

By Christopher Schnoor

# BEAUTY AND THE BEES

For Boise artist Stephanie Wilde one thing is always leading to another. A blood disorder in a loved one triggers a passionate pursuit over many years of capturing visually the tragedy of AIDS, particularly its epidemic proportions in Africa, and its parallels to the Black Plague in Europe centuries earlier. Or an innate sensitivity to the injustices inherent to the growing gap between the rich and poor in this country that, fueled by increasing exposure of deeds of corporate greed, culminating in the financial disaster of 2008, inspires a series of indictments in multi-media panels going back to 2000, as seen in her Harmed exhibition in 2009. Human suffering resulting from self-indulgence, arrogance, ignorance and denial has always been a clarion call to artistic action for Wilde, not only as an expression of moral outrage but as an opportunity to bring her aestheticism, passion for research, and humanistic instincts to bear in an art of great beauty and poignancy.

So where does this exhibit with its focus on bees fit into Wilde's oeuvre? In truth, The Golden Bees is both a departure from, and continuation of the art she has been making over the last 30 years. Nature and environmental subjects are not exactly what she is known for. Wilde is an intellectual, politically motivated artist with a deep interest in history and an encyclopedic knowledge of symbology whose geometrically abstract designs serve as a stage for human dramas. Narrative and allegory are critical elements of her art. Wildlife innocently flitting amongst elaborate floral settings is not a theme we expect from Wilde. Yet the subject here, i.e. the disappearing Western Honeybee, is really right down her alley: a malevolent biological/ecological puzzle creating a class of helpless victims which has serious ramifications for the rest of us,

and involving a creature embodying an elaborate mythology. Nevertheless, the work in this show was quite a challenge, requiring a different sort of imagery and approach than she was accustomed to making.

It began for her in 2008 when she learned of the mysterious ongoing disappearance of the Western Honeybee, for which no definitive cause has been found. The devastating effects of this inexplicable phenomenon could be far-reaching given the role of the honeybee in the ecosystem, and have led scientists to describe it as the "AIDS of the colony" or "colony collapse disorder," just as the medical community struggled to accurately define the AIDS disease in its early years. The implications of this potential catastrophe for mankind struck home with Wilde, resonating with her social consciousness and proclivity for harnessing figurative and decorative emblematic abstract art to address matters of human life and death.

The symbology of the honeybee and the life of the hive is rich with scientific, cultural, even religious significance throughout history which makes this a topic of multiple dimensions. Given their crucial role in the food chain, honeybees have always been emblems of hard work and industriousness, teamwork and perseverance, charity and selflessness with their unceasing endeavors for the common good of the hive and of humanity generally. The ancient perception that the bees' existence is an act of divine intervention rather than pro-creation have long made them symbols of chastity and purity as well. Part of Wilde's exhibit is dedicated to what she calls the "Angels of Agriculture," which emphasizes not only their sacred stature but also suggests a species passing on to an afterlife. Ruled by queens, bees have also been

emblematic of the Divine Feminine in both the occult and Greek traditions. And they have represented wisdom and an alchemical intelligence for turning the pollen of flowers into the nourishing gold of honey. As Wilde points out, the colony itself reflects "human culture and its importance of hierarchy," all of which explains the ages-long human fascination with this life-perpetuating creature. The Golden Bees is a lament for a creature intimately entwined in the human experience yet whose imperiled state may very well be the result of that relationship.

Wilde's approach to this project has been painstakingly methodical, starting with researching bee fact and lore in scientific, historical and literary sources. Out of her immersion in the subject came the Specimens series, individual hexagonal blocks of wood painted black, each depicting in detail an individual bee rendered in ink and gold leaf. The two hundred and sixteen of these are presented as bee-like swarms out on their daily rounds. Nearby, the Angels of Agriculture, exhibited in multiples of six, are comprised of ink, acrylic and gold leaf portraits of bees on paper behind fresh, live orchids as embodiments of the work they do, as if Spring had permeated the art itself.

Wilde will often use unusually shaped panels for her work, as in the hexagonal Specimens. For the next group she produced for this project, the Observers, she used 84 inch-high, 6-inch wide vertical panels painted black with partial figures rather unemotionally watching a few bees in flight. With pale, detached demeanor these human heads sit atop a panel-length single line denoting the slender line between man and nature that is being ignored by these disconnected figures.

The spare imagery of Specimens and Observers becomes more elaborate when Wilde deals with the complex nature of the bee colony itself, the subject of her triptych of 24- inch-square works entitled Golden Hive, Humming, and Hierarchy. Her propensity for geometric/ emblematic patterning and tapestry-like compositions comes out here, but it is restrained and in Golden Hive and Humming even pushed to the periphery of the central focus which in all three panels is the queen-to-drone mutual dependency as well as the colony's hierarchy. The triptychs also herald a new fluidity and movement in her imagery, a marked departure from the stylized poses and gridwork so characteristic of her work, due to her foray into the natural world. Working on a larger scale has, too, assisted Wilde's goal here of depicting the experience of life, rather than over-aestheticizing it.

Wilde returns to the long and narrow format in two large, dramatic paintings. Sweet Clover, at 4 inches by 60 inches, is of almost mural-like proportions, a horizontally sweeping floral panorama filled with bees weaving in and out at work, rendered in ink, acrylic and white gold leaf. It is simultaneously exquisite and life-like. Finally, inspired by Leo Tolstoy's reflections on the significance and sacredness of bees, the 52-inch high Sacred Bees is a magnificent paean of symbolism and floral specimens testifying to the importance of the bee in the natural world. Recognizing that the ultimate purpose of existence is "beyond our comprehension," Tolstoy further propounded, "All that is accessible to man is the relation of the life of the bee to other manifestations of life." Golden Bees reminds us of that sacred truth.