Sandra Jane Heard
Wound and *Wound*

by Christopher Merlo

In the work of Sandra Jane Heard, *the* wound is *wound*. Literally, silk thread, yarn, and linen are wound around allegorical wounds inflicted by man upon nature. Her work is not meant to be a tongue twister but rather an eye opener as she spins a cautionary tale with each of her narrative sculptures. Moreover, "wound and *wound*" also speaks to the dichotomies found in her work—both physical in the grouping of pairs, and figurative in the contrasts between man and nature, past and present, nurture and neglect—those countless universal dualities that form the foundation of myths across all cultures.

This duality is heightened by the allegorical, the multilevel richness of meaning and visual metaphors Heard sets before our eyes. One might even call her narrative sculptures dioramas. But unlike those tableau testaments to our rapacious appetite to hunt and collect, Heard's work tells a story about the wounds we inflict on nature and ourselves because we live out of balance and disconnected from the world we inhabit. What Heard so poignantly makes evident in the winding of thread and linen is that we are, in fact, connected. In her talismanic approach, she connects a concern for the environment with our inner worlds, both past and present: memories, awareness, passion, self-image.

Heard's sculptures take us on a journey through time, metaphor, and fact. Open your eyes and picture:

> *A subterranean herd of buffalo marching beneath grain silos.*
>
> *A menagerie of endangered animals ascending a tramway in a parade to oblivion.*
>
> *Two tigers watching helplessly as a cub dangles above a chasm.*
>
> *A pair of lions attempting to cross a bridge suspended between two oil derricks.*

No, these are not the typical action shots found in *National Geographic*. Nor are they the documentation of a safari bound for a trophy wall or photo album. But yes, these imaginings are certainly out of the ordinary. They are unusual juxtapositions designed to disturb the calm and provoke alarm to the state of peril we occupy in this place we call Mother Earth.

The gathering of animals. The collecting of found objects. An interest in textiles. All come together in a body of work that breaks the mold, as Heard morphs into a sculptor of assemblages. And all on a grand scale that plays with universal themes.

Heard's vision is panoramic, from the figurative to the literal. Through an exploration of materials and the meanings they possess, she struggles to resolve a seemingly endless conflict between the dueling forces of man and nature. The world she creates is rich with imagery, symbolism, and storytelling. And it challenges your exploration.

While Heard's work is about time (past and present), it is also about place (history and geography). For now, that place is Perrysburg, Ohio, a bucolic Midwest all-American town and the location of her home and studio. The town is a short distance from the post-industrial landscape and, some might say, urban decay of Toledo. Again, even in her place of residency, she is confronted by the push and pull between nature and industrialism. This is a familiar juxtaposition for an artist born and raised in the United Kingdom, where she first became aware of the history of industrialization, its rise and decline, and the toll it continues to take on the environment.

Heard began her studies in textiles and printmaking in the UK and went on to earn a BFA at the California College of Arts. All along, she has been building a vocabulary of themes and images drawn from both the natural and the manmade. There is a keen sense of symmetry and the use of multiples influenced by her

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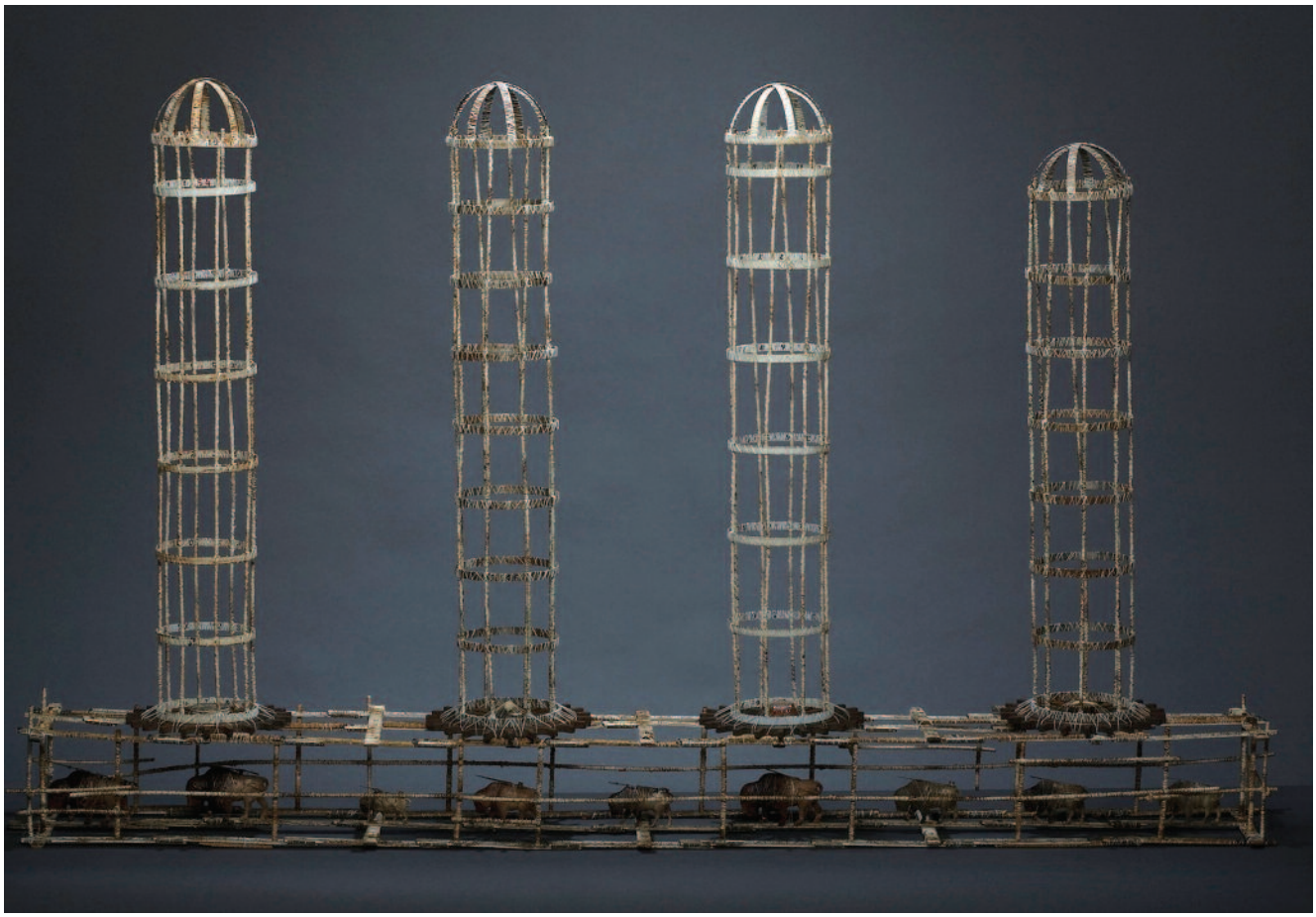

Sandra Jane Heard *The Sisters of Servitude* Reeds, vintage steel tape measures, wooden rulers, vintage maps, silk and linen yarn, found objects, 36" x 57" x 7", 2012. Details *ABOVE*. All photos by William Jordan.

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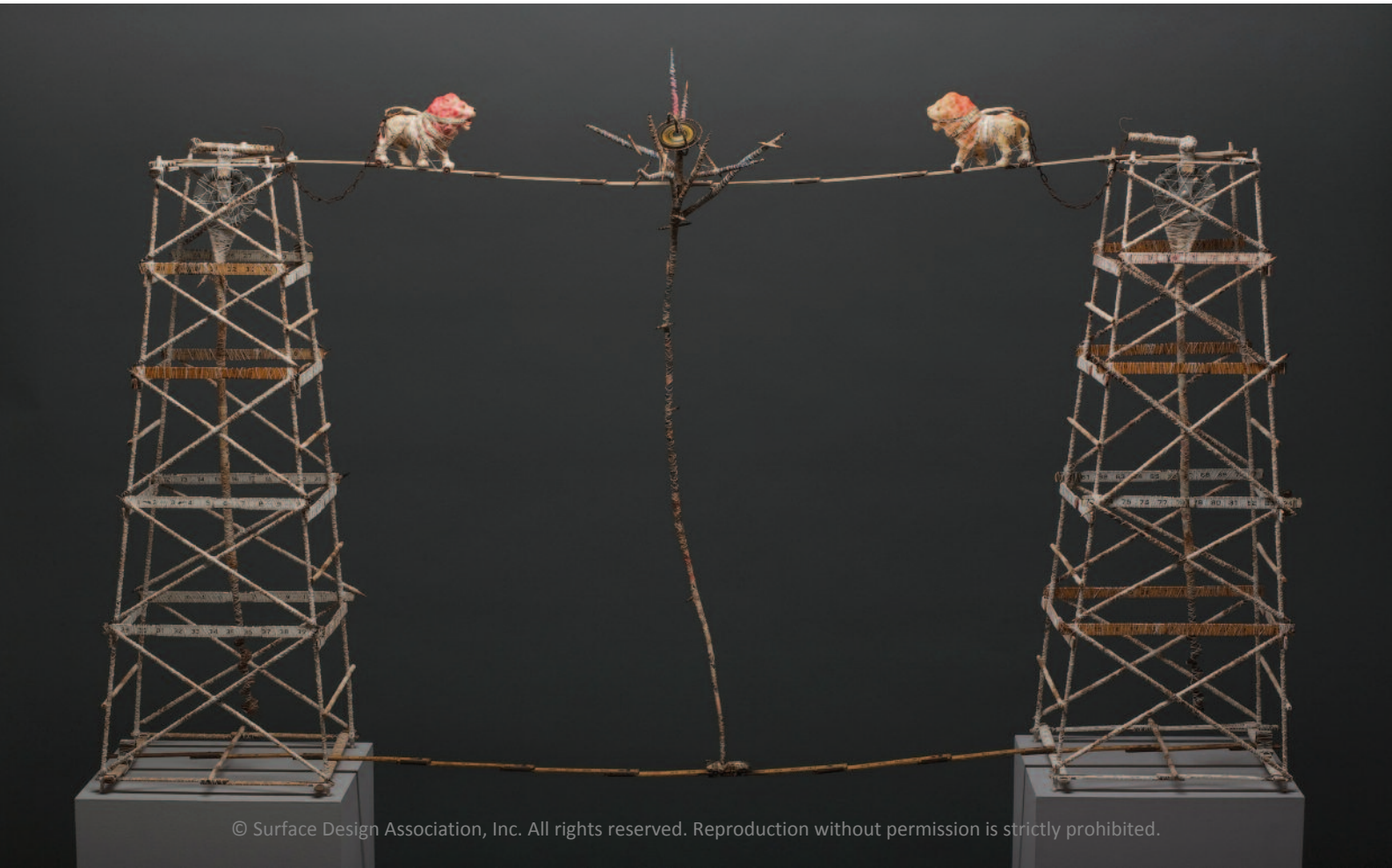

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ABOVE: **Sandra Jane Heard *Into the Abyss*** Reeds, wooden rulers, vintage toy train tracks, pages from vintage National Geographic, silk and linen yarn, found objects, silk, 44" x 7' x 20", 2013.
LEFT: **Sandra Jane Heard *Dissolution of Brotherhood*** Reeds, wooden rulers, vintage book of anatomy, vintage maps, silk and linen yarn, found objects, 44" x 6' x 20", 2013. With details.

observations of the structures built by nature's master architects, such as nests constructed by birds and insects. Manmade structures provide counterpoints in the form of grain silos, bridges, and oil derricks. The erosive effects of time upon these constructions and the found objects she collects, destined for inclusion in her sculptures, are key elements in her narratives. There is the incorporation of paper from vintage books and magazines to sheath surfaces like skin. Structures are built with reeds and branches, as well as antique carpenter rulers and tape measures. The materials that bind them together—links them-are silk and linen yarn.

In 2012, Heard began to explore these themes and techniques in a series of multi-faceted sculptures that express "…the many deep-rooted affinities we as humans share…the fragility of the natural world, and the importance of our role as custodians of all that inhabit it."

In *The Sisters of Servitude*, she transforms the great American buffalo, once a symbol of the wild majesty of the Great Plains, into pack animals marching one by one beneath the skeletons of grain silos. Silk bindings secure old clock hands to the animals' backs. They are transporters of a bygone era when their ancestors numbered in the millions and roamed free across the prairie. Now, they are shackled and imprisoned by the taming of the frontier and the forces of agribusiness, as represented by the silos.

Another intriguing element of Heard's new work is her use of kinship terms and the linkage to gender in her titles. With the *Dissolution of Brotherhood,* two lions—animals known for their high level of social integration within a pride—are separated and attempting to reach each other. They are perched and chained atop two oil derricks, another symbol of the exploitation of nature. Their focus is to join together and reestablish balance by reaching the gyroscope that rests precariously at the center. The imagery evokes memories of circuses and lion tamers forcing "Kings of the Jungle" to perform unnatural acts for the pleasure of humans.

A few words here about palette. From a distance, each sculpture appears nearly monochromatic, with a subdued mix of earth tones. However, *Brotherhood* is a good example of how the artist uses color to direct the eye and highlight the anxiety. The lions' heads are lightly dusted in red, and red thread is wrapped around

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Sandra Jane Heard *Demarcation of the Mother* Reeds, mitsumata branches, wooden rulers, pages from a book of comparative anatomy, silk and linen yarn, found objects. 44" x 8' x 26", 2013. Detail *RIGHT*.

the centermost spiked branch or thorn. Together, they form a trinity of tension.

Into the Abyss offers another blending of narrative and the architectural. A menagerie of endangered species ascends a rollercoaster—into the abyss. Surely, this is no amusement ride but rather an opportunity for bewilderment. As Heard muses, "In utilizing an old toy train track and the vintage toys that represent threatened species, I am attempting to convey that we are still just children at play, gambling with the Earth's wonders, leading to catastrophic irreversible consequences." Yet, there is hope and another example of duality in her work; the abyss into which they will plunge is also a partial cocoon. The potential for rebirth into a new state of mind still exists to transform our relationship with the natural world.

With *Demarcation of the Mother*, Heard brings forth a metamorphosis as the structural becomes skeletal. Once again, we find two opposing symmetrical shapes that suggest aged mother figures. Their bones, made of mitsumata branches and vintage carpenter rulers, are wrapped in the pages from an anatomy book and bound with burnt linen and silk yarn. Handmade skin-like shawls drape protectively over their shoulders. To create the garments, Heard wrapped fine silk thread around a mold and then scorched the lace-like fabric.

The figures' heads are antique stereoscopes. Within their fields of vision, two tigers stand poised to cross a footbridge. Their journey is precarious, uncertain if the bridge will hold because its center is stressed by the weight of clock gears and hands. A young tiger cub dangling from this assemblage has fallen prey to time. Its life and the future of the species hang in the balance between two entities—a division or demarcation separating civilized man from Mother Nature. As Heard bluntly puts it, "…this is a work depicting a mother being torn apart as she bears witness to the demise of her creation."

Despite the underlying darkness of her narrative, Heard believes we can mend the wounds inflicted upon Nature and ourselves. But it will require the elimination of our pride and sense of superiority. The tension and the stoppage of time, as seen in the arrested movement of two lions or two mothers who seek to be reunited, is a sign of hope. Ultimately, we do want to be a part of—and not apart from—Nature.

Sandra Jane Heard's website is www.sandrajaneheard.com.

—Christopher Merlo is a freelance writer and poet in Dearborn, Michigan.

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