JDJ

Barrow Parke
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Weaving originated at least 10,000 years ago, coinciding with the first cultivation of plants to produce food and shelter. It marks one of the first examples of complex thought, and is the genesis of abstract knowledge. One can trace back most of humankind's development of civilization—language, mathematics, and science, among others—back to the process of weaving.

The many conceptual ideas explored in these works by Barrow Parke share a common theme: the complex relationships between humans and the natural world, and our need to define it, assign meaning to it, and use it on our own terms. While some characteristics of flora, fauna and terrain are emphasized, others remain hidden or disregarded if inconvenient to the narratives that humans decided to create around them. The human need to assign names and definitions to the natural world is an act of knowing, yet not necessarily an act of understanding.

Barrow Parke combine their fascination with the natural world with art historical, anthropological, cultural, and scientific references in their hand-woven paintings, works on paper and a unique wallpaper. Central to their practice is the act of weaving: as a method of production for their sumptuous paintings, and as structural inspiration for their works on paper, but also as a conceptual framework that has had an outsized effect on nearly all aspects of humanity.

Fish Don't Exist

The most common of sea creatures, right? But taxonomically speaking, there is no official categorization or designation for "fishes." Modern scientific classification does not even recognize "fish" as a category because they do not descend from a common ancestor. To make matters even more complex, since all life on Earth descended from aquatic species, some types of sea-dwellers, like salmon and sharks, are more closely related to non-fish-like creatures than they are to each other.

We think that a hierarchy exists in nature—that all living creatures are organized into a pyramid, with humans at the top, and lowly single cell organisms making up the base. But when we can let go of the need to hierarchically classify, we can develop a richer sense of understanding. This approach also emphasizes the subjectivity that is often present in what one considers factual or scientific information.

The solar system motif is a reference to Nicolaus Copernicus, the Renaissance mathematician and astronomer who was the first to propose that the solar system existed, and that all planets, including the one we inhabit, revolved around the sun. A change in perspective—from geocentric to heliocentric—quite literally opened up a new universe.

The visual structure of *Fish Don't Exist* is organized like a traditional needlework sampler. Before the introduction of printed designs, samplers were often used as a teaching tool for children to learn the craft, as well as a way to test designs before printing methods were commonplace.

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Pangaea

The image of the supercontinent Pangaea as depicted in this painting is inspired by British embroideries of maps from the 16-18th centuries. Outlining where current country borders would be if the land mass had remained intact, the map created by Barrow Parke shows the arbitrary nature of political borders. The artists' initials are inserted into the corners of the work—a nod to the traditional method of authorship on weaving samplers.

The floral ring motif encircling the globe is a reference to the importance of plants and botany within the history of weaving. One of the oldest human technologies, weaving originated in the Neolithic era when early humans wove branches, twigs and plants into objects of utility: baskets, shelters, etc. Weavings were then used to make fabrics and clothing, and were one of the first ways image reproduction became possible (the structure of tapestries were the precursor to the printing press).

Conceptually speaking, weavings were one of the earliest forms of abstract thought manifest into the physical realm. Their vertical and horizontal threads (warp & weft) are used to create both the structure of the weaving and its pattern. Patterns in weaving can take on a variety of significance: from the exchange of information found historically, especially in non-Western weavings, to more recent iterations related to modernism and to Bauhaus figures like Anni Albers.

Straw Woman

Based on a sculpture of Eve by Rodin, the central figure in this work, encircled by a border of wheat stalks, symbolizes the connection between the role of women in cultivating wheat, which led to the domestication of humans. The cultivation of plants bound people to land so they could tend to it—the term "putting roots down" was as much literal as metaphorical. Humans were able to build self-sustaining communities based around agriculture, which provided a more stable life than the nomadic hunting tribes that preceded them. Plant cultivation also led to the need for territorial boundaries, and the rise of disputes over land ownership.

Weaving was one of the first physical manifestations of complex thought, and most technological developments in history have descended from it: agriculture, textiles, medicine, architecture, mathematics, to name a few. The labor involved with the plant cultivation and weaving was historically performed by women, yet they are largely left out of the history books when it comes to these innovations. The production and utility of textiles was a key aspect to population growth—it provided protection from the elements, and therefore an ability to travel to colder climates. Later, clothing the body went from a strictly utilitarian to a moral act, with the notion of shame around nudity taking root in the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The pattern inside the central figure is a depiction of Norma, a statue created in 1943 by eugenic scientists to represent the ideal woman based on a study of measurements for a small and unrepresentative slice of the world's female population. Standardized clothing sizes still in use today were derived from Norma's measurements. Considered together, all of the references contained in Straw Woman are examples of how women's stories are often constructed externally—and even more often, by men. The title of this work is a reference to the term "straw man"-something that is intentionally misrepresented.

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American Songbirds

This work depicts a number of bird species that have been designated as state birds within the United States, a tradition that began in the early 20th century. The decision that each state makes to designate its representative bird can be as arbitrary as the political borders that demarcate the states themselves, and is based around characteristics like their spirit, beauty, and song quality. A number of states lay claim to the same state bird (seven states use the northern cardinal, and six states use the western meadowlark).

What these birds are supposed to symbolize often has nothing to do with the bird's actual ecological or habitat needs. The human tendancy to assign names and definitions to the natural world is an act of knowing, yet not necessarily an act of understanding, and in co-opting these birds as symbols, we disregard their true nature. In humankind's assignation of these wild creatures to represent land with arbitrary political boundaries, we cultivate a human-centered approach to their existence.

If US states were focused on their representative birds outside of their generic symbolism, there would be more awareness around the fact that their populations are dwindling due to human activity: habitat loss due to construction and the use of pesticides and other insecticides are the two major culprits. A shift in perspective from homocentric to ecocentric could be the path forward for our avian representatives.

Octopoda

Barrow Parke depicts an image of an octopus in this work, with a repeat of smaller octopuses and nerve synapses in the background. The patterns contained in each of its arms act as a visual reference to the unique neurological structure of the creature: it has nine "brains" or masses of neurons, one in each of its eight arms and one around its eyes. The arm with the sequence of numbers represents the numeric loom threading instructions used to create the pattern of the fabric they wove for this painting.

Some scientists argue that octopuses were the first intelligent beings on Earth—their predecessors were in existence before dinosaurs, as their early fossils have been dated at approximately 330 million years old. They are also some of the smartest creatures on earth—they can use tools, solve puzzles, recognize humans, communicate, and play.

The background pattern of female octopuses clutching onto their eggs references the species' unique reproductive process. The years-long gestation period of deep-sea octopuses drains so much energy from mothers that it often leads to their death, though some have found innovative ways to make the process easier. Deep-sea hydrothermal vents which produce warm water currents along the ocean floor can dramatically speed up the gestation process, thus improving survival rates and maternal health. Just like humans, octopuses can use the earth's resources to aid in self preservation.

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Rosetta

A tangle of hand-embroidered plants are organized into a knotted net structure inspired by a diagram in Anni Albers' book On Weaving that references pre-Columbian weavings.

The floral motif is a reference to the importance of plants and botany in the history of weaving. Weaving is one of the oldest human technologies, and originated in the Neolithic era, when early humans wove branches, twigs and plants into objects of utility: shelters, baskets, etc. Weavings were then used to make fabric, clothing, and were one of the first ways to reproduce images—tapestries were the precursor to the printing press, and then much later, the computer. Plants were also cultivated for food and medicine—used to sustain and protect life.

Over the centuries, the use of plant and botanical motifs started to become thought of as decorative, or trivial, despite there being a clear conceptual link to plants and the technological advancements of humankind. The artists use this motif in this painting as a way to reclaim their importance in the history of civilization.

Mark Barrow (b. 1982) and Sarah Parke (b.1981) live and work in New York City. Their work has been recently exhibited at JDJ | NYC & Garrison, NY; University Art Museum, Albany, NY; Shirley Fiterman Art Center, New York, NY; Fabric Workshop & Museum, Philadelphia, PA; La Capella Cavassa, Saluzzo, Italy; Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; White Columns, New York; Le 109, Nice, France; ZERO..., Milan; Galerie Almine Rech, Paris and Brussels; and Elizabeth Dee, New York.