

Atta
Carol LaFayette
The University of the South
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Carol LaFayette's *Atta* at The University of the South, Sewanee, Art Gallery looked like an experiential science exhibit. Entering the darkened gallery, viewers were drawn to a centrally lit floor installation. A group of flat stones on the floor was animated by video playing across it. The arrangement of rocks was echoed in size and shape by a perpendicular projection screen showing a different set of moving images. At right, a flat stainless steel stand held a console tilted for comfortable standing access. The console knobs were arranged in a diamond-shaped diagram, with no clear operative direction indicated, no color code, no instructions. Viewers left to their own devices soon learned that the upper projection could be changed to different video channels by dialing the knobs.

On the floor was what looked like speeded-up shots of an organism in a Petrie dish. The screen above was filled with long exposures of scenes in nature—fields of grasses

growing, leaves on and then off trees—as if the artist had planted a camera in different locations with its shutter propped open, which in fact turned out to be the case. The most fascinating were long exposure scenes of nighttime animal behavior: buzzards tearing at a carcass, an inquisitive cow distorted by its closeness to the lens, a Barred owl, and a rare glimpse of an elusive bobcat. LaFayette admits to baiting the buzzards with dead animals and setting off bird distress calls to attract the owl. Nevertheless, her intrusion into nature's privacy was worthy of National Geographic, and viewers had the privilege of watching things usually only available through very powerful zoom lenses. Watching these scenes, we recognize our own ignorance of the vast range of animal behavior and language.

But, one might ask, where is the art? It is only by reading the artist's statement that we learn that the slowly growing image in the projection over the rocks on the floor is in fact the nest of a large "atta Texana" colony, and that "atta" is a species of ant found on the artist's own ranch. LaFayette has used infrared videography and ground penetrating radar to map a 3-D section of the colony, which we then see floating in front of our eyes, made visible by enhanced orange and

green hues. What at first seemed to be fairly straightforward nature observation, with the films on screen and the accompanying still photographs in the balcony gallery above, becomes instead a commentary on what is unseen.

LaFayette's endeavor has become transformed. Using the tools at her disposal in the digital imaging lab at Texas A & M University, she is now making connections between the natural and digital worlds in order to extend the realm of the visible. When she encountered the ant colony whose fungus-like nest was the size of a minivan and whose residents carry an antibiotic on their backs to keep the fungus in check, LaFayette was awed by the invisible "balance sheet" beneath her feet. Her previous documentations of nature seemed to pale in comparison to the image rippling over stone, a fictionalized construction made possible only by geometry, which she terms a kind of drawing. By manifesting something newly realized, LaFayette's work becomes a metaphor for the artist own experience.

Susan W. Knowles

Susan W. Knowles, an independent curator, has organized numerous museum and gallery exhibitions. She serves as the Tennessee editor for *ArtPapers*.

