

Cover Essay

Out of the Forest

We set forth, this bright and cool morning, newly awakened, as if from a dream, yet still dreaming. Mist rises around us as the day warms. Looking from the shore out to the lake, the stones beneath our feet seem secure. Seeing the bright haze ahead, we are filled with hope.

For millions of years, our species has been leaving the forest and entering a new and uncertain terrain. We do not always tread lightly, nor carefully. Now, some days, glancing down at our feet, we see water, and the deep chasms of city streets. There is a moment of fear, and of vertigo.

For thousands of years, through agriculture and city-building, we have been entering the city, re-creating the world in our image. Some have envisioned heaven as city, and the dark forest behind us alive with hungry bacteria and wolves. Others see Atlantis under our feet, a city of drowned hopes, and imagine an idyllic past in the forest.

Where have we come from? Where are we going? What is the reason for this endless, restless questing? Will we, in the brief time given us, yet earn our name: *Homo sapiens*?

Yet if we do not know our origins, and can barely articulate a future, if every person sees a different world, constructed from the same rocks and birds and water, how will we ever make our way? How can we ensure the quality of our information in an uncertain world? What kind of science, scholarship, knowledge, and decision-making can encompass all of this?

The painting by Canadian artist Robert Gonsalves, *Stepping Stones*, on the cover of this issue, captures the wealth, wonder, and dilemma of these many perceptions of our complex and wonderful life. It is a painting of hope, and of danger. One misstep, and we are dashed, or

drowned, or perhaps merely swallowed up by the city, by music and literature, and good conversations at a sidewalk tea shop.

We do not know which vision is correct. We have no independent third party to verify our observations. We have only each other. This is the real meaning of a community of peers: that we pay careful attention to each other, that we listen, challenge, chide, and encourage. The convivial and sustainable world we seek can only be an emergent property of the collective journey we take.

We gather facts, like artifacts and fruits, from the sensual richness of life's experiences and from scholarly investigations. From these, through statistical models, simulations, pictures, and stories, we construct a sense of who we are. Indeed, all the scientifically gathered data in the world are of no consequence, no meaning, until we embed them in a narrative, or a vision. Often, as scholars, we do not reflect with sufficient care on the narratives and visions that inform our work. All too easily, we then fall prey to tales of techno-progress, or eco-doom, to confusing impoverished causal models with the richness of the experiences they guess at.

With this journal, we are launching a unique and wonderful journey into the complexities of understanding how we might find healthy and sustainable ways of living, for ourselves and our fellow species, on this planet. Philosophers of science Jerry Ravetz and Silvio Funtowicz, would say that the questions we are asking are characterized by high levels of complexity, uncertainty, epistemological and ethical difference, and conflict. They might also add that these questions demand answers in our daily lives—on climate change, endangered species, fisheries, agriculture, and the building of cities—which are both urgent and of great consequence.

For these kinds of issues, reliable, high-quality knowledge can only emerge if we expand our peer group, if we learn to perceive in many ways, and if we bring those many perceptions back into the heart of how we live.

The quality of our knowledge is judged by its fitness of purpose. In this journal, and on this journey, we have common purposes, to integrate and enrich our understanding of how ecology and health are related, and to find ways to nurture both ecological sustainability and human health. Our job as a community of peers is to continually nudge each other toward those purposes, to keep each other on the surest stepping stones.

The cover and this essay space are being opened for explorations of human and ecosystem interactions in ways that are not possible using the standard tools of academic scholarship, but which resonate deeply with who we are. The visual images on the cover may be drawn from the work of great artists, such as the Gonsalves painting which graces this issue, but may also encompass still pictures from scenario models and computer simulations used to explore possible futures, or photographs which capture current investigations at a particularly resonant moment. We hope to draw on a wide variety of artistic traditions and visions from around the world. Each cover will be accompanied by an essay that briefly (in fewer than 1000 words) explores terrain similar to that presented in the artwork. This essay need not be written by the artist who did the work featured on the cover. Indeed, you may have an essay without a

picture, or a picture without an essay. Try us. You are among peers.

David Waltner-Toews
Art and Culture Editor

Cover Art

Stepping Stones by Rob Gonsalves

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Our cover artist, Rob Gonsalves, was born in Toronto, Canada in 1959. In his postcollege years, Gonsalves worked full time as an architect, also painting trompe l'oeil murals and theater sets. The images he uses are deliberately and carefully planned, with ideas drawn from recognizable human activities, but altered through illusionist devices often connected with what has been called *magical realism*. Like the work of the literary master of this genre, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, we find that his magic resonates richly with the many layers of the real world in which we live and work. His work strikes a sonorous chord worldwide, and his very successful first book, *Imagine a Night* (Simon and Schuster, 2003), is expected to be followed by *Imagine a Day* in 2004. More of his works can be seen at the website of the Discovery Galleries in Bethesda, Maryland (<http://www.discoverygalleries.com/>).

Published online: March 25, 2004