

## **Jim Toia, *Easton Irregular* Art Profile, March 2013**

"I decided to work exclusively with nature some time ago," Jim Toia says. "Why mimic it? I enlist and employ its process." He likes "nature to dictate what can happen, then I have to react/respond." He uses nature to "upend assumed expectations," in the pursuit of new creative opportunity. He asks, "Can we see *that something*, and if so, can we allow ourselves to seize *that something* and stop short of our expected goal, to arrive at something perhaps better, newer, odder, more novel, more open? "

His recent show at Kim Foster Gallery in NYC blurs the boundaries of art and science by allowing inky cap mushrooms to rot on top of crisp, white, clay board surfaces that preserve the long process of decay. The pieces dramatize mortality, entropy, loss, and, with humble and limited materials, make a "lament for the state of nature." The show also marks a moment when Toia is allowing his hand to re-enter the dialogue with nature.

*Coprinus comatus* a.k.a. "lawyer's wig" or "shaggy mane" is a fungus that grows all over the North America. A pale cap shields gills that first appear white, later pink, and finally black. When picked or when they are ready to produce spores, inky caps decay and ooze with a black liquid that was once used as ink. Black walnut larvae hatch from the liquid, leaving an abbreviated line as they wiggle out of the goo, the trail ending where the insects molt and fly off. Tilting his white surfaces, Jim harnesses gravity like Lynda Benglis or Robert Morris and allows the brownish black liquid to flow into shapes resembling Oriental flower paintings, bonsai trees, or firework displays. He sands the dried sludge with steel wool to brighten an area, or he rehydrates the ink so he can coax the dark liquid across the surface with a brush. Recent collaborations with the ooze are more gestural and make me think that as Jim relaxes his "hands off" rule, he approaches discovering a metaphoric "hand of nature."

He received his B.A. from Bard College in 1985 and M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in NY, in 1993. He is the Director of Community Based Teaching at the Williams Visual Arts Building at Lafayette College. He has participated in residencies, given lectures and/or exhibited work in Florida, Texas, Romania, Taiwan, Germany, Costa Rica and Mexico. He shows regularly at Cheryl Haines gallery in San Francisco and at Kim

Foster Gallery in New York.

Highlights from Toia's career include: "Piet Project" (2010), a limited-edition work of Piet Mondrian-like designs painted on the front of woodpecker feeders, a project that pokes fun at the sterility of the cool Modernist canon. Robert Rauschenberg "erasing" a De Kooning drawing came to mind when I saw how the woodpeckers destroyed the Mondrian-esque paintings to reach their food. The multi-media installation "Knee Deep and Risin'" (2009) was made with Noah Vawter and Lafayette students in response to flooding and the lack of run-off management in the Easton area. This piece involved multiple videos of water, moving surfaces for projection, sound, dance, and a computer program using LED technology. A message flashed, "Don't just stand there do something," encouraging viewers to take control of the installation and, by extension, think about what impact they might have on the environment. Simple, lyrical, "Plume" (2006) is short for "plumage." Videotaping fall leaves, trees, sky and water, Jim mimics a painter mixing colors: when the camera is in focus, nature's observed color is clearly attached to objects; when the camera strays out of focus, we see color as radiant, blended chromatic light. Lifting me out of my limited, human perception, these pieces make me wonder about vision in other species and consider the beauty I'm missing.

—Elizabeth Johnson