

Penny Olson
Artist Statement

The source images for the Tablet Pictographs came from my iPad as I hiked along the Wildcat Canyon Trail above Berkeley, not much able to see the screen because of the bright sunlight, just pointing the tablet in a particular direction as I walked, and tapping the screen icon of what I guess could be called a shutter release, or maybe a light pen or not exactly a cuneiform etching stylus, but since they call it a tablet, I started thinking about early ways of recording visual information that had the intention of counting or organizing for the assumed purposes of keeping track in a visual way – keeping records using cuneiforms, the early Sumerian writing system that used wedge shaped elements etched into stone.

The iPad gave me a blurry document of the device's view of the environment, of water and trees and earth in the winter afternoon light. Using my usual system of sampling a few picture elements and patterning them, I made a series that allows the original image to stay in the background of the completed work. I did this out curiosity, to see what would happen, and also with the intention of contextualizing the samplings, of showing a little bit of the source image as a part of the new whole. The result may not particularly succeed in informing the viewer as to the appearance of the original image, but a texture has emerged as a result of the layering, maybe it has to do with mixing of angles of light, of overlapping a small part of an image on top of itself, which I think adds a different dimension to those pieces.

Anemone Details

A number of years ago I planted a four-inch pot of Japanese Anemones in my garden. They quickly multiplied into a large clump, wiping out the other plants in the area, but flowering profusely toward the end of each summer. As the petals fell off, the plants produced fluffy seed heads, and I cut the whole thing back for the winter, never really paying much attention to what I was doing. Last year, as I began to cut them back, a hummingbird came right up next to me and began gathering the fluff, which caused me to rethink my intended garden cleanup, and to look more closely at this 'dead' material, actually of use to the hummingbird as well as quite beautiful. The patterning, and the color, and texture were extraordinary in a very subtle way.

"... how do you exercise the restraint that simplicity requires without crossing over into ostentatious austerity? How do you pay attention to all the necessary details without becoming excessively fussy? How do you achieve simplicity without inviting boredom?"

...Pare down to the essence, but don't remove the poetry. Keep things clean and unencumbered, but don't sterilize. ...Usually this implies a limited palette of materials. It also means keeping conspicuous features to a minimum. But it doesn't mean removing the connective tissue that somehow binds the elements into a meaningful whole. It also doesn't mean in any way diminishing something's 'interestingness,' the quality that compels us to look at that something

over, and over, and over again.”

--- Leonard Koren, in *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 1994.

Video from *Test Negative*, a work made in collaboration with Theodora Varney Jones, 2012

The project was initiated by the artist Theodora Varnay Jones, who was participating in an exhibition in San Francisco, which was part of the Zero I Biennial based in San Jose. Theodora was making a sculpture from discarded plastic boxes that originally held vials of research material, perhaps stem cells to be used in breast cancer research. She invited me to work with her on a digital component for the work. I saw an opportunity to animate her sculpture with content-related material, and we began searching for possible sources of appropriate imagery. Through chance we were introduced a breast cancer researcher, who generously offered us the use of images of cells she had taken for a study now completed. I worked with the images to create a series of animations that were inserted into the piece, and are also now presented as a stand-alone work. The content, or subject matter became the core at the same time as it dropped away - that is, while conceptually inspired by the content of the material, the work, like all of my output, strives to be a visual, sensorial experience. While the content comes from a specific source it in no way intends to make a specific or literal comment. Part of our interest in the project was in repurposing the images and objects, in transforming them into art.