landscape into a singular sensation. Lines between reality and imagination shift. The mundane and the seemingly familiar become significant."²⁰



ABOVE (FIG. 10) Michelle Droll, Drawing for *Site Bite*, 2006
 Marker and gouache on paper
 18 x 24 inches

Both Droll and Underwood take mundane objects or situations and elevate them to a state of phenomena and wonderment. Droll's objective is to make material junk boast importance and possess an elaborate narrative, where fantasy and make-believe are incited. For Underwood, it is concocting and capturing extraordinary scenes, such as a glowing hedge, or heightening the antiquated drive-in theatre to cult status and magnitude. For both these artists, the power of illusion and imagination is an inspiration.