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## Reflection on My Visit to the Akron Art Museum

For my museum visit, I went to the Akron Art Museum on a Wednesday afternoon. I spent several hours there, exploring the contemporary section first, then the “traditional” gallery located on the North end of the building, and then finally walking in the garden. I had been through the garden before, but this was my first time visiting the museum itself. It being a weekday, most of the patrons in the museum looked like college students, and there were a few people that I thought may be artists whom were taking notes and studying certain pieces.

The Akron Art Museum is very small for an art museum in a relatively large city, but I enjoyed its collection. I’m not sure if it was intentional or because of limited resources, but many of the pieces in the collection were from artists that were from the greater Akron area, or if not Ohio and the rest of the Midwest. There were several pieces that depicted scenes in neighborhoods throughout Akron, and this really illustrated cultural diversity in the city throughout the ages. The devotion to local artists was as refreshing as it was informative.

I’ll Be Your Friend, I’ll Be Your Love, I’ll Be Everything You Need is a mixed media artwork by James Gobel, depicting a man in gaudy lounge attire presumably singing karaoke. Gobel uses felt, yarn and rhinestones to add depth and physical texture to the work, so that the character is practically popping off of the canvas. Neon-green laser lines point outward from behind the subject, suggesting he is creating the array with his eminent stage presence. The patterns of the character’s smoking jacket and shirt – a pink-fringed cheetah print on plaid – create an atmosphere as vibrant as it is playful.

In Man Eating Trees, John Sokol paints with tar and varnish to create a monochromatic landscape that is both allegorical and haunting ([akronartmuseum.org](http://akronartmuseum.org)). In the foreground, we can see the man devouring one tree while still having another in his grasp. Behind him, a landscape of cut-down stumps creates a void, suggesting that his destructive behavior will in the end leave him with nothing. The use of tar and varnish give the piece a strange glow, especially in the void background, and is applied in cloudy, irregular brushstrokes. Also, the sheer size of Man Eating Trees, at 6’ x 8’, makes it a piece that is very hard to overlook. Sokol began experimenting with tar and varnish in the 1980s, when he was working in construction, and favored the medium and for its monochromatic brown color.

The two artworks could not be more different in style. Gobel’s piece resonates with color, pattern, and pomp, highlighting the expressiveness and vibrancy of its subject in every way possible. Also, Gobel presents the viewer with a character that is very realistic. He wears a beard, and a band t-shirt under his stage clothes, which suggests it is all for show, or an

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alternate persona. In contrast, the muted nature and lack of descriptive detail in the face and features of the figure in *Man Eating Trees* suggests that it is meant to be allegorical, and from an almost dream-like dimension.

The social context of *I'll Be Your Friend...* is significant when considering that James Gobel is trying to depict a character from the 'bear' LGBTQ sub-community. Often unseen, Gobel gives exposure to the 'bear' subculture in order to extend public stereotypes of gay men beyond those of the well-groomed, good-looking men that are usually depicted in the mainstream media.

John Sokol obviously had environmentalist themes in mind when painting *Man Eating Trees*, but the choice of depicting a man devouring trees instead of a machine suggests that the problem is a cultural or even psychological one. Sokol is from Canton, OH which was a steel-producing town for much of its recent history, and he worked in construction for several years, so he would have been familiar with industrialism and its consequences first hand from his experience in the construction industry. From a social standpoint, Sokol is trying to illustrate the destructive nature of industry and corporate greed, and to show us the darkness it brings upon the natural world in hopes that the viewer may consider their own consumption.

Sokol and Gobel have chosen to represent two different social narratives, homosexuality and environmentalism, but have done so in a similar way. By choosing to depict a single subject, both artists are forcing their viewers to focus on the individual and the narrative they represent. We view the singing man in *I'll Be Your Friend...* in his element and where he feels comfortable, which creates a feeling of intimacy and gives us the opportunity to interpret his lifestyle in a new way. In *Man Eating Trees*, the murky and muddled world of the subject makes us uneasy, and creates a feeling of disgust and hostility to the man and his destructiveness. The suggestion here is that his ambition is not only self-serving, but ultimately hollow and misguided.

From a gender studies analysis, *I'll Be Your Friend...* offers a multitude of opportunities to re-evaluate masculinity and the male form as depicted in society and art. There are several contrasting elements that leave us to wonder where the subject's 'real' persona lies, and therefore breaks gender boundaries altogether. The Iron Maiden shirt beneath the loud lounge jacket and plaid shirt suggest that underneath it all, he is just an average guy like anyone else. Also, until we take a closer look, we don't even notice that the man is wearing make up and has dyed and curled his mustache. The layers of clothing and pattern mimic the layers of identity in the subject, and in turn, those of perceived masculinity.

At first it is difficult to approach *Man Eating Trees* from a gender studies perspective, but the important element in the piece is the portrayal of the devouring force as a man and not as a machine or corporate entity. This suggests that the problem is within man's nature and not in

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some abstract institutional or corporate entity. Most of the leaders of the organizations responsible for such environmental devastation have been men, however, and perhaps Sokol is implying that it is something in the male nature that wants to conquer and even destroy its environment.

The depiction of masculinity in the two pieces is very different, but I found that the differences show just how versatile depictions of gender in art can be. Gobel explores the masculine identity by playing with cultural norms to create a character that is complex and memorable. On the other hand, the lack of color drives the viewer to focus inward, and to re-examine the masculine need for industrial ambition and consider the environmental costs.

I was pleasantly surprised by the Akron Art Museum, and plan on revisiting it again in the near future. Its size at first was disappointing, but afterward I felt that the small scale gave more intimacy to the works that were displayed. James Gobel's piece was one of the first I stopped to examine, and I revisited it several times over the course of my visit. I was at first drawn to the vibrant colors and patterns of the piece, and noticed only afterward that the subject's clothing had the added textures of felt and yarn. I also really enjoyed the subject matter because it was so obscure, and exposed a community that is largely out of the mainstream. When I first saw *Man Eating Trees* I was immediately caught off guard by how dark and brooding it was. The painting at first seemed to depict a tale from folklore or a myth, but after researching Sokol's other work and upbringing in Canton his environmental message was more evident. In both pieces, by initial reaction caused me to delve deeper into the artist's lives and their background to discover deeper levels of meaning and context.

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