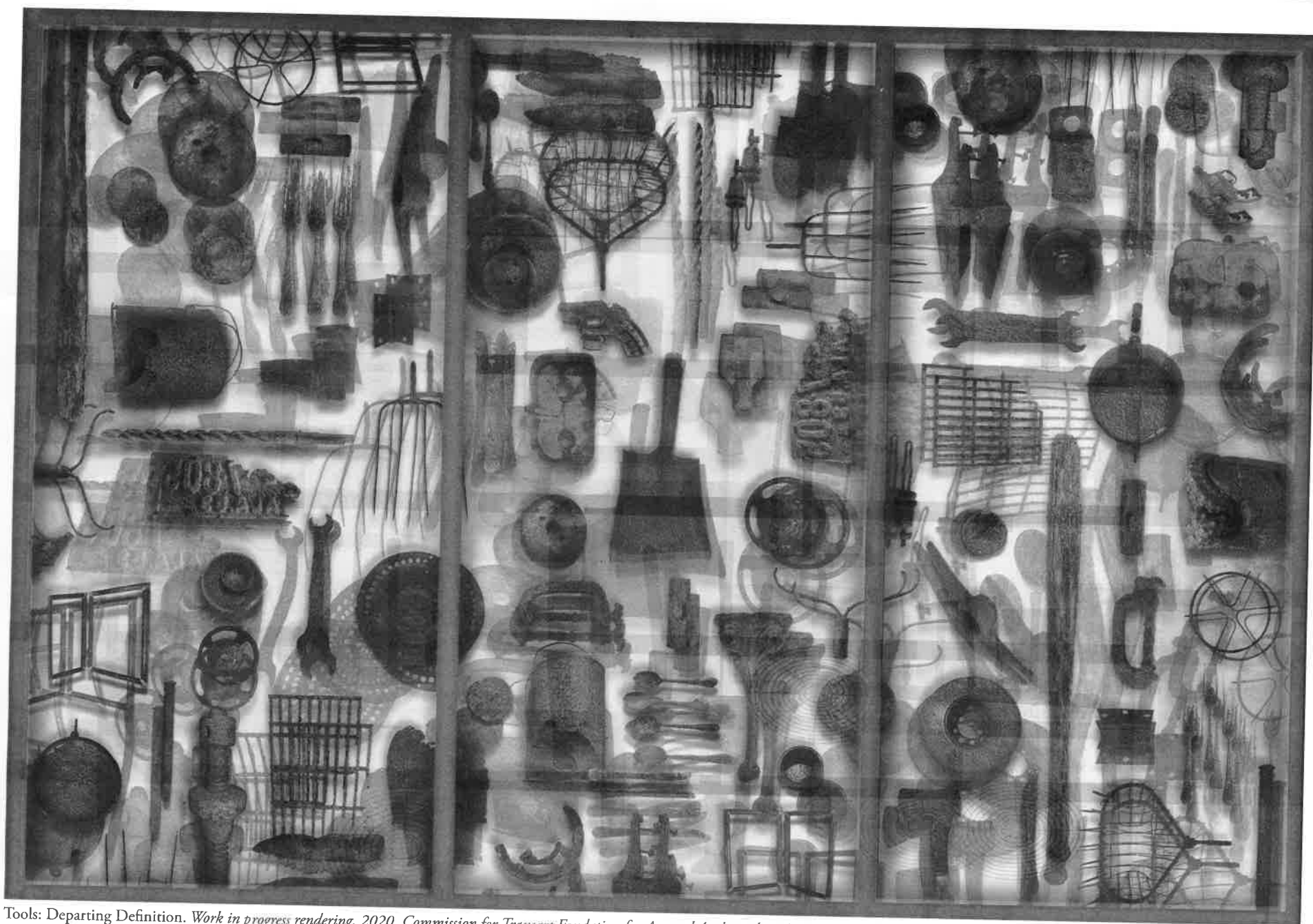




Tools: Departing Definition. *Work in progress rendering, 2020. Commission for Transart Foudation for Art and Anthropology, Houston.*
Mixed Media: Digital Imaging, Objects, Aluminum Frame System, Lighting. 8' x 12' x 3"

PARADISE LOST

Suddenly, Last Spaceship

DAWN DEDEAUX CREATES POST ART FOR A POST HUMANIST WORLD

By Alexandra Kennon

Even artist Dawn DeDeaux, who has been preoccupied with the inevitability of an apocalypse for years, was not immune to the surprise of a pandemic sweeping the globe during her lifetime. Seated at opposite ends of a long, narrow garden table on a sunny Saturday morning at her Camp Abundance property in New Orleans' Fairgrounds neighborhood, we removed our masks to sip dark roast Community Coffee and discuss her expansive career, and naturally, the end of the world. "I think it's got us thinking about how precious life is, and the experience of living—to have these barriers, to be sitting now so far from you at a table, and to speak muffled through a mask," she told me. "That's a small taste—a very small, modest taste—of how bad things could really get."

DeDeaux has long-identified as a "student of the apocalypse," anticipating pandemics, environmental disasters, and unrest over social inequities in her

artwork long-prior to 2020. "I don't want to go so far as to be a fear-peddler, but I do want to bring you to the brink of that, because it is quite serious," she said from across the expansive table. "We still have some opportunity to change the paradigm, so this is the moment. We don't have much time left to safeguard the future for our children. I have none, but for those who have children, I care about that." Now that much of what she anticipated has manifested, she seems more professor than student; a Cassandra issuing warnings too-oft unheeded in mediums from sculpture to painting, to photography, to interactive and immersive use of technology.

Of course, DeDeaux is far from the only artist and thinker to address the concept of apocalypse. A devotee of science, philosophy, and literature, she has taken to heart Stephen Hawking's prediction that humans will need to colonize another planet within one hundred years as the planet's environment changes and degrades.

She has also slogged through Milton's *Paradise Lost* several times, taking the old English text as a prediction of the future, despite its antiquity. "I mean, look at this abundance!" DeDeaux gestured widely to her lush, green garden, replete with citrus trees, ginger lilies, and climbing vines. Truthfully, she admitted, she prefers gardening to art. "I kind of had a wake-up call, actually, on my last reading of *Paradise Lost*. I had a 'Eureka!' moment, in that I said 'Oh my gosh, Genesis and Milton, that's not a story of the past. That's a foretelling of our future. This is paradise. This is paradise, and we are the ones who will expel ourselves from this wonderful, glorious, bountiful Earth.'"

She recognizes, however, that Milton's text is not the most accessible—this is where her art and incorporation of technology come into play. In her outdoor sculpture installation *FREE FALL: Prophecy and Free Will in Milton's "Paradise Lost"*, which was created for Kansas City's International OPEN

SPACES art venue, forty-eight towering, leaning, white concrete cylinders stick up from the grass at odd angles. A closer look, particularly as the sun sets and one shines headlights or a cell phone flashlight on the columns, reveals excerpt's from Milton's 1667 epic poem in highway reflective vinyl. Upon an even closer look, QR codes await at the base of each, offering a more contemporary and accessible interpretation of Milton's themes when scanned with a smartphone. In addition to Hawking and Milton, DeDeaux takes inspiration and audio bites from hip-hop artists like NAS and J. Cole—one QR code reveals J. Cole's verse, "I can see the future that we're heading and it's better not to tell/ If it's anything like this in heaven/I'd be better off in hell". Another iteration of the work, titled *Darkness Visible*, is scheduled to go up in the neutral ground on Poydras Street across from the Superdome this fall.

DeDeaux was the first artist in Louisiana to heavily incorporate digital

media as a means of engulfing the senses and emotions of her audience, in addition to reaching those beyond the scope of your average (privileged) museum-goer. "What's paramount is to really communicate outside of the museum walls, to make works that are accessible without compromising the aesthetic power," DeDeaux explained. "For me, using contemporary technology puts me in touch with the people who are out there using it too." As early as 1975, her project *CB Radio Booths*, which entailed nine telephone booths attached to CB radio connections at varying locations, provided opportunity for equal communication regardless of race and class—social media, long-prior to its existence as we now recognize it. That same year she continued bringing art into the streets by installing outdoor film projections on the sides of buildings.

Perhaps her most-auspicious—and most theatrical—digital media piece to date, having premiered at the 1996 Olympics and won the international Montage 93 Competition for best example of merging art with technology, is "The Face of God, In Search of". Drawing on her somewhat Southern-gothic childhood combined with digitized theatrics, the piece reckons with the past as well the future; technologically ahead of its time,

conceptually a tribute to DeDeaux's personal history and another long-time inspiration: Tennessee Williams.

"I lost two siblings," explained DeDeaux of her unusual preteen years spent down the street from the Degas House. "I was somewhat mute, living with my grandmother on Esplanade. 'Television was out, black and white, and I'm in a very sorrowful state. I'm alone in a room and all of a sudden, *Suddenly, Last Summer*, the T.V. version with Montgomery Clift and Liz Taylor and Katherine Hepburn and the elevator—that comes on, and I'm very taken with it. That was my first experience of art, was watching this—whether you like it or not, this particular interpretation of Tennessee Williams."

The crux of the play, and film, is the bizarre, untimely death of Sebastian—a young, gay poet preoccupied with finding the "face of God," as he once said he had on Encantadas beach watching thousands of newly-hatched turtles be devoured by carnivorous birds. "He finds God in consumption," DeDeaux assessed. "I said, 'My God, I don't see God there.' I was having a crisis of faith, too. I said, 'If you're going to find God in consumption, you don't have to leave your room.'" Having watched her beautiful seven-year-old sister be consumed by liver cancer before her



Dawn DeDeaux takes flight in a thirty-foot metal ring from her *MotherShip* series, on view now at TransArt in Houston. Photo by Bill Fagaly.

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Still image from "The Face of God, in Search Of" (1996), Dawn DeDeaux's only autobiographical piece, inspired by the death of her sister, and Tennessee Williams' Suddenly, Last Summer.

eyes, the tragic artistry of Williams' story spoke to her, loudly. "The Face of God, in Search of" features a solitary twin bed bathed in moving projections, recordings of Williams' stage directions from the 1958 play echoing through the space. It is the only piece DeDeaux considers autobiographical, though like the play that inspired it, it addresses the environment and issues of class division and societal upheaval, as well.

Another seminal moment for DeDeaux's reckoning of loss and beauty came following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when visiting Pass Christian to

survey the damage to her parents' home near the beach. "So there I was, and you couldn't drive anywhere, so I did this long, long walk to see if the house still stood...there was a moment when I was standing and sludging through in my boots, in eighteen inches high of shattered, tempered glass. And I'm crying, because there's no *there* there. So much destruction of so much beauty. And then all of a sudden the sun comes out, and I look up, and there are five pelicans flying, and the sun is just beautiful and the sky becomes this gorgeous azul, and I look down and all

of the glass surrounding me three sixty is glittering like diamonds, it's sparkling. And so I said to myself, 'Oh my God, I've never seen anything more beautiful.' That's the paradox." DeDeaux laughed her deep, effervescent-yet-melancholy laugh.

That moment inspired her 2008 piece "The Glass Floor," featuring a recreation of the sparkling, sea-like glass amid the dilapidated frame of a house. This is one of her Post-Katrina sections that is currently on display as part of her exhibition *Being and Everything: Post Art* at Houston's TransArt Foundation for

Art and Anthropology. "It's a fictional imagination that could become true, that is predicted to be true, that at some point humankind will be extinct, and who will know what art was?" She asked. "Art can be out there floating around, but who's there to give it definition?" She and the curator of the exhibition tapped into a "gestalt moment" DeDeaux had while based in Luxor, Egypt in 1982, where she discovered the ground beneath her feet was not merely dirt, but tangible shards of pots, sculptures, temples, and other indicators of civilizations long-past.

Another work included in that

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show is one of her thirty-foot metal rings that comprise her *MotherShip Series* (which goes back to Hawking, intersecting inequality and climate change to ask the question “Who gets a seat on the spaceship?”) “We’re in the Anthropocene, okay?” DeDeaux says, referring to the present geological age in which humans are the dominant factor influencing the environment. “So the shattered glass in one room kind of dealing with water’s impact. But we’ve got over a million acres burning in California and Australia, the arid climates. So this piece will be this huge fire landscape with rings coming down to save us, the spaceships are landing, the ladders are there to climb into the spaceships to get away—just a little bit of theatre,” she chuckled.

One piece called “Dirt Bowl Table” comes along with her *Souvenirs of Earth* series, which asks viewers what they would bring with them from Earth when boarding the hopefully-theoretical MotherShip, if they could only take something small enough to fit in their hand. “I narrowed it down, and I was going to take a small jar of my mother’s ashes,” DeDeaux concluded. “Now, how strange, to leave Earth and to bring dirt with you? So it grew, it grew.” Hand-honed wooden bowls sit beneath a glass-topped coffee table, filled with various colors of dirt and ash from around the world—including DeDeaux’s mother’s ashes. “So I’m a recycler: the Dirt Bowl Table will have my mother’s ashes, and the timbers are from my studio,” she said of the charred timbers that remain from her former studio, which burned a year after flooding following Katrina. “So I just pick from what’s immediately around me, and hopefully it translates into something universal.”

A new wall installation called “Veiled

Tools #1” incorporates anthropology, archeology, and the philosophy of Heidegger—presenting a twelve-foot wall of flying, rusted tools thinly veiled by a translucent screen; reminding viewers what might one day remain of human existence and our material world. These pieces for TransArt, and many others, will appear again next fall during DeDeaux’s first comprehensive retrospective of her expansive career at NOMA, which was previously scheduled for fall 2020 and postponed due to COVID. Titled *The Space Between Worlds*, the retrospective will mark the premiere of a brand new work called “Where’s Mary?” featuring a sea-worn, alabaster sculpture of the Virgin, which DeDeaux picked up at a curiosities shop. “You can see where the sand and the bottom of the sea made its etching into this soft marble, and so I’m taking this object and floating it out as the last surviving remnant of our culture, out into outer space,” she told me. “I think that my job as an artist working in visuals is to give kind of an iconography to the complexity of the science and the philosophy... An icon, one image, can say so many things.” ✱

Being and Everything: Post Art will be open at TransArt in Houston until January 31, 2021. She also has pieces from her Space Clown series up as part of the exhibition Art in the Time of Empathy at Arthur Roger Gallery until December 19, 2020. DeDeaux’s retrospective exhibition The Space Between Worlds is scheduled to run at NOMA from September 16th, 2021 - January 30th, 2022. For more of DeDeaux’s work and philosophy, visit dawnededeaux.net.

The sea-worn marble statue of the Virgin Mary, which DeDeaux plans to launch into outer space as a theorized last remnant of human culture in a premiere piece for her NOMA retrospective called “Where’s Mary?”, on a table among Asian calligraphy and other collectibles at Camp Abundance. Photo by Alexandra Kennon.



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