

SCENE

BELOW THE SURFACE

Susan Danko Tackles the Hidden Damage of Invasive Species in *Beautiful Intruders*

By Dott von Schneider

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WE CAN ONLY BLAME OURSELVES

for the bane of invasive species over the globe.

Cane toads were brought over to Queensland, Australia in order to kill off the sugar beetle, another experiment gone wrong. The toad took over without killing a single beetle. Then there's the invasive flora. Kudzu was introduced from Japan at the Centennial Expo in Philadelphia in 1876. Americans were bedazzled by the vine's beautiful color and planted it all over the south.

Unfortunately, kudzu has no natural predators outside of Asia, and so it propagates a foot every month over the summer, causing collateral damage to power lines, buildings and native species. And, of course, who can forget Dutch elm disease, carried by an exotic bark beetle that devastated a huge portion of American elm trees.

Some invasives hitched their way to North America in crating materials, such as the Emerald Ash borer, which can kill trees in one to four years depending on their size. Artist Susan Danko decided to take a closer look at this phenomenon when all the ash trees died in her yard. "I learned about the ash borer beetle and I thought what the larvae do under the bark is visually interesting and awful." This birthed Danko's "Serpentine Series" that reference the trails created by said larvae.

"They're mostly made out of stencils that I had mono-printed and built up in layers," states the artist. "Some of them I used a wooden plate to get that texture. I did a month at Zygote (Press) knowing that this was the beginning of the series." The result is a mesmerizing series of woodcuts in Danko's signature haunting hues. The repetition of the ash borer's intricate path is incredible to look at and we can see why it so appealed to the artist's eye.

Danko dived head first into researching other personalities in the world of these intruders, such as garlic mustard. Her painting "First Sprouts" educates us on the effects of the delicious smelling (and tasting) plant. Danko depicts its wispy branches holding court over a landscape devoid of wildflowers. Garlic mustard was introduced by settlers from Europe for food and medicinal purposes. It propagates thousands of seeds after its second year of growth and chokes out native wildflowers. If you ever pass through the park during early spring and mid-summer, you can smell the plant's overwhelming garlic odor.

In the woodcut print titled "Rootbound 1," Danko perfectly translates the visual of what happens when Phragmites, such as the common reed, get out of control. Imagine a bird's nest, how it is meticulously woven and intertwined. Now imagine that bird's nest is half an acre in size and underground, a rhizomatic labyrinth that is so difficult to exhume it chokes out the roots of other plants. In fact, it was the common reed that choked up the Mentor marsh, a project that took two years of work to at least partially eliminate.

Danko's paintings and woodcuts have a haunting delicateness to them despite the heavy subject matter. We are particularly enamored by "Weaving Vines," a large yet delicate painting in blues and greens that shows the



Susan Danko, Serpentine 1, Mono-print 11 x 9-3/4"

rhizomatic mass underneath the water, revealing the danger that lurks beneath its lovely façade. In "Autumn Olive," Danko strikes quick with muted primary colors and fragile leaf contours. Solid red dots depict the fruit of the tree in the foreground, while the background is riddled with a wave of droppings that, perhaps, allude to the birds that eat the fruit and disperse it throughout the region.

All in all, Danko has researched twelve different specimens of harmful flora and fauna. Next to several works is a card with talking points on the various paintings and woodcuts derived from her research. These invasive species are indeed beautiful, hence the exhibition title, "Beautiful Intruders." It's difficult to see what damage is being done by them, because, frankly, they are pretty to look at. It just proves that one cannot judge a book by its cover.

Susan Danko reveals an educational and stunning body of work that, if you'll pardon the pun, is perfectly planted at the John F. Seiberling Gallery, smack dab in the middle of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

Beautiful Intruders

On view through Aug. 30, 2019

The exhibition is free and open to the public

Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

1403 W. Hines Hill Road, Peninsula, 44264