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A Three-Part International Sculpture Exhibit Champions Biodiversity

State of the Arts

By Kevin J. Kelley

“On the Planet,” sculptures by Japanese and American artists at the FlynnDog in Burlington, Studio Place Arts in Barre, and Millstone Hill in Barre Town. Reception at the FlynnDog on Friday, September 10, 6-8 p.m., during the South End Art Hop, with performances by the Burlington Taiko Group at 6 and 7 p.m. Artist talks and performances on Saturday, September 11, 4-6 p.m. Exhibits through September 22. www.studioplacearts.com

East and West come together in a creative collaboration in Vermont this month, with 44 Japanese and Americans exhibiting artworks indoors and outdoors in three locations. “On the Planet,” a show exploring the theme of biodiversity, is spread among the **FlynnDog** in Burlington’s South End; Millstone Hill, an abandoned quarrying complex in Barre Town; and **Studio Place Arts** (SPA) in Barre. SPA organized this follow-up to a similar interchange that took place early this year in Nagoya, Japan. The entire undertaking was inspired by the 10th anniversary conference of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, which meets in Nagoya next month.

Plainfield sculptor **Emiko Sawaragi Gilbert**, a native of Japan represented in the current shows by twisty constructs of branches and vines, made the initial connections with a Nagoya artist/curator that culminated in “On the Planet.” Gilbert worked with SPA’s executive director **Sue Higby** and artist **Janet Van Fleet** in arranging this elaborate but low-budget trio of multimedia shows, along with concurrent visits to Vermont by five Japanese artists and four students from a fine-arts university near Nagoya.

“We did a lot with very little,” says Van Fleet, who showed her own work in the Nagoya show. “It’s actually quite remarkable what SPA has been able to accomplish.”

The FlynnDog portion, easily accessible to Art Hoppers this weekend, features outstanding work by three Japanese artists.

Osaka’s Kita Yoshiaki displays dark-toned, close-up pigment prints of animal skin and fur that take on an otherworldly quality. His images of gnarled, mottled or silken textures hang alongside an equally startling series of drawings, collectively entitled “Total Eclipse,” by New York-based Shige Moriya. Without the identifying label, viewers would never guess the delicately crafted allusions to sun storms and supernovas are crafted from soot.

A pair of wood reliefs by **Hisanori Morimoto** is an elegant introduction to the FlynnDog show. In “Volcano,” the 79-year-old Waterbury sculptor has carved craters and blasted blisters on two joined slabs of birdseye maple, one of which is painted black. Morimoto has done something similar but more painstakingly detailed in the adjoining “Wave.”

“On the Planet” isn’t intended to be an international throwdown, but comparisons between the American and Japanese artists are inevitable. Visitors to SPA will most likely conclude that the Vermonters have held their own in this high-quality matchup. Among the local stars is **Janet Fredericks**. In “A River Has a Right to Its Curves” the Lincoln artist uses watercolors — appropriately enough — to depict the colors of the water in the New Haven River. The nature forms built by **Zelma Loseke** of East Corinth also command attention, while “Adaptation” by Montpelier’s **Gowri Savor** fills most of a wall with several concentric circles made of threaded-together maple-seed “helicopters.”

The 15 or so pieces installed along a mile-long loop at Millstone Hill make inventive use of a site billed as “central Vermont’s manmade natural wonder.” Visitors may come away as impressed with the setting as with the artworks, some of which will be left in place to dissolve into their surroundings.

At Millstone, 70 miles of biking, hiking and cross-country skiing trails weave past piles of stone and flooded quarries left behind by small, independent operations that were supplanted in the 20th century by Rock of Ages and other Barre-area granite companies. Near a towering pair of neatly stacked blocks resembling an Incan ruin, new-media artist **Jenn Karson** of Colchester has installed a “shimmer of sound” inspired by Millstone’s multifaceted environment.

Hardwick sculptor **James Teuscher** rests tusk-like cedar beams on a pair of wishbone-shaped supports at a high point in a meadow to mark the exhibit’s entry point. Following the trail, visitors soon come upon “Inside Out,” **Chris Nelson**’s array of four ropes extending from the walls of a quarry and intersecting just below its watery surface. Laughter may be heard nearby as walkers happen on **Mary Sweeney**’s Holstein-colored “Bed” perched incongruously on a rise in the forest.

The Japanese artists in “On the Planet” offer generally flattering comments about Vermont. Utterly different, Van Fleet notes, is Nagoya, a large city noted for its Toyota plant. But Mie Matsuyama and Sae Nakano both present less complimentary takes on Western civilization. In “Greeting to the Forest,” Matsuyama crafts a flower out of a crushed Budweiser can. In Nakano’s “EMANON” — which spells “NONAME” backward — bar codes are visible on pieces of painted plastic.