

*Dust to Dust***The Art of Tracy Linder**

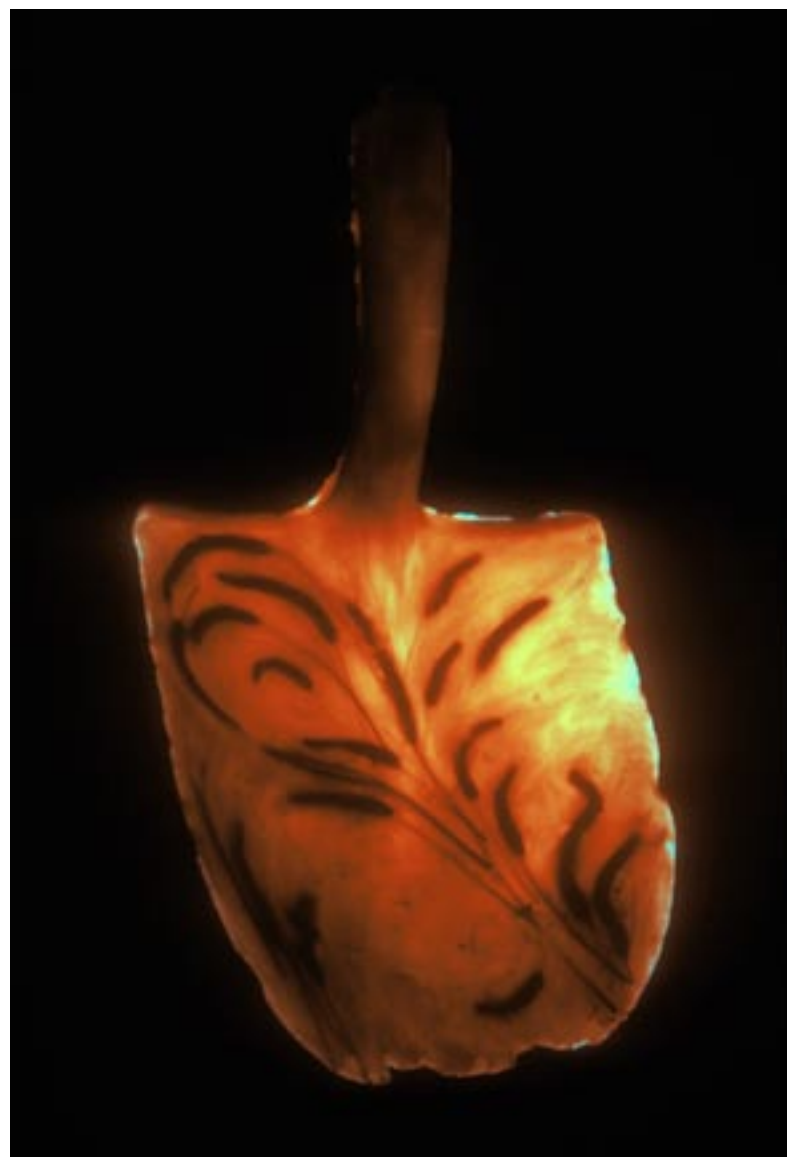
Patricia Vettel-Becker

Note: This essay first appeared in the catalog accompanying Tracy Linder's solo exhibition, *Dust to Dust*, mounted by the Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, Montana, in 2000. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the author and the Yellowstone Art Museum. Our thanks to the artist and to Carol Green, the Yellowstone's interim director, for their invaluable assistance.

As a young girl growing up on a farm, one of the most profound moments I experienced was watching Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* clutch a fistful of red dirt in her hand and vow that she would triumph, that she would never go hungry again. That sense of rootedness, of deep connection to the actual material of one's ancestral home, is rarely given cultural expression, yet for those of us bred on a family farm, we know that it forms the very core of our beings.

I am forever rooted to the land on which I was raised. My connections to place were generated early in my childhood as my folks included my sister and me in all the daily routines. This attachment developed over time as we each took on individual roles of irrigating, driving tractor and truck and tending to the cattle. This place embodies my understanding of the subtle intertwining relationships necessary for survival as land, body and spirit become a whole.—Tracy Linder

Montana artist Tracy Linder was raised on a farm just west of Billings, Montana, where her family raised sugar beets and



Tracy Linder, Shovel #11, 1999, beeswax, pigment, crops, 14 x 8.5 x 5.5 inches, © 1999 Tracy Linder.

corn to feed their cattle. Linder and her older sister, Natalie, were the only children in the family, and according to the artist, they did everything with their mom and dad, from pulling calves to cultivating fields.² The artist pays tribute to her father in *Dad's Coveralls*, 1994, which is rendered in oil over a black and white photograph. In a barren gray space hangs a lone pair of worn coveralls, to the right of which Linder has threaded strips of animal sinew, a reference to the laces of her father's boots. Suspended from the sinew strips are rusty nails that Linder found in her garden, remnants from a building that had burned down, and thus a tangible link to the past. Like religious relics, these nails take on the aura of the sacred, as does the image of the coveralls itself, which seems to radiate divine light. Coveralls evoke fond memories for the artist, especially the aroma of corn silage that clung to those worn by her father.³ I, too, remember the scent of sweat mixed with the loamy black soil of eastern North Dakota that emanated from my father's skin. This overt sensuality associated with the materiality of the farm, and by extension, the farmer, is what comes through in Linder's work—the inextricable connections between family members on a farm, between bodies and the earth.

This visual homage to Linder's father also functions as a haunting memorial to a way of life. Much of Linder's art functions to negotiate this profound loss, a process of both mourning and fetishization, a simultaneous letting go and holding on to the past. The enforced need to let go is evident in the ephemeral, almost ghostly, photographic images of farm life that she prints on her paintings and sculptures, whereas the attempt to hold on explicitly reveals itself in her use of actual farm matter as the physical support for her works of art. This emphasis on materiality,



Tracy Linder, Dad's Coveralls, 1999, oil stick, sinew, nails, 40 x 29 inches, © 1999 Tracy Linder. Courtesy Walter Fairfax.



Tracy Linder, Conversations with the Land, 1997, photo emulsion on animal collagen, polyurethane, twine, dimensions variable, © 1997 Tracy Linder.

the plant and animal matter that formed the very lifeblood of her family for generations, is at the core of all of Linder's work, as is the haunting sense of transience and vulnerability evoked by the spectral photographic imagery. For example, her 1997 installation *Conversations with the Land* consists of seven monumental sheets made from animal collagen, upon which she has printed black and white photographs of such scenes as *David Chopping Corn* and *Larry and Ryan Opening Fields*. Baling twine falls from the ends of the wood dowels upon which the translucent sheets of animal flesh are suspended. As the very fabric of physical life, flesh is a prime signifier of our strength. Yet it is also the site of our vulnerability, subject to destruction from both internal and external forces.



Tracy Linder, Conversations with the Land: David Chopping Corn, 1997, photo emulsion on animal collagen, polyurethane, twine, 2x2s, 83 x 65 inches, © 1997 Tracy Linder.

Flesh is a universal phenomenon not unlike the earth itself, which is also a fabric that binds all living things in a precarious web of life and death. For Linder, death, like flesh, works on two levels: death as an essential component of the seasonal cycle that characterizes life on the farm, and death to family farming at the hands of industrial agribusiness. Death is thus both celebrated and mourned—artistic expression is given to the beauty of the life-and-death cycle, as well as to the individual and communal grief involved with losing a traditional way of life, one tied to the rhythms and matter of nature.

After receiving her bachelor's degree in art from Eastern Montana College in Billings in 1988, Linder completed a Masters of Art degree in sculpture at Eastern Illinois University in 1989 and a Masters of Fine Art degree at the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1991, the same year her family lost their farm. During her tenure at the University of Colorado, where she studied with John Wilson, Garrison Roots, and Antonette Rosato, she produced such fetishistic objects as *Rainmakers*, which were made from farm materials—irrigation tubes, bones, nails, sinew, leather, corn, rice and raffia. According to the artist, she wanted to demonstrate that ritual and the use of hallowed objects were primary components of farm life, an automatic assumption about ethnographic cultures, but not about modern agricultural practices.⁴

I grew up understanding relationships between people, machines, animals and crops, where the daily routines became nearly ritualistic, with their implications of hope, faith, and fortune. At a very young age my sister and I were trailing in my father's footsteps carrying irrigation tubes in the corn field. We would improvise minor mechanical repairs and assist in all aspects of the farm process. In this environment, I learned that

the demands of everyday life require a sense of resourcefulness in order to survive. It is a life where existence depends upon the goodwill of neighbors, weather, and 'the bank.' In certain respects, a farming area becomes an ethnic community.—Tracy Linder.⁵

The sanctification of the utilitarian is also the theme of *Shovels*, 1999–2000, which addresses the earth as simultaneously womb and grave. The shovel is an icon of continuity, an implement that has traversed the ages, playing an integral role in both agricultural and burial practices. Historically, it has also functioned as the primary mediator between the laboring body and the earth. Linder's thirty beeswax shovels exhibit five motifs: farm machinery, hands, grain, hair and bones. Photo-emulsion images of machinery and hands, both gloved and ungloved, speak to the issue of sustenance, the turning of soil to raise food, which is literally present in the stalks of oats, barley and hay that the artist has suspended in the beeswax. Hair is a dead substance, yet one associated with life, for not only does it grow, but it protects animals and humans from the harsh elements. Linder used horse hair in her shovels, thus honoring an animal that has shared with humans the turning and traversing of the earth. Bones signify burial, the returning of animal matter to the soil, so that the life cycle may begin anew. One shovel contains a photograph of a ram's carcass decaying into the land. The artist aestheticizes this image of decomposition by imbuing it with light and color, which works to foreshadow the life that this animal matter will, in turn, foster. Although death represents the end of the life cycle, to Linder, it also contains a nurturing element, a lesson she learned as a young child. When a calf was stillborn, her family would buy another calf, skin the dead one, and then wrap the skin around the live one, so that the mother would nurse it in place of her own. The artist believes that her



Tracy Linder, Shovel #2, 1999, photo emulsion, pigment, beeswax, 17 x 18.5 x 5.5 inches, © 1999 Tracy Linder. Yellowstone Art Museum Permanent Collection, Museum purchase with funds provided by Stephen Haraden and Linda Schelhamer (Accession #2000.003).



Installation view (detail): Tracy Linder, Shovels #4, 6, 12, 14, & 21, photo emulsion, pigment, beeswax, 17 x 18.5 x 5.5 inches, © 2000 Tracy Linder.

experience of this practice is one of the reasons that she is so at ease working with flesh.⁶

Throughout the *Shovel* series, the intricate relationships binding soil, animals, plants, machinery and physical toil are emphatically conveyed. The artist took malleable beeswax harvested by local farmers and then used her own hands to form the sculptures using actual shovels as molds. Linder claims that she is drawn to this process of transmutation, in which stable objects are transformed into fragile and vulnerable ones, for it is a process not unlike that of family farming.⁷ The continuity inherent in seasonal cycles and in the permanence of the land itself coexists with abrupt and often

cataclysmic changes due to uncontrollable forces—drought, hail, disease, accident, politics, and the marketplace. Indeed, the manner of display itself evokes trauma. Because they lack handles and seem invisibly suspended from the ceiling of the darkened gallery, the spotlighted shovels resemble two long rows of floating decapitated heads that still glow with life. This sense of the uncanny permeates Linder’s work, forcing both a physical and metaphysical reaction in the spectator.

Perhaps the eeriest of all are Linder’s *Tractor Hides*, 1997–1999, which, like *Conversations with the Land*, are constructed of animal collagen. Lit from within, these human-scaled pod-like sculptures seem ethereal, ghost-like icons to the agricultural life Linder venerates and mourns. Yet under close examination, they are strikingly visceral; like insect cocoons, they appear ready to burst forth with new life, to foster physical rebirth from out of dead matter. The simultaneous strength and vulnerability of flesh is again conveyed, for the tractor treads function as skeletal frameworks supporting the thin layers of tissue that bear photographs of day-to-day life on the farm. These barely discernible images flicker in and out of view as one moves around the tractor hides, not unlike a rapid series of film projections onto a movie screen. In this way, the hides function as photographic archives, ones that convey the transitory nature of their subject matter through the very manner of their display.

As the disappearance of family farming becomes imminent, I believe it is important to document daily processes as a matter of record. The photographic element in my work, in effect, both represents a moment of historic reality and a recognition of fate. These images are situated on non-traditional materials in a manner that reveals the



Tracy Linder, Tractor Hides, 1997–1999, photo emulsion on animal collagen, polyurethane, steel rod, disc plate, dimension variable, © 1997–1999 Tracy Linder.

psychological artifacts of this way of life. These skin-like apparitions recall ceremonial rites while retaining aspects of an unhealed wound. I am interested in what will be the remains of this once vital lifestyle as the ritualistic elements are being sequentially removed.—Tracy Linder.⁸

Linder’s use of flesh, especially in these upright corporeal pods, evokes a sense of violence and pain. Indeed, the “unhealed wound” to which the artist refers is not exclusive to farmers. For millennia, humans have been alienating themselves from the natural world, a process that has accelerated at an amazingly rapid pace over the past hundred years. We have yet to understand the



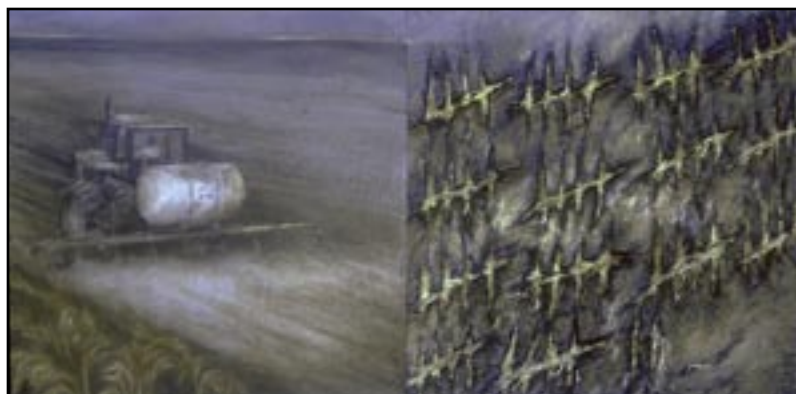
Tracy Linder, *Rainmakers*, 1991, irrigation tubes, bones, nails, sinew, leather, corn, raffia, 48 x 96 x 12 inches, © 1991 Tracy Linder.

ramifications of this estrangement on the human psyche and soul, yet the symptoms of it are undeniably present: ecological crisis, unchecked materialism, depression, selfish individualism, emotional and psychological isolation, malaise, spiritual vacuity, even our nation's apathy over the increasing loss of family farms, long a potent symbol of humanity's symbiotic relationship with the rest of nature.

The balance between growth and decay, between life and death, that structures Linder's work is more characteristic of the family farm model of agriculture than that of industrial agribusiness, the model towards which agriculture in the United States has been progressively moving. As Marty Strange, a cofounder and co-director of the Center for Rural Affairs, argues: "Family farming has a seasonal, rhythmic quality to it. Production

is sequential: planting precedes cultivating, which is followed by harvesting. Breeding, birthing, nurturing."⁹ Family farming is small-scale, diversified, and resource conserving. The agribusiness model, on the other hand, encourages large-scale farms that are industrially organized, financed for growth, specialized, capital-intensive, standardized in their production processes, and resource consumptive. The overall contrast is between farming as a way of life and farming as a business.¹⁰

Linder's 1996 *Who's Counting?* series addresses this contrast, but also points out the ambiguous line dividing the two. In *Roger Combining* and *Harley Applying Anhydrous*, the left half of the painting displays an image of a farmer at work in the field, and the right half exhibits a series of tally marks. Although these marks can be understood as an indication of the mathematical repetition inherent in the cultivation of row crops, they also serve as a visual reminder that small independent farms are continually being lost. What is unclear, however, is whether the farmers pictured on the left represent the traditional family farmer, or the more contemporary corporate farmer. As Strange reminds us, "the family farmer is an institution eroding from within,"¹¹ because in an economic climate increasingly oriented to industrial agribusiness, many independent farmers believe they must transform their operations in order to survive. In fact, the combine and tractor pictured in Linder's paintings could be read as harbingers of death. Combines, of course, harvest the crops, and thus signal the end of the life cycle, and anhydrous ammonia, although it serves to increase nitrogen levels, which leads to higher yields, also kills insects and worms, and eventually "burns" the soil, depleting it of nutrients. Anhydrous ammonia is cheaper than most other



Tracy Linder, Who's Counting? (Harley Applying Anhydrous), 1996, acrylic, oil, wax, straw, black-and-white photo, 30 x 60 inches, © 1996 Tracy Linder.

commercial fertilizers, and therefore signifies a mode of farming that prioritizes economic gain over stewardship of the land. Moreover, with new combines and tractors costing more than most people pay for their homes, such sophisticated machinery indicates an agricultural model closer to that of corporate, rather than small, family farming. Like the traditional figure of Death with a scythe, these modern agrarian monsters invoke fear. Indeed, much of Linder's work recalls the horror film genre, from her use of flesh and pod imagery, to these monstrous machines, foreboding skies, and tally mark slashes, which resemble knife wounds that someone has tried to bandage with straw, which is in turn dead matter, a byproduct of the harvest and thus death.

With industrial agribusiness now dominating food production,¹² the intricate web of connections associated with family farming is also dying. Not only are the links between generations of farm families being eradicated, but so are the

immediate bonds between humans and the climate, vegetation, animals and soil. Linder recalls incidents at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, North Dakota, in which women began to cry as they viewed her art on display. Not only did some of the women want to engage her in discussions about their own lives on the farm, but they begged her to allow them to touch the works themselves.¹³ This experience reveals the physical relationship that so many of us have with the farm, the deep connection that works on a sensual, thus bodily, level.

This anecdote also raises questions regarding personal and communal identity. For example, what is the specificity of a farmer's subjectivity? Is it more enmeshed in matter, with the materiality of that which is paramount to farm life—the soil, the crops, the animals? Bombarded with the touch, smell, and taste of the farm, such a subjectivity might be a more corporeal one, one more dependent on the body and its senses. Moreover, the privileging of one's interconnectedness with other material forms—other bodies, animals, vegetation, and soil—might serve as a source of strength and a means towards social agency. The specificity of place would thus serve as an anchor, the relationship with place a signifier of physical affinity with one's environment. Linder's work is in keeping with such a model, for she fuses visual representation with sensual experience and memory, thus accessing something that may not be best understood through language alone—the complex connection between body and place.

Precedence exists for such an artistic practice. In the 1930s and 1940s, Mexican painter Frida Kahlo produced a series of small self-portraits that explored her personal relationship with the land of her birth. Drawing on Mexican folk traditions and symbolism,

Kahlo rendered her often nude or broken body as literally connected to the earth itself. For example, in *Roots*, 1943, leafy vines spring from her open torso and creep out onto the barren and cracked soil upon which she lies. This image foreshadows Linder's *Dad's Coveralls: Rooted Connections*, 1994, in its linking of organic life to the earth and its ability to provide sustenance. Likewise, during the Great Depression, Iowa artist Grant Wood painted jewel-like images that evidence an eerie tension between life and death. In such works as *Young Cows* and *Fall Plowing*, 1931, the agricultural landscape is rendered both active and inert, for although a warm amber glow infuses the fertile fields of corn and grain, the scenes appear amazingly still, as if the earth and its vegetation were constructed of stone. For both Kahlo and Wood, their work functioned as a source of empowerment by proclaiming their affinity with a specific place and its traditions when both seemed threatened by political, economic, and natural forces.

Linder's aesthetic is also informed by her heritage and connection to place. Indeed, little distinction can be made between her artistic practice and agricultural traditions. The aesthetics of order and repetition that structure the cultivation of row crops reveal themselves in the artist's obsessive production of multiples in her sculptural installations. Thus the spectator is forced to enter into a relationship with her work that emulates the physical movement of the farmer through the field. For example, *Conversations with the Land* reproduces the sensation of expansive flat fields with regularly spaced furrows through which one must navigate in a methodical manner to experience the work in its entirety. Appreciation for the single form coexists with appreciation for the many, as in farming, where individual plants and animals



Tracy Linder, *Dad's Coveralls (Rooted Connections)*, 1994, oil stick, graphite, photograph, 40 x 29 inches, © 1994 Tracy Linder.

carry aesthetic appeal, as does the entire field or herd. This emphasis on multiples and repetition recalls the artistic movement known as Minimalism, which erupted in the 1960s in opposition to the tenets of high modernism and its emphasis on the pure opticality and autonomy of the individual piece. Minimalism prioritized materiality, the physical environment of the work, and the interaction of the audience, thus the spectator's body as well as the eye. In asserting the work's "objecthood," Minimalists rejected the traditional categories of painting and sculpture, as well as illusionism and direct references to the external world. Artists like Donald Judd displayed identical geometric units of galvanized iron or aluminum at regular intervals, which signaled not only the exhaustion of traditional artistic subject matter, but an interest in achieving aesthetic wholeness through repetition, symmetry, and order. Linder's installations bear similarity to Judd's work in terms of serial order and modular repetition, yet her approach to materiality is more in keeping with artists like Eva Hesse and Magdalena Abakanowicz, who explored the nature of malleable materials in a visceral relationship with the human body. Moreover, like Abakanowicz, who addresses the issue of political torture by using plant fiber as a metaphor for living human skin, Linder situates her work within the context of larger social issues. Rather than participate in the nihilism of much postmodern art, she has chosen a path of commitment and responsibility to the values and traditions in which she was raised. Although a full-time artist, she lives and works on a farmstead near Molt, Montana, thus choosing to retain as much as possible those intimate connections between body and soil that her art so eloquently and poetically reveals.

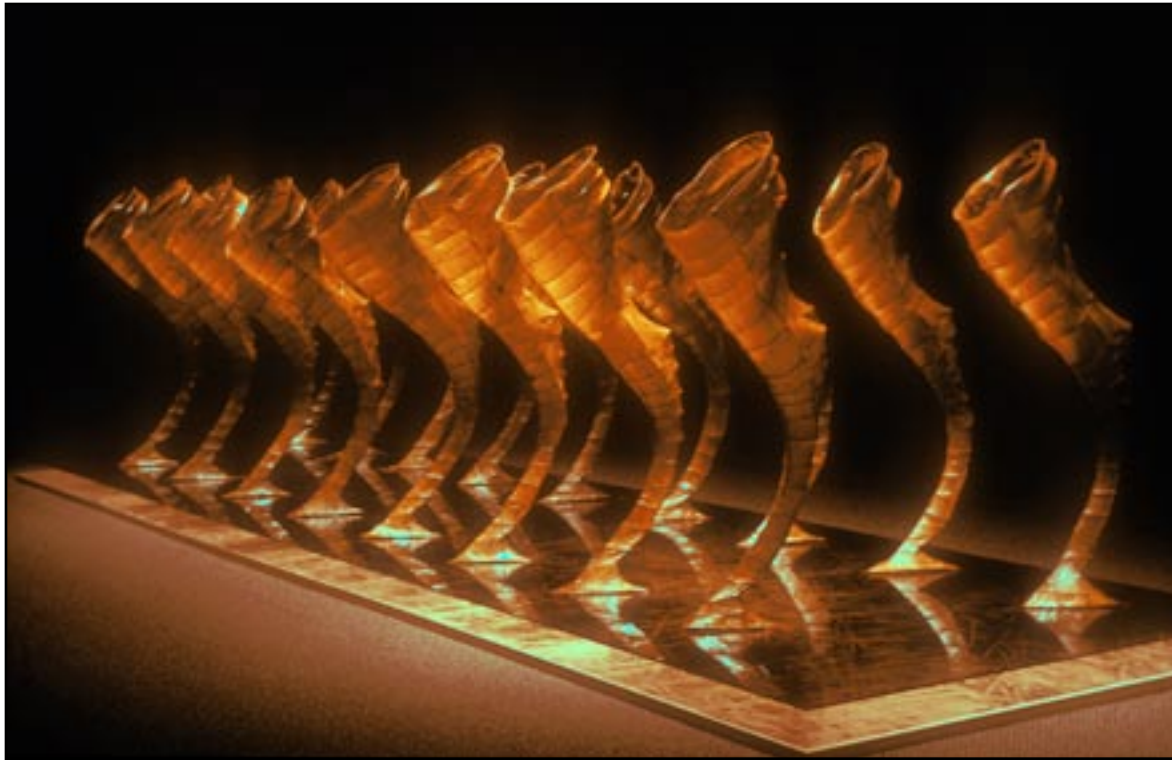
This complex integration of plant, animal, and soil is also

evident in Linder's newest work, *Cultivator*, 2000. Seventeen sculptural forms constructed of polyurethaned animal collagen over armatures of baling wire are arranged in two rows on a sheet of bronze glass, which bears a photo emulsion image of wheat stubble. Each form is a hybrid combination of cultivator sweep and hooved animal leg. *Cultivator* draws attention to the farm as a site of cohabitation, one crossed by both wild and domestic animals. Antelope and cattle graze together in fields cultivated by humans and their machines. All depend on the soil and its fruits for survival.

Now, living out on the prairie among farms and ranches, I am able to witness the crossing of many paths both wild and domestic. In this crossover are unique relationships between animals, people, machines, and land. Within this interconnectedness exists a tenuous balance that requires careful nurturing; a certain strength and vulnerability lies in this balance that is the core of day-to-day sustenance. By focusing on this balance, I am able to reveal some of the intangibles that are being lost as we continue toward a more corporatized America.—Tracy Linder¹⁴

This delicately balanced interdependence, which has evolved over thousands of years, is now in danger of sudden extinction. *Cultivator* is a chilling reminder of this threat, a haunting vision of life desperately trying to stave off death. Precariously poised over fragile glass, these ghostly fragments could be seen as the offspring of the *Tractor Hide* pods. Life has sprung forth, but tragically, it may be already dead. Its appearance is merely an illusion, one as fleeting as the endangered connections reflected in the mirror-like glass below.

The Book of Isaiah reminds us that "all flesh is grass."¹⁵



Tracy Linder, Cultivator, 2000, animal collagen, polyurethane, baling wire, photo emulsion on bronze glass, 43 x 180 x 48 inches, © 2000 Tracy Linder.

Accepting this knowledge “is a hard truth,” according to the writer Kathleen Norris, and one that “has real meaning for people who grow grass, cut it, bale it, and go out every day in winter to feed it to cows. They watch that grass turning into flesh, knowing that they in turn will eat it as beef. They can’t pretend not to know that their flesh, too, is grass.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, as we increasingly move from a nation of food producers to food consumers, this existential awareness is being lost. Resistance to this loss is a function of Linder’s artistic practice, for her works seek reunion with nature, not its “framing.” They signify connection, rather than distance.

In fact, her three-dimensional works literally “embody” nature, rather than offer scenic views. Thus they are not in keeping with traditional landscapes, which as Lucy Lippard points out, “are still perceived as trophies from the battle of culture with nature.”¹⁷ Linder’s works do suggest a battle, however, for they function not only as archives, but as cadavers, the material remains left behind in the struggle between nature and agriculture, between the family farm and industrial agribusiness. The need to halt this process and preserve a balanced interconnectedness might be the most important message of Linder’s art.



Tracy Linder's work is informed by her upbringing on the family farm and her ongoing experiences as she now resides out on the vast prairie of south-central Montana. Linder received her Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1991. Her exhibition record includes shows in New York, St. Louis, and Indianapolis, as well as numerous shows throughout Montana and North Dakota. In 2000 she had the solo exhibit at the Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, discussed above.

From 2000–2004, Linder worked on a commission for the Art in Architecture Program of the U.S. General Services Administration for the new Joint Port of Entry at Sweetgrass, Montana/Coutts, Alberta. Her works are included in the permanent collections of: Yellowstone Art Museum, Montana State University–Billings, Deaconess Billings Hospital, North Dakota State University–Fargo, and Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana. Most recently, Linder has had work in a group show at the Ucross Foundation, Wyoming, through June 9, 2006.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father, Richard John Vettel (1925–1999), whose life was inseparable from the land he nurtured and loved.

1. Tracy Linder, artist's statement, 2000.
2. Interviews with the artist, May 24, 1999 and June 3, 1999.
3. Interview with the artist, March 15, 1999.
4. Interview with the artist, June 3, 1999.
5. Tracy Linder, Artist's Statement, 1997.
6. Interview with the artist, March 15, 1999.
7. Interview with the artist, May 26, 2000.
8. Tracy Linder, Artist's Statement, 1997.
9. Marty Strange, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press; San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1988), 34.
10. Strange, *Family Farming*, 36–39.
11. Strange, *Family Farming*, 1.
12. Strange, *Family Farming*, 40.
13. Interview with the artist, June 3, 1999.
14. Tracy Linder, artist's statement, 2000.
15. *Isaiah*, 40:6.
16. Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 174.
17. Lucy Lippard, "Undertones: Nine Cultural Landscapes," in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 310.