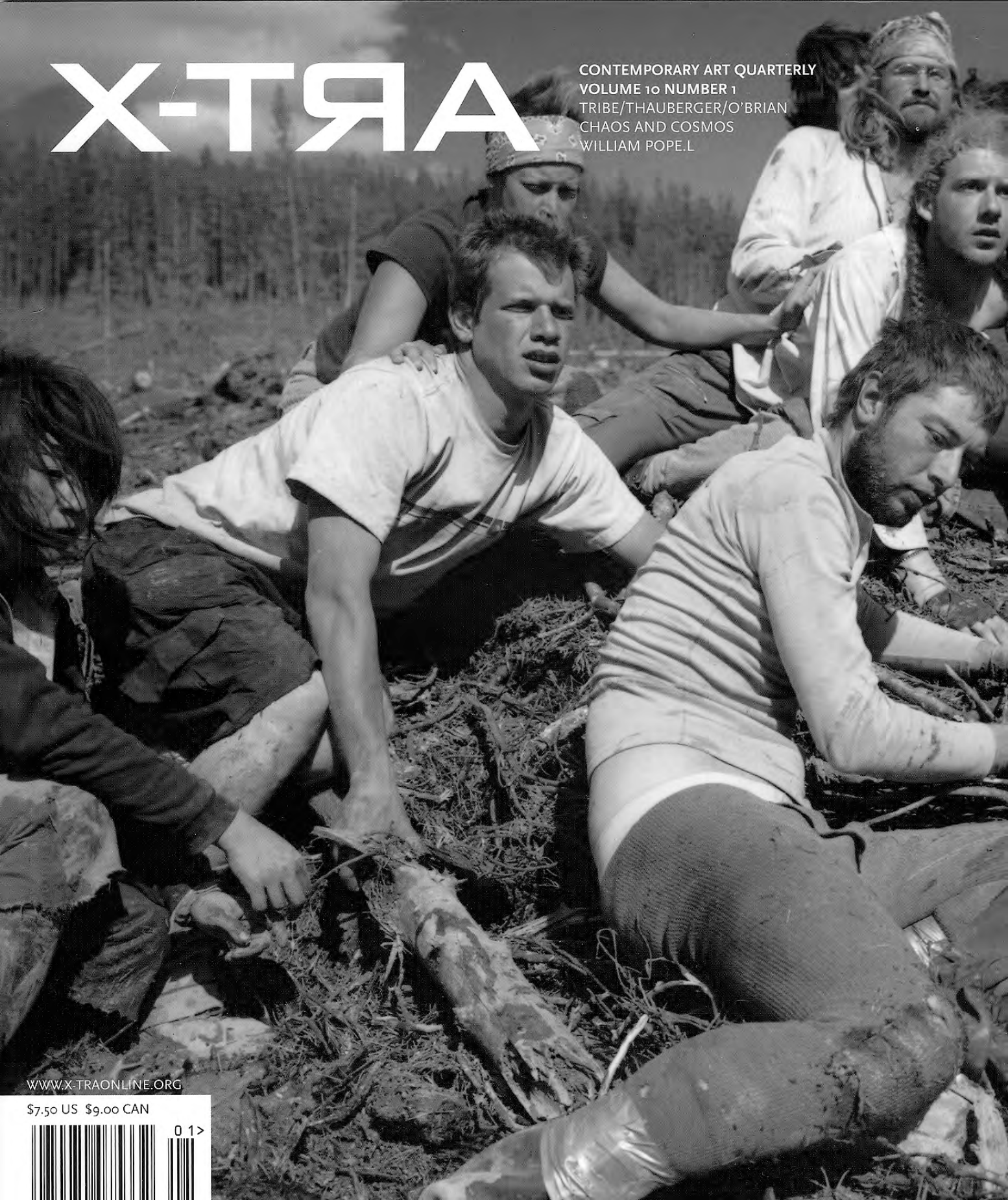


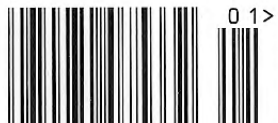
# X-TRA

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## Together Apart

MATIAS VIEGENER

## Christopher Russell

Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

Since the age of industrialization, the opposition of nature and culture has been deployed by artists to depict the goodness of nature, both that of the human and that of the landscape, as being corrupted by the predations of decadent and avaricious men. This trajectory can be traced through Romanticism, Symbolism and even Realism and Naturalism, re-inscribing the various ways in which an original innocence has been spoiled or love turned to violent hate. Nature is used to signify either an original purity or a threatened refuge from the bad things men, machines and cities do to us. Culture corrupts and nature redeems.

Christopher Russell's recent show at Acuna-Hansen recuperates these tropes as they emerge particularly in the gothic novel, the bastard child of Romanticism and Symbolism. These novels often complicate the opposition of nature and culture, showing us that the opposition is less absolute and certainly less stable than it might appear. Dark forests, cathedrals of light, and symbolic tracings populate Russell's imagistic world. Both nature and culture are innocent and dangerous. The wintry image of a forest stream is etched with ghostly white sailboats, pirate frigates carrying us away from the ominous grey enclosure of the forest. The boats are incised into this photograph with an Exacto knife, revealing as much as inscribing the cultural basis of this seemingly natural world. Many of Russell's photographs are incised this way, some with natural figures like birds or leaves, but many with decorative and stylized figures like stained glass windows, monsters or woven *fleurs de lys*, heavy in their symbolism but reluctant to be pressed into a unified visual narrative.

The gothic novel is at the core of Russell's show. All the visual pieces are based on his recently completed novel of the same title as the show, *Together*. The novel itself, with color images seen also on the walls is for sale, as well as a cleverly packaged, eight-page, "Cliff's

Notes" version of the book. While you might expect the images to mirror the novel, they do something else. Nothing here serves as an illustration. Each component functions allegorically, the images drawn from the text and the notes on the text. They echo each other's themes, images and narrative turns but at the same time each of them stands alone as a self-enclosed entity. This plays against the conceptual enclosure of the story which is, broadly, the narrative of a pair of serial killers seemingly writing a book together. Their story resembles that of the two killers (one older, one younger, potentially lovers) shooting people in their cars a few years ago in the Washington, DC, area.

The narrative begins and ends in enclosure. First the claustrophobia of a mad parent and an escape into the feral wilderness, then the madness of the runaway boy and the man who finds him, each potentially victim and murderer of the other. Their acts of violence resonate more symbolically than actually, or rather, the reader becomes unsure of the actual location of the violence: the narrative fractures and turns in on itself. Russell's writing is influenced by the structural experimentation of New Narrative texts as well as the thematic concerns of Dennis Cooper—sexual murder as an erotic existential pact, sexual murder as a philosophical meditation. This is especially refracted through Wayne Koestenbaum's critical notion of male co-authorship as a fundamentally homosocial or even homosexual relationship between two writers.<sup>1</sup> The theme of control, and the anxiety to escape control permeates the texts and floods the images with strange resonance. While the opening is suffused with maternal suffocation and neglect, the form of control exercised at the end is that of the state, with the final chapter written either by a detective or one of the characters masquerading as a detective. He is delusional, desperate to create meaning without particular regard for veracity.

While each of Russell's images has its counterpart in the text, they also form part of the familiar elements of both the Gothic and contemporary true crime narratives. Blurry images of what appear to be strangers are taken at great distance or with blurred focus; each vacant location seems like a potential

1. Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989).



CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL, *Untitled (Adam's House)*, 2004-2007. SCRATCHED ULTRACHROME PRINT; 11 X 14 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ACUNA-HANSEN GALLERY.

or past crime scene. The solitary figures are either the victims or the perpetrators, cloaked for different reasons but never identified. Far more of the photographs are of natural settings than interiors, about half in color, half black and white. Many represent trees, either skeletally bare or seen from below as a form of shelter. The tree is a persistent Romantic symbol, linking the surface with both the depths of the earth and the limitlessness of the sky above. But the tree is just as easily emptied here, simply a symbol of desolation, the absence of meaning. And while the images reference the outdoors, they point toward a troubled, refracted interiority.

The show is weighted with text at every turn. The pages of the novel have been printed in colored peacock-feather ink patterns used as wallpaper on one side of the gallery. Many photographs have lines of Russell's text etched into them. Several of Russell's artist's books are set on two tables, some with just photographic and collaged images, and others that include text. There is more here than can be viewed in one sitting, deliberately overwhelming the visitor with images, texts and sensation. One book is weighted between heavy upholstered steel covers as if to symbolize the force necessary to contain the violent narrative held within. This re-engages



CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL, *Untitled (Empathy Drawing: Bat)*, 2004-2007. SCRATCHED ULTRACHROME PRINT; 8 X 10 INCHES.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ACUNA-HANSEN GALLERY.

the theme of enclosure and release, capture and escape.

When not ominous, nature is a refuge in many of these images, with stained glass windows echoing the theme of nature as a divine space. "Nature is a temple," said Baudelaire, "whose living pillars sometimes utter jumbled words." In one of the photographs, branches arch inwards to form a kind of chapel, and in another the opening of the branches reveals a white Gothic church window etched into the paper. On the back wall is a photograph of bare tree branches whose openings have been filled in with stained-glass colors, referencing both the church and an acid trip. Russell has draped the two store windows beside the entrance to the gallery with erratically crocheted afghans in multi-colors, which arise in the narrative but also look from inside the space like stained-glass windows. The gallery from within might

resemble a cave draped with vines, a shelter draped with old blankets or even a chapel. The afghans edge toward the abject rather than the kitschy—ordinary sentimentalized and maternal objects all too ready to take on paranormal meanings.

These images do not reference a divine presence so much as the absence of the divine. God is replaced by abject aestheticized experience, an anti-aesthetic that celebrates decay, sensation and delirium. Often there are dead birds or lost animals, which evince a fascination for death and mortality. While the core of the narrative centers on how literal the murders are—how real or how symbolic—the images gravitate more toward the question of being and meaning. Often this rests on the issue of possession. What is it to be possessed of a thing larger than oneself? Does one possess an obsession or is one possessed by it? The work here is as much about desire



CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL, *Untitled (Fantasy of Elbert Hubbard's Shipwreck)*, 2004-2007. SCRATCHED ULTRACHROME PRINT; 8 X 10 INCHES.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ACUNA-HANSEN GALLERY.

as meaning.

This dark drive at the core of Russell's work resembles the dark aspect of the unconscious drive Freud first described before he split the libido into eros and thanatos. Before he defined the two drives as a life drive and a death drive, his version of the libido was rather more paradoxical or ambivalent. One desires both to possess and destroy. Perhaps the desire to love is inseparable from the desire to destroy. Russell's technique of scratching into his photographs is an allegory to this complex drive. The purpose of the photo may be to see, but the etching longs to reveal something beyond sight, something under the skin of the photograph. If you look very closely at the incisions, turn them against the light, you see the trace of violence in the innocence.

Everything human in this universe is guilty, but this is very close to saying

everyone is innocent: humans are driven by compulsions beyond their comprehension. Nature is indifferent. Perhaps the most fruitful gesture in this show is to interface the nature against culture debate with the use of image and text. It's tempting to see text as a guilty cultural product, generated by looking within the self, while the exterior photograph captures nature with perfect registration. But Russell's images shimmer with complicity and suspicion, while the text constantly maps routes of escape. Everything moves through a web of allegory. Nature is a language, offers a language, symbols speak louder than words, and narrative texts refract into parallel tracks, referring to each other yet not mirroring anything more than a spectral truth.

**Matias Viegner** is a writer who lives in Los Angeles and teaches at CalArts.