



/DAN HUDSON SHRINES

**"DAN HUDSON'S SHRINES – THE ARTIST AS TRAPPER, PHILOSOPHER, ILLUMINATOR" BY
KATHERINE YLITALO**

I first met Dan Hudson in 1994 in Canmore, Alberta, as I made studio visits in preparation for an exhibition that might challenge the modernist assumptions of the gallery architecture of the Nickle Arts Museum with works that were intimate in scale, hand-crafted and narrative in content. I was attracted by the quasi-finger paintings that positioned commonplace objects like a piece of pizza, a tool box and a computer mouse as icons. Almost twenty years later, I remain convinced that Dan is a truly unique artist.

Over a period of five years, Hudson created wall-mounted, sculptural shrines in his current Canmore studio. These labour-intensive projects became touchstones that he continuously revisited as he won awards as a travel/adventure photojournalist and garnered artistic recognition in Germany for his recent video installations. Dense, gritty and richly textured, the shrines function as twenty-first century sites for the contemplation of life cycles in a contemporary world.

Hudson developed as an artist in Ontario during the 1980s in a cultural climate populated with visionaries like Patterson Ewen who championed Canadian identity and celebrated regional experience. Before Hudson turned ten, philosopher Marshall McLuhan published, *The Medium is the Message*. In it, you find an oft-quoted line that is particularly central to Hudson's thinking, "Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible."

Like a wilderness trapper, Hudson knows his environment well and welcomes the processes that work on him as he moves along his various trap lines. Timing and resourcefulness are crucial. To collect components for his shrines, he

➔ **QUEEN, DETAIL, 2006–2007. PHOTO BY MARC HUTCHINSON.**





EXHIBITION STATEMENT

The *Shrines* are a series of multimedia projects that reflect on the relationship between contemporary culture and the natural world. They are contemplations on cycles of time — day and night, summer and winter, life and death. Aesthetically, these works encompass wide ranging ideas from both high and low culture — museum displays, cemeteries, hunting trophies, television, medieval artifacts, Baroque frames, Asian temple decorations, Mexican roadside alters, kitsch Americana and Canadian landscape painting.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Dan Hudson is based in both Canmore and Berlin. He holds a BFA from York University, and has attended the UCSD and the Banff Centre. Hudson has received numerous awards and his work is represented in public and private collections throughout North America and Europe.

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© **SHRINES**, INSTALLATION VIEW, 2013.

PHOTO BY MARC HUTCHINSON.

covered a far-flung territory of geographic terrain from the Rocky Mountains and Georgian Bay to pop culture destinations like dollar stores, model shops and home décor outlets. To catch video imagery that invokes the vision of elk, coyote, bear, salmon and crows, he had to be a careful observer of their ways and follow their paths, whether along remote mountain trails, a secluded island, a distant river or landmarks in Berlin.

Hudson conjoins physical material with transitory digital images. He invents ways to embed the video: onto a mirror, in scale with the silhouette of an elk's profile or seen through eye openings of an animal mask. By inserting the video narratives into the material constructs, he converts the trophy-laden shrines into provocative sites of complexity and contradiction. To experience the visceral and virtual coexisting in close proximity can be unnerving, especially as you draw close to see the detail in *Greener Grass* and *Scavenger*.

Hudson's inquiring mind leads him to anthropology, metaphysics, physics, natural science, social science and the history of art. Unpacking the imagery in the two ornate, supersized playing/Tarot card hybrids, *King and Queen*, he rewards the viewer with references to creation myths, the planet's seasonal turns, life cycles of flora and fauna, and the history of art. Faces of females and males at different stages of life melt from one to the next. Dip into the uncomfortable zone of the valley of the uncanny as you briefly recognize faces from Warhol, Raphael and ancient Egypt eerily projected and distorted within transparent contemporary masks.

King presides over the suit of turtles and *Queen* over the sun. Within the outline of the sun in the top right quadrant of the Queen's card is one of the most disturbing vignettes in the exhibition. Through an apparent portal in time, a diorama of a suburban house built over a frightening untold history is the scene of a young mother's life.

An overarching sense of a desire to fathom the cycles of life, but an inability to do so, permeates each of these shrines. The counterbalance is provided by Hudson's attention to detail and his sense of humour and irony. Like Marshall McLuhan, he values the way jokes can elucidate philosophy. Consider this one that sheds light on metaphysics, and especially the sticking point of infinite regress:

DIMITRI: If Atlas holds up the world, what holds up Atlas?

TASSO: Atlas stands on the back of a turtle.

DIMITRI: But what does the turtle stand on?

TASSO: Another turtle.

DIMITRI: And what does that turtle stand on?

TASSO: My dear Dimitri, it's turtles all the way down!

🕒 REACHING FOR HEAVEN, DETAIL, 2010–2012. PHOTO BY MARC HUTCHINSON.





Hudson's methods are akin to those of the monk who worked away in a remote scriptorium on a sheet of calfskin for the *Book of Kells*. The illuminator embellished the first three letters of Christ's name with elaborate interlacing patterns that mirrored the beauty of the metalwork of the day. He inserted whimsical, half-hidden images, angels behind a letter, a man's head as a finial and animals. Hudson also relishes material ornamentation and pattern. Personifications and allusions to the sublime and the everyday world are tucked in throughout his work. He too clothes his work in the trappings of contemporary beauty. In his case, modified gold frames from interior design outlets replace splendor with kitsch.

Bird in Hand is relatively spare, but abundant in allusions. The form of a human hand emerges from a regal background of red velvet surrounded by a gilt mirror frame (read: a glory of golden rays). The gently cupped hand presents a small painted bird. In Byzantine times, artists hit on a simple solution to represent the Supreme Deity: a hand emerging from light. Hudson's compact sculpture takes advantage of the codified symbolism and our willingness to accept a theatrical construct. We readily ascribe meaning to an artful assemblage of relatively commonplace objects.

Reaching for Heaven offers a lyrical cinematic culmination to the series. Heavy red curtains flank an arresting silhouette of a solitary male figure standing with his back to us. On the crest of a hill, he is frozen in a gesture of extending his arms to the sky. His arms morph into tree branches, perhaps a roosting place for the mysterious crows that fly in mesmerizing circles against the shifting colours of the sky as night begins to fall. In the final work in this series, Hudson suggests a poetic accommodation between man and nature, day and night, life and death. ⑤

Katherine Ylitalo is an independent curator, horticulturalist, garden historian, educator and writer based in Calgary. She immigrated to Canada after graduating from Stanford University in 1973 and was a practicing ceramic artist before working as an educator and museum professional across Canada.

- 1 McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Q. with Agel, J. *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Random House. 1967.
- 2 Cathcart, Thomas and Klein, D. *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar, Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes*. New York: Abrams Image. 2007. 1.

➡ BIRD IN HAND, 2012. PHOTO BY MARC HUTCHINSON.