

JOHN N. COLT: NATURE UP-CLOSE

“I’ve never been interested in the panoramic scenes as much as I have the little areas - little realms of experience, nature up-close .”

John N. Colt explored concepts of growth and metamorphosis through his thoughtful examination of the small living beings often overlooked. Creatures such as amphibians, snails and moths, along with natural objects such as flowers and tree branches were transformed into shimmering and delicate works of art by one of Wisconsin’s artistic giants of modernist expression.

Nature viewed up-close was the inspiration for John Colt (1925-1998) for nearly five decades of his artistic career. Though his artistic style evolved somewhat over time, Colt’s work consistently revealed his ideas about transformation

and interconnectedness in both subject matter and composition. The living beings and organic objects he renders are simultaneously naturalistic interpretations and fanciful abstract compositions.

Colt’s interest in interconnectedness can also be seen in his media explorations. He was intrigued by the links between the natural forms he painted and the materials he used to create them, often choosing water media and pastels. Colt once compared a segment of a dried sea urchin to a piece of pastel saying “it has the same quality, same tonality, same touch, same modality. It’s an example of the media and the motif being the same.”

A series of sketches in this collection provide evidence of the artist’s process, which was grounded in Colt’s careful examination of nature. He explored gardens, roadsides, ponds and tide pools in search of his creatures and objects, especially those with opposing characteristics, which he said “could be as simple as smooth versus rough.” Through his close observation in the field, Colt uncovered the living forms that he would later reimagine in his studio.

The artist’s process of reimagining sometimes involved magnifying his humble creatures and forms to epic proportions—demanding the viewer’s attention of the unnoticed. The triptych *Through the Green Fuse* exemplifies this approach. The amphibious figure in the center panel and the surrounding flora are elevated to near human scale. The thin layer of acrylic paint on the canvas creates a dreamlike world of warm pink, yellow and orange hues. Colt’s title may be revealing, perhaps evoking a work of poetry by Dylan Thomas. In *The force that through the green fuse drives the flowers*, the poet muses: *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees / Is my destroyer. / And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose / My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.*

From *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, published by New Directions. Copyright © 1952, 1953 Dylan Thomas

In contrast to the artist’s interest in epic scale are several intimate micro-studies. *Life Tracks* is a series of six etchings that explore the interconnectedness of living beings. The creatures and organic objects in this portfolio of work are detailed and naturalistic depictions composed in dream-like arrangements. This series was created over a period of six months using lithographic inks painted on plexiglass to create the monotypes. For each image, approximately 28 monotypes were pulled. The etching was later printed over these unique monotypes, with each impression bearing its own unique edition number.

Born in 1925 in Madison, Wisconsin, John Colt was exposed to the world of art from an early age. His father was portrait artist and educator Arthur Colt. Though his father initially discouraged his artistic aspirations, Colt nevertheless persisted. He began teaching crafts in Richland Center and Janesville, Wisconsin, spent a year teaching high school in Australia, and then joined the faculty of the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee. He eventually landed at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, where he spent his next 33 years, teaching scores of students as a beloved professor. John Colt’s work has been widely exhibited and is represented in numerous private and museum collections locally and nationally.



Rick Wood, *John N. Colt Painting in His Studio*, Milwaukee Sentinel, 1978

Twenty interpretations of Colt’s natural world were chosen by the Cedarburg Art Museum Collection Committee and are gifts to the Cedarburg Art Museum Collection by Colt’s wife, Ruth Kjaer, and the Kohler Foundation, Inc.

Bibliography

Auer, James. “Colt retiring from UWM after 33 years to paint full-time,” Milwaukee Journal, August 1990.

Colescott, Warrington. “Galleria: John Colt,” Wisconsin Academy Review, March 1986, pp. 28-30.

Kohler Foundation. www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation/major-collections/john-n-colt/ (accessed April 22, 2021).

Museum of Wisconsin Art Online Archive. “John Nicholson Colt” www.wisconsinart.org/archives/artist/john-n-colt/profile-817/ (accessed April 22, 2021).

Salsini, Barbara. “Artist John Colt ‘sees’ a luminous world in nature,” UWM News, September 1986.