Maryann Webster

Motherboards, Mutant Gardens, and the Human Condition

By Shelly Ezzard Smith

In the space of an instant, the eye takes in the translucent quality of Giottoesque flesh, sees the tender but mysterious gaze from mother to infant, registers the beautifully filigreed veil and robe. Then just as the mind commits to “14th-century Madonna-and-Child icon,” a disturbing wave of anachronistic visual information permeates the consciousness: the gold filigreed bust of the Madonna’s robe morphs into computer circuitry flowing to her nipples, her jeweled crown shifts to a band of circuit board diodes, the infant the Madonna cradles in her hands is tiny, weak, and malnourished. The “late-Medieval, proto-Renaissance” classification collapses in a matrix of seemingly disjointed signs in works such as Motherboard IV (1998; Pl. 13), even as the religious icon continues to resonate from behind its cyborg avatar. These are the tropes that characterize the work of Maryann Webster. Her ceramic wall paintings and sculptures position viewers to engage in a critical dialog about the effects of computer and biotechnologies on the environment, culture, and the human condition.

Webster was born Maryann Sorensen on July 15, 1947, in San Francisco, to Alice and Royal Sorensen. Royal was a microbiologist, whose work carried the family to the central valley of California in 1951. Alice, a homemaker, was kept busy caring for the seven Sorensen children, of whom Maryann was the third. Maryann spent a great deal of time as a child playing in her father’s laboratory or building elaborate dirt and sand sculptures on lake and seaside beaches. As a young girl she spent days constructing an enormous mermaid out of sand, rejoicing at the comments of curious onlookers strolling by on the beach.

Soon after receiving a bachelor’s degree in art education from Brigham Young University in 1970, she married James Webster and moved to Sausalito. That year she took enough studio courses at San Francisco State University to earn the equivalent of a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. In 1971 the couple moved East, to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Jim spent two years pursuing degrees in landscape architecture and the history of architecture. Maryann taught two days per week for the art educator Al Hurwitz. She rented an industrial space at the Cambridge Paper Box Company, where she experimented with various media, including colored ink and wax, to make abstract paintings. She exhibited and sold her batik and abstract expressionist works at a gallery in Harvard Square.

In late 1973, the Websters moved back to Utah, where their first child, Jessica, was born. After a few months, they settled in Salt Lake City, where they still live and where Jim has his own architectural land planning firm. Sons Zachary and Benjamin were born in 1976 and 1979, respectively, and daughter Sarah in 1983. For almost a decade Maryann did little artwork, devoting herself to raising her children. Attempting to bring art back into her life and to share her love of art with her children, she instigated drawing sessions and provided opportunities for “smearing paint about” in her backyard for the neighborhood children.

As Webster immersed herself in art again, she came to feel that Abstract Expressionism was inadequate for articulating her concerns about contemporary life. In the late 1980s she began experimenting with clay and china paints, recalling her childhood experiments with dirt and sand. She began creating figurative works: surreal “fish-women” and dolls.

On one of many trips to Europe, she traveled around Italy studying the sculpture as well as Medieval and Renaissance paintings. “My husband’s background in the history of art and architecture...was an important contribution to this experience,” she tells. In the early 1990s she was mesmerized by the paintings of Giotto and Massaccio. Giotto’s Lamentation (c. 1305) from the fresco cycle in the Capella Scrovegni (Arena Chapel) at Padua has been an enduring stylistic influence on her work, most recently on her narrative reliquary boxes, which mourn the loss of nature and warn of impending environmental catastrophe.

Although Giottos served as an important stylistic and even spiritual inspiration for Webster, the profound effects of computer-and-bio-technology on human lives, culture, and health, as well as on the surrounding biosphere, have been her overarching concerns for the past decade. Her teenage years in northern California coincided with the rise of computer technology in nearby Silicon Valley. As a young adult she was drawn to Richard Brautigan’s 1968 poem, “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace,” which wryly conveys the wish for a new cybernetic world where computers seem to displace God and replace nature. Webster was also fascinated by the idea that the name for the main circuit board in computers and other electronic devices is “motherboard.” This concept, along with Brautigan’s vivid imagery, inspired her Motherboard series of ceramic wall paintings in which she fused computer circuitry with medieval Madonna-and-Child icons.

Individual works from the Motherboard series and her Dormiens Vigila (While Sleeping, Watch) series about the disappearing ecosystem and fragile nature of our existence lure viewers with their stylized beauty and conventional religious iconography. Viewers are soon unnerved, however, when they discover the radiation symbols, embedded computer circuitry, or genetically altered creatures. Webster’s visual image of the “nurturing” cyborg-mother, like Brautigan’s poetic trope of the “machines of loving grace,” is a powerful oxymoron. At best, this cybernetic mother seems to provide insufficient nourishment to her infant; at worst, she saps the life-energy from him. A venerable religious image like the Madonna transformed into a cyborg icon, the sacred idea of a mother’s unconditional love replaced by a parasitic computer relationship—these are disconcerting.

Webster does not impose her own time, culture, and feminine subjectivity on the religious imagery of the past so much as she uses this imagery as a tool to reshape views of the present. Her appropriation of the painterly styles and stereotypes of Medieval and Renaissance icons and narrative works provides viewers with an element of familiarity, if not continuity. The effect of her subsequent postmodernist inscription of current cultural, political, technological, and even science-fictional signs onto the appropriated imagery is to draw the audience into a collaboration with her in a critique of present-day society’s refusal to deal with the repercussions of computerization and biotechnology. She remarks that “hidden stress from these rapid
Webster recalls an event from her childhood: "When I was young, my father refused an important and lucrative Cold War offer to work on biological warfare at Lawrence Radiation Laboratories near our home. He opted instead to continue his government grants in search of helping people be well." She, herself, grew very concerned several years ago when she learned that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission was poised to approve a plan by the nuclear power industry in states on the East Coast and Great Lakes to force their nuclear waste into a storage dump in Utah, about 40 minutes from downtown Salt Lake City. In her words, "My passionate public ranting about the environment caused me to be appointed to the governor's panel which was charged with the mission of preventing these nuclear waste plans."

Webster has tried to press officials in her church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to take a position against the Skull Valley nuclear waste project. She was quoted in the Salt Lake Tribune as saying, "I don't think the LDS Church wants the center of Mormonism to be known as the world's largest nuclear waste dump." As of late 2004, the dump was on hold.

As a newlywed, Webster was torn between having a family and making art. Now, more than two decades later, her conflict is between keeping the environment safe and making art. "After many dreams, visions, and nightmares," she explains, "my efforts merged and I began to create some work based on environmental concerns." This work consisted of ceramic basins and reliquary boxes developed around themes of pollution and genetic mutation. As she began this series in 2000, which she grouped under the title Dormiens Vigila, she was awarded a research fellowship at the University of Utah for the second year of her M.F.A. program. (She continues to teach part-time there as well as at Brigham Young University.)

Individual expression and cultural responsibility are inseparable for Webster. "One purpose for creating the altarpieces, reliquaries, and basins was to satisfy the anxiety of my dreams," she writes. "I saw my dream self running through tunnels of soundly sleeping people, trying desperately to awaken them to the precarious conditions only a few could see." Each body of work, indeed each individual work, is a site where multiple vectors of meaning intersect: Meticulously hand-crafted ceramics converge with representations of high-tech computer circuitry, military aircraft, and bioengineering-gone-wild; china painting, historically dismissed as "women's art," meets the "high art" style of early Renaissance masters; age-old ideas of religious devotion encounter modern-day worship of the computer; computer circuitry fuses with the human body; the Garden of Eden collides with the "mutant garden" of environmental pollution; and fears from the Middle Ages are presented in tandem with similar fears of today.

When projected to a level of critical discourse, Webster's layering of information can be likened to a multidimensional map, prompting viewers to sharpen their perceptions about where they stand in history and in relation to the rapid and extensive technological developments of our time. It accomplishes this via her masterful exploitation of technological signs through assemblage, manipulation of the iconography, and even unconventional manipulation of the ceramic process itself.

Several individual works in the Motherboard series are enclosed in architectural frames, similar to those that encase early Renaissance Madonnas and altarpieces. The implied invitation to worship the figures within these frames makes the viewer conscious of the tendency to idolize technology. Webster incorporated actual circuit boards into the spaces under the heavy, supporting columns of the classical portico surrounding the Madonna and Child in Motherboard III: All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace (1998; Pl. 14). Seeing the embedded circuit board shakes conventional conceptions of classical architecture as solid and enduring and confronts viewers with the question of whether they are observing a physical structure or some evanescent, "virtual" reality. In an even more visceral example of assemblage, a circuit board is affixed to the breasts of the Madonna. The circuit board is, in turn, wired into the head and abdomen of the holy infant, magnifying the sense of the infant's helplessness and making the Motherboard-Madonna that cradles him.

Webster plays on the conventional iconography of the golden halos of the Madonna and Child with her use of gold computer circuitry, which, radiating out from the halos into cyberspace, alters the historical significance of gold as the "Light of Heaven." The fact that the artist also uses computer circuitry to wire the two angels in the background into the network, as though they are "on-line" in a cybernetic heaven, furthers the slippage from religious to technological icon.

Webster substitutes a real silicone wafer board with circuit diodes for the decorative trim on the Virgin's garment or the heavenly light of a halo in Motherboard IV (Pl. 13). It is beautiful at first, with the diodes resembling tiny lights or jewels, but upon closer examination it gives the appearance of being melded to the brain. In addition to this effective use of assemblage, Webster shows innovation in this work through her manipulation of the ceramic process to create the Madonna's filigreed garment, which doubles as the "circuitry" of her breasts. She uses the same adhesive decals once used to create the copper circuits on computer wafer boards. Just as the computer decals (now obsolete) resist the acid they are submerged in to leave a copper circuit, Webster's decals resist the purple china paint, then burn up in the heart of the kiln to leave the gold "circuits" forming the Madonna's breasts. Computer circuitry could be considered the vascular system of the computer through which electronic energy flows, enabling the computer to function. Ironically, the cyborg mother's breasts are malfunctioning. This is evidenced by the frail, undernourished appearance of the infant she holds to nurse. The mother's breasts seem to be sapping energy from the infant rather than provid-
Webster confronts the specter-becomereality of cybernetic and genetically engineered life-forms with both the human-machine hybrids of her Motherboard works and the genetically modified creatures of her reliquary boxes and basins. A combination of disparate influences has perhaps compelled her to take her art to the site of the cyborg or the posthuman—a site that is probably the next great battleground of identity politics. She experienced being an outsider, first growing up as a Mormon in California and later living as, in her words, a “California transplant” to Utah. Her frequent childhood visits to her father’s medical research lab where the shelves were lined with organs preserved in jars triggered her interest in human issues. Spending her teenage years in the shadow of Silicon Valley instilled in her an early awareness of the potential impact of computer technology on the human condition. Webster has long admired the work of feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, and matured as an artist at a time when feminist critical theory was being incorporated into art curriculums. Finally, while she considers herself a Mormon and a spiritual person, her views toward religion in general and toward some environmental and political issues do not always line up with conventional Mormon positions. She largely attributes her broad outlook on religion, as well as her ability to act on independent-minded ideas and take chances with her art, to a heritage of strong-willed female ancestors, as conveyed in a recent letter:

*I have found that the most meaningful spiritual truths are often universal and, as in many belief systems, I feel connected to my ancestors because of religion... I have been influenced by a knowledge of my family histories which describe a long line of very strong women. There was the French woman, Mary, my great-great-great-great grandmother, who administered water to the wounded men at the battle of Waterloo and her granddaughter, Elizabeth, who was kidnapped from her family’s wagon train by a chief of a Plains Indian tribe and through various other adventures returned to her family. I have other ancestors who were among the Jamestown colony and on the ship Brooklyn which [carried] the first group of colonists to arrive in San Francisco after California became a U.S. territory. These adventure-some families or their descendants eventually made their way to the territory around the Great Salt Lake as Mormon pioneers. As an artist, I can say I gain strength from a knowledge of my long line of unconventional forebears.*

One of the ironies in Webster’s work lies in her pairing of both the female figure and the age-old art of ceramics with pieces of computer hardware. (This is in keeping with the women artists who use their bodies as the canvas on which to inscribe feminist concerns.) Webster's abusive conflation of the female body with computer hardware ties the political and the feminist to a “cyber-” or “techno-machine” aesthetic, one usually assigned to men. Moreover, the history of ceramics as a traditional female medium determines that Webster’s coupling of ceramics and computers further binds feminist political concerns to a (perceived) male domain. It is in the charged space between feminized and dominant spheres, between female and male, art and science, human and computer that Webster’s *Cybernurse* (1998; Pl. 15) operates. By navigating this space, it simultaneously reflects and challenges the dominant power structures.

*Cybernurse*, exhibited with the Motherboard series in 1998, shows a classically beautiful female face with a penetrating gaze and hair of gold luster circuitry. The implications of seduction and cybersex are obvious. At a cursory glance, one might be tempted to conclude the work simply promotes the idea that the Internet, instead of being a great equalizer that empowers women (and other marginalized groups), actually reflects and exacerbates the prejudices and hegemony of institutionalized power in the society that created it. *Cybernurse*, however, cannot be neatly pigeonholed within the parameters of feminist identity and displacement politics. Rather, the work plays on our familiarity with the visual language and methodological practices of these politics. This familiarity effectively serves as a vehicle by which the work moves us to recognition that what may be truly at risk of marginalization in the new digital age are not just groups of people but—for both women and men—certain critical elements of our humanity.

The process of this recognition begins when viewers familiar with the 1980s codified rhetoric of the “gaze” become conscious that *Cybernurse* has trapped us in a satire; we are roped into an “infinite loop” of voyeurism. This face, monumental in its Greek temple frame, seems to belong to a goddess. However, her gold circuitry hair and Brautigan’s title phrase “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace” written in gold letters above her head and topped by five pairs of piercing eyes, transport us back to the 21st-century and our computer screens. Even as our eyes consume the Cybermuse, she calmly transfixes us with her own gaze; the voyeuristic act is turned inside out. We grow uncomfortably aware that it is perhaps we who are unwitting objects of the gaze, watched intently by her and “watched over” by the staring eyes of the computer that has been elevated to god- or goddess-like stature. The anthropomorphic quality of the machine—one, moreover, with a human face of classical beauty—gives this old Orwellian twist renewed emotional power. The image before us meets Donna Haraway’s definition of a cyborg: it confuses the boundaries between human and machine, natural and artificial, mind and body.  

*Cybernurse*, with its implications of cybersex, raises the issue of at what point human-computer interaction jeopardizes real human relationships. As do the works in the Motherboard series, it also blurs other boundaries of our humanity. It raises the question of whether “machines of loving grace” on some level replace God, and whether they can adequately satisfy the human craving for spiritual fulfillment. Are computer images modern-day religious icons and somehow worthy of our worshipful attention? And who, now, is the purveyor of images—the artist or the computer? As viewers we wonder if the Cybermuse inspires, neutralizes, or appropriates creativity, and whether it is she or we who are objectified.

In her altarpiece, the *Cybernurse* is reminiscent of Byzantine icons, which were thought to have healing powers. Webster uses milagros, Mexican religious healing charms, in *Cybernurse* and in some of her other figurative wall pieces and ceramic dolls. She combines them in an innovative way with both the religious and computer/high-tech iconography. Milagros of kneeling, praying figures, one male and one female, are fused onto bare-bones circuit board pieces in the lower register of the marbleized ceramic temple that frames the *Cybernurse*. The humble figures are turned toward each other in three-quarter view. A small crowned military eagle with

![Fig. 3. Maryann Webster, Moth Spirit Reliquary (2001), porcelain, vitreous enamels, 11" x 13" x 5". Private Collection.](image-url)
majestically outstretched wings hovers in the pediment. A milagro consisting of a pair of eyes is superimposed over the eagle's torso. The corners of the eyes extend beyond the eagle's wingspan and appear as an additional set of wings.

This “winged-eye” is more than a physical layering of materials. Like the milagro figures mounted to the circuit boards, it is a site where multiple meanings intersect. As such, it generates a zone with multiple possibilities for interpretation: The winged-eye is multivalent site and multivalent sight, a suggestion of the “visionary.” Perhaps the milagro eyes crown the Cybermuse with the creative and all-seeing power of a deity, or in combination with the row of staring eyes and Braunig's title phrase they amplify the voyeuristic undertones of the work. A third interpretive possibility arises through a milagro's “healing” signification; it is the interpretation of the winged-eye as the human's healer and protector, capable of seeing through and beyond the watchful eyes of the machine.

Webster's works, while exploring questions of mortality and of cybernetic identity, are antithetical to the virtual body that would be hypothetically immune to the genetic inevitability of aging, disease, and even death. They possess a weighty, physical presence and visceral power that are typically missing in today's proliferation of digital imagery. This sense of physical “embodiment” is partly a function of the ceramic medium in combination with imagery of the human figure. It manifests itself across the spectrum of Webster's oeuvre, from the cybernetic works to those dealing with bioengineering, the environment, and human health. In Cybermuse and in the Motherboard series, this physical embodiment acts as a memory (similar to the way the painted and collaged elements act as physical artifacts)—an umbilical cord to human history, enabling exchange and psychological play between history and the digitalized, high-tech present.

This physical, tactile quality is equally essential to Webster's Lazarus Figure (2003; Fig. 1), a work about the human obsession with defeating death. This effigy is even more striking than Webster's Host Figure with Apocalyptic Tattoos (2001), which appeared on the cover of The Figure in Ceramic catalogue for a 2002 exhibition at the Lewis and Clark College Gallery of Contemporary Art. The artist applied a sgraffito drawing technique on Lazarus Figure, forming stark white lines in the rich, black “terra sigillata” surface. She describes “terra sigillata” as coming from a manganese- and cobalt-colored ball clay. The clay is ball-milled and then left to settle, and the top layer, the terra sigillata, is poured off to be used. Webster applied terra sigillata to the porcelain surface of the figure and then burnished it. She drew images of seraphim with folded wings on its right thigh and left forearm. A fetus encircled by a line of cells in various stages of reproduction, which Webster describes as “a dance of mitochondrion,” appears in sgraffito on top of the figure's head. On its back, two skeletons menacingly aim their bony fingers at the adult Lazarus, whose heart appears in x-ray-like form through the tomb wrappings, in an attempt to electrically reanimate him by performing a sort of crude cardiac defibrillation. Webster draws electrical currents coursing through the Lazarus's head and limbs and calls the connective wires that run through blood-red holes at his joints “electrodes.” On the back of his head his spirit floats above his, as yet, unresuscitated body.

Another fetus appears above the cavity of the Lazarus Figure's chest and abdomen, while its white umbilical cord surrounds and highlights the cavity's edge. Insectlike skeletons—one inspired by Gray's Anatomy and the other by an anonymous photograph—hover on either side of the cavity. Below are the acupuncture site and Chinese characters for increased vitality. Inside the cavity two milagros convey the illusion of being suspended in front of a pool of blood-red liquid (the only color on the black-and-white figure). One is a large milagro, a repousse of lungs; a smaller eye milagro is poised above it. The figure's physical presence and lifelike eyes challenge the observer to watch the lungs fill with air and blood pulse through the body and to ponder the biting ambiguity of whether renewed life will occur via modern medical machinations, stem-cell research, healing charms, or faith as implied by direct reference to the biblical story of Lazarus.

Webster is one of a number of artists grappling with issues of genetic modification. She first drew the inspiration for her darkly humorous basins or “tide pools” of genetically altered creatures from the work of the 16th-century artist Bernard Palissy in the Louvre. Palissy created basins and grottos adorned with ceramic castings of lizards, snakes, frogs, fish, shells, and small plants. Webster's basins make up part of her Dormiens Vigilo series. She is interested in issues of both genetic modification and mutation via environmental pollution or contamination. Her basins, she claims, represent microcosms of natural life that have been “irreparably altered by human carelessness and apathy.” She relates them to holy water basins, or as she calls them, “un-holy water works.” In Mutant Tide Pool II (2001), a three-headed snake interwoven with kelp plants rises up in such high relief that the upper half of his body writhes in the air. The genetic modification-gone-awry reaches an extreme in Genetically Modified Tide Pool (2001; Fig. 2), where a two-headed, two-tailed snake with lobster claws on its body slithers on the surface. Webster wrote of the bizarre creatures that inhabit this basin:

I did not expect the effect of the central mutant figures to be humorous, but the feeling from them was like they were creatures from a bad Japanese horror movie. I began to think of...Genetically Modified Tide Pool as sort of a three-dimensional cartoon. Cast baby corn vegetables were mutated into genetically modified aggressive little corn monsters. I imagined they had been bred by corn-pollinated tomato plants whose genes in reality were spliced onto fish genes. The large, two-headed, two-tailed fish with crab claws was undulating in the center of a kelp ring, with one of the corn creatures and a snakish snail creature, each marling at one of the heads.

The authentic-looking textures of the fictitious mutants act as a virtual device to draw viewers into the work. The ceramic medium is well suited to mimic the texture and pearlescent luster of seashells. Webster created the realistic appearance of frog skin, scaly lizard skin, and fish scales by, at first, casting real animals. She recounts feeling guilty one day when she captured a live gecko in Mexico whose form and texture intrigued her: “I turned it over in my hand
and saw its transparent white underbelly with the red liver...and tiny blue, pulsating heart. I put it in the freezer for a short while and then brought it out to cast its form in plaster. The tiny heart under the transparent skin was still.... I decided from that moment on to cast only plastic animals." "

Webster effectively captures an ongoing dilemma of the human condition with her Dormiens Vigila series: desire that oscillates between a passion to create and control and a wish to stay in tune with human sensibilities about nature and the world around us. Like the Motherboard series, Dormiens Vigila adds another dimension to the discourse over new technologies by integrating rich religious iconography from another transitional historical period: early Renaissance Europe. Now, as then, humans find themselves in a historical position—in this case, of dramatic scientific development and technological innovation—that requires reevaluating their relationship to the universe.

Webster's large Adam and Eve painting, Mutant Garden Diptych (2000; Pl. 16), reliquary boxes, and basins, all part of the Dormiens Vigila series, were first exhibited in a gallery space that the artist interpreted as a temenos, or sacred enclosure. The central placement of the basins in the gallery space was influenced by Carl Jung's discussion of the garden as a temenos, which in Islamic and Early Christian architecture had a fountain (or source of "living water") in the center.

She positioned five reliquary boxes in the area behind the basins. The wall pieces, including Mutant Garden Diptych, were intended to recall not only the painting style but also the didactic manner of early Renaissance altarpieces. Mutant Garden, the only nonceramic piece in the exhibition, is much larger than the other works—the Adam and Eve figures are more than four-and-a-half feet tall.

The prominent placement of Mutant Garden on the back wall of the gallery (opposite the entrance) further extended the idea of the garden as a temenos. The Garden of Eden represents in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions the sacred garden, an earthly paradise. As Webster's basins are microcosms of human-caused contamination of nature, Mutant Garden represents a more universal degradation of what was once pristine and pure. The artist increases the immediacy of the work by collapsing time: the Creation story of Adam and Eve in the Garden conflates with an apocalyptic background scene of nuclear and environmental disaster. The background of Mutant Garden is covered with 22-karat gold leaf and German metallic composition leaf. She intended this gold as a metaphor for radioactivity, again altering its traditional representation of the holy light of heaven in Christian iconography. The gold leaf flattens the background, bringing the nuclear power plant, B-29 bombers, and mushroom clouds closer to the foreground. A one-eyed rabbit and other sickly animals hover near the Tree of Life. Webster's appointment to the Nuclear Opposition Coalition to prevent Utah from becoming the nation's dumping ground for high level nuclear waste influenced this and her other environmental works.

Most disturbingly, Adam and Eve seem not to recognize the signs of destruction and mutation around them. They stand, completely oblivious, on the edge of a precipice. Webster compares their "innocence" to that of many present-day Americans, who either ignore or deny environmental pollution and destruction. The work asks whether we are to continually relive this story/myth. As Adam and Eve were separated from God, are we to become separated from nature, with our technological "progress" proceeding at the expense of the natural environment and human relationships?

The recurrent theme in Webster's oeuvre of nature threatened by the careless use of technology achieves its maturation in her reliquary boxes, which mourn the loss of nature caused by man's technological follies. Rather than serving as repositories for the relics and bones of Christian saints, these 21st-century reliquaries are containers for (ceramic representations of) traces of dead insects, lost species, and ruined ecosystems. The vain attempt to create a container for something that can never be recovered makes the reliquary box all the more powerful as a symbol of loss. The deaths of insect larvae that should have transformed into beautiful monarch butterflies inspired Webster to create Insect Spirit Reliquary (2001) and Moth Spirit Reliquary (2001; Fig. 3). Her interest was piqued by reports of Monsanto's genetically modified corn and other products causing alarm among some farmers, biologists, and environmentalists. The reports mentioned a Cornell University study in which pollen from a type of genetically modified corn was fed to monarch butterfly larvae, and half the larvae died after four days. The outside of Moth Spirit Reliquary is populated by small bee- and moth-angels that hover over a chrysalis. These insect-angels, with human heads and torsos, are guardian figures whose gestures and facial expressions were influenced by the figures in Giotto's Lamentation. Webster observed that Giotto's almost translucent faces seemed a natural crossover to porcelain. Her original association of angels to insects was inspired by these figures, since Giotto did not paint the lower bodies of his angels, causing them to appear almost insectlike.

Webster's references to Giotto inject a dose of theological and ethical concerns into the debate over bioengineered creatures. Her guardian figures apprehensively watch over various avatars of the chrysalis on each side of the reliquary. On one end of the box, a bee-angel cradles a caterpillar, while on the other, the head of a baby encircled by a halo protrudes from a chrysalis. On the front of the ceramic vessel, startled, angry-faced guardian insect-angels withdraw from a large, winged insect-creature with no human characteristics. This insect presumably emerged from the large green chrysalis depicted on the back of the reliquary. The ambiguity over whether the transformation will be marvelous or terrible makes this work a potent metaphor for the current human condition, as we agonize over bioengineering, embryonic stem-cell research, human cloning, and the development of new life-forms. Like the other reliquary vessels, Moth Spirit Reliquary, is supported by gargoylesque feet or claws. Oblong moon-faces substitute for handles on the sides of the lid, while a golden moon-face appears in deep relief on the front of the lid where the lock would be.

Webster's Lost Nature Reliquary (2000; Fig. 4), through literary and religious metaphors and references to the Nature versus Culture dichotomy, calls attention to the point where our desire to create and control threatens to overpower our responsibility toward nature. A seraph with eyes on its wings stands with hands and eyes raised toward the mushroom cloud that explodes above and behind him. He stands on the bank of the Rivers of Paradise, which flow around the entire bottom of the reliquary vessel. Emaciated, deformed fish float in the water, some upside down, while birds hover frantically on the opposite side. B-29 bombers cut through the air above.

The most intriguing imagery is located on either end of the Lost Nature Reliquary. Adam, on the left, stands at the base of the Tree of Knowledge, and Eve, on the right, at the base of the Tree of Life. The snake image on top of the lid begins as a literary, symbolic idea and transforms into a large and threatening figurative presence as it slithers down out of the tree in high relief above the heads of Adam and Eve. The tree next to Adam bears large yellow fruit inscribed in black with the radiation symbol. Adam gazes down at the affected fruit he has just plucked. He holds it in one hand in front of where
his phallus would be. As the snake hovers above, the viewer is caught in the ambiguity over whether Adam will continue to cultivate this “fruit” of man’s labor or consume or destroy it.

On the other end of the reliquary, Eve hugs the Tree of Life from which waters flow out of the mouths of gargoyles-heads on the ends of the branches. Her tree is loaded with healthy, ripe fruit. Eve appears to be a guardian of the Fountain of Life as it flows with renewing force into the Rivers of Paradise.

The contrast between these scenes of Adam and Eve might seem at first to reinforce historical conventions that associated men with the “high” culture of progress and reason, women with “base” nature and emotion. However, this work is overtly feminist in a way that Webster’s other works are not. By turning part of the story of Adam and Eve on its head, it breaks with the Cartesian mode of thinking and begins dismantling the Culture/Nature dichotomy: This time it is Adam who is tempted by the fruit—radioactive fruit—and plucks it from the tree. Reason, power, and technological progress do not equate to progress for the human condition when left unchecked by other human capacities, as the apocalyptic scenes on the front and back of the reliquary forewarn. Webster’s reliquary works suggest that technological advancement can dominate human sensibilities about nature only at great expense. Eve’s guardianship of the Tree of Life is a sign of hope and, perhaps, an indication that attention to traditionally female sensibilities about nature and human relationships could engender a more balanced approach to technological development.

A golden snake coils on a light, blue-green surface inside the bottom of Lost Nature. Whether it is poised to again spoil everything, or whether its position inside a reliquary box indicates it is no longer a threat, is open to interpretation. Maryann Webster, as in many of her other works, presents this ambiguity along with small signs of hope that seem to imply catastrophe may be near but is not inevitable. At the same time, her body of work—from Cybermuse and the Motherboard series to Lost Nature Reliquary and the Dormiens Vigila series—situates viewers on a precipice that challenges them to mend the spectacular disconnect between the technological developments of our time and the values that make us human.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information and statements by Webster are taken from conversations with her during the last five years. I became interested in her art in 1998 and met her when she attended an international ceramics conference in Denver in Autumn 2000. I flew to Salt Lake City in May 2001 to view her studio and see her new work.

2. See Richard Brautigan, The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). 1. The last verse of “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace” reads: “I like to think/(it has to be!)/of a cybernetic ecology/where we are free of our labors/and joined back to nature./returned to our mammal/brothers and sisters,/and all watched over/by machines of loving grace.”


4. Webster is represented by the Ferrin Gallery, Croton, New York, and Lacoste Gallery, Boston. She also shows at invitational ceramic shows and is included on the Coalition committee were several down-winders, people whose health has been adversely affected by past nuclear testing in Nevada. Mutant garden appeared on the cover of High Country News and accompanied a feature story on Webster and other Mormon environmentalists. See Rosemary Winters, “Being Green in the Land of the Saints,” High Country News (December 2003), 1, 10-15. Webster is quoted as saying, “You can’t take a stance against alcohol and smoking and then be for storing nuclear waste in your neighborhood.”

5. Maryann Webster, Dormiens Vigila (White Sleeping, Watch) (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2001), 14.

6. Webster made the stoneware frameworks separately and gave them a matte, marbled surface of sponged and painted underglazes. The porcelain faces and figures were painted with as many as 20 to 30 fired layers of vitreous enamels.

7. Webster obtained permission to use Brautigan’s phrase “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace” from Ianthe Brautigan Swensen, the late poet’s daughter and the copyright owner.

8. Up close, even the tiny code numbers and letters for the circuitry are visible, left in gold on the painted ceramic surface underneath where their matching decals had been placed before kiln firing. A layer of gold in a liquid emulsion was painted on and fired before the decals and then purple china paint was applied.


10. Cybermuse and the Motherboard series were exhibited with other works in “Icons and Motherboards” in November and December of 1998 at Dolores Chase Fine Art in Salt Lake City.


12. Milagro is Spanish for “miracle.” These ex-voto healing charms, or votive offerings, came to Mexico with the Spanish and date back to previous Mediterranean cultures. Webster collects milagros, Chinese healing coins, and other small objects, some quite ordinary. She recounts buying milagros—now mass-produced from junk metal and covered with gold leaf—outside of cathedrals on annual Christmas-time trips to Mexico. People buy an “arm” milagro if they wish to heal an arm, a woman buys a “baby” milagro if she wants to become pregnant, and so forth. The believers then enter the cathedral, pin the milagro onto the figure of a saint, and pray for healing or ask for a blessing.

13. See Linda Brady Tesner, “The Figure in Ceramic: Metaphoric Vessels of the Human Spirit,” The Figure in Ceramic (Portland: Lewis and Clark College, 2002). Tesner writes that Webster “transforms the body into both a shrinelike container and the ground for ‘tattooed’ apocalyptic illustrations…. Does the doll suggest the human collective unconscious and thus represent all of humanity? The illustrations covering her body are chilling. In a style reminiscent of ancient maps or medieval manuscripts, the narrative derives from the biblical Book of Revelations, an arcane tale that serves as an overt harbinger of humankind’s future, “6. Another of Webster’s ceramic doll figures, Spirit Vessel (2003), appeared on the cover of The Figure as Object catalogue for an exhibition at The Blue Ridge Parkway’s Folk Art Center, Asheville, North Carolina, June 28-September 21, 2003.

14. Palissy’s work was bizarre for its time. For more on his life and work, see Leonard N. Amico, Bernard Palissy: In Search of Earthly Paradise (Paris-New York: Flammarion, 1996).

15. Webster, Dormiens Vigila, 12-13.

16. Ibid., 12.

17. The exhibition took place at the Alvin Gittins Gallery at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, February 26-March 9, 2001.


19. Also included on the Coalition committee were several down-winders, people whose health has been adversely affected by past nuclear testing in Nevada. Mutant garden appeared on the cover of High Country News and accompanied a feature story on Webster and other Mormon environmentalists. See Rosemary Winters, “Being Green in the Land of the Saints,” High Country News (December 2003), 1, 10-15. Webster is quoted as saying, “You can’t take a stance against alcohol and smoking and then be for storing nuclear waste in your neighborhood.”

20. Webster experimented extensively with different slip formulas and firing temperatures and with various vitreous enamels in combination with commercial glazes in producing the reliquary boxes. She employed gold in a chemical emulsion for some surfaces. Creating the reliquaries was a labor-intensive process. She hand built the box forms and contrasted their geometric regularity with hand-sculpted handles and feet relating to the boxes’ painted narratives. The boxes were fired as many as 20 to 30 times, as various colors and layers of porcelain paint were added.

Shelly Ezzard Smith, an independent art historian based in Colorado, has a particular interest in the intersection of technology, environment, and culture in contemporary art.


Pl. 16. Maryann Webster, Mutant Garden Diptych (2000), oil and gold leaf on wood panels, 66" x 51". Artist’s Collection.