

Jennifer Vanderpool
Displaced
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ART PAPERS

DISPLACED

Ballroom Studios

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A swamp in a ballroom? Indeed! In Atlanta's Ballroom Gallery, Jennifer Vanderpool has created a fantasy Okefenokee, albeit with actual dirt, sand, and grass. A pervasive but subtle redolence of coffee evokes marshy smells, and the breeze generated by a fan suggests the outdoors. A recording of swamp sounds interspersed with the plaintive chanting of swampers offers an intriguing auditory backdrop to the experience. At the opening reception, cornbread, biscuits, and apple butter—all regional foods—completed the multisensory event.

Vanderpool's title, *Displaced*, bears a twofold significance. On the one hand, her aesthetic parallel of Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp "displaces" the famed geographic area to an urban gallery. On the other, the title alludes to the swampers who settled the area in the early 1800s but were forced from their homes when it became a National Wildlife Refuge in the 1930s. Many of their descendants still dwell on the Swamp's periphery; but their culture, as expressed in the chanting, is rapidly vanishing.

An enormous peat bog once on the ocean floor, the Okefenokee covers 496,000 acres and in some parts is as high as 128 feet above sea level. The Indian name, meaning "trembling earth," derives from its islands of layered peat which wobble when stepped on. Along with the resident alligators, bears, and ubiquitous cypresses—some over five centuries old—the Swamp hosts an impressive assemblage of exotic creatures: carnivorous flowers, terrestrial orchids, water moccasins, 200 species of birds, 40 of mammals, and 60 of amphibians. Just as many of these are endangered, so is the Okefenokee itself. Dams on area rivers, coupled with an extended drought in the Southeast, have caused the wet areas to dry out alarmingly. Tour boats once gliding freely over the dark but mysteriously clear "cola" water now founder frequently.

Intending not to replicate this spectacular domain, Vanderpool rather presents a minimalist parallel to it. Spreading top soil in an undulating pattern on the floor, she planted real grass along the edges and set out handfuls of Irish moss. The moss's delicate chartreuse hue, in vibrant counterpoint to the earth's rich brown, resembles in name only the Okefenokee's lacy gray "Spanish" variety, thus epitomizing the artist's intention to suggest rather than to duplicate the geographical reality. Sand strewn with pebbles indicates a sandbar, and lengths of laboriously hand-twined hemp curling over the soil stand for the eddying of water. Most intriguing, however, are the artist's imaginative equivalents of epiphytes: plants that grow on others but produce their own food through photosynthesis, such as orchids, mosses, and lichens. Using wire to secure used tea bags that she had coated with various natural substances—sieved strawberries, beeswax, curry, camomile, dried mangoes and papayas, and shredded kelp—Vanderpool fashioned blossom-like configurations in shades of rose, green, and yellow-orange. At once menacing and appealing, these formations symbolize the antipodal emotional reactions inspired by the Swamp: fearful in the face of its mortal dangers, awe-struck before its beauties, and discomfited by its unsettling miasmatic mystery.

As disturbing to the artist as the menace to the ecosystem is the inevitable extinction of the human culture that once thrived there. Eschewing facile figural representations, Vanderpool limits her expression of these earlier mores to the solemn, rueful chanting punctuated by feral swamp noises. Termed both "Sacred Heart singing" and "hollerin'," the music is led by a caller who reads a line from the Bible or other religious text, which is then echoed repeatedly by the chorus. Less often performed, the music is now heard only once every several years.

Rejecting a kind of anthropological and natural recreation of a vanishing culture and its natural habitat, Vanderpool provides instead a spare aesthetic analogy to that reality. To paraphrase Cézanne, art is a fiction paralleling nature.

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