



JOAN WADLEIGH CURRAN

Decay and Regeneration

BY NAOMI EKPERIGIN

OPPOSITE PAGE

Packing

2011, gouache,
22 x 30. All
artwork this
article collec-
tion the artist
unless otherwise
indicated.

RIGHT

Weed II

2004, charcoal,
32 x 28.



When discussing the power of drawing, Joan Wadleigh Curran is matter of fact. “I think that the reason people love drawing is because it’s so basic,” she says. “It’s how we first learn to interpret our world in a visual manner.” As an artist and senior lecturer in drawing and painting at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, Curran has likely spent as much time ruminating on her process and motivations as on creating the work itself. For her, drawing is both a foundational skill and a means of translating images and concepts that inspire her. The artist works in a range of media, including charcoal, oil, and gouache, preferring one over another at various times depending on the source of her inspiration.

The artist has always had a bit of a soft spot for drawing. After earning her undergraduate degree from Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, New York, she enrolled in the M.F.A. program at Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut, with the intent to study printmaking. But “when I got there, I was more interested in drawing than

anything else,” she remembers. “My thesis was mostly drawing, and even now, I feel that the painting I do is closely related to drawing.”

Regardless of how her work is labeled, the artist’s focus is always clear: the symbiotic, and at times antagonistic, relationship between people and their environment. “For a while I was interested in the subject of gardens,” she says, “because it was a perfect example of man controlling and altering nature. In a lot of ways a garden shows as much about the creator

as anything else.” Curran has always enjoyed painting the natural world, but upon moving to Philadelphia, she found herself attracted to another facet of her environment. While out one day gathering photographic references, she came upon a tree that was in the process of being pruned and felt compelled to record it. “It had become gnarled from the pruning,” she recalls. “That’s when I became interested in the relationship between man and nature, especially natural organisms living in an urban context.”

PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE, LONDON

With this in mind, Curran's exploration led her to subjects that are rarely noticed by passersby—the weeds, branches, and roots that break through pavement and fencing in order to survive. The resulting charcoal drawings are intimate and detailed while also being representational. No doubt the black-and-white image connotes a sense of reportage, but through her use of the white of the paper and dynamic composition, these objects become elevated. In such drawings as *Weed II*, the titular subject is handled sensitively, and just a hint of wire fencing—created with dark and light lines—delineates the space. This

vegetation, normally the bane of every gardener or landscaper, is given the attention of a fine botanical illustration. "I've always been interested in the singularity of objects and their power," the artist says. "And because I'm extracting the object from the landscape once I'm back in my studio, I tend to think of it as isolated. But I take this approach because doing so allows me to really analyze and decode what about the image turned me on in the first place.

"The interaction between man-made forms and nature is always compelling," she continues. "Nature is struggling to survive—it's actu-

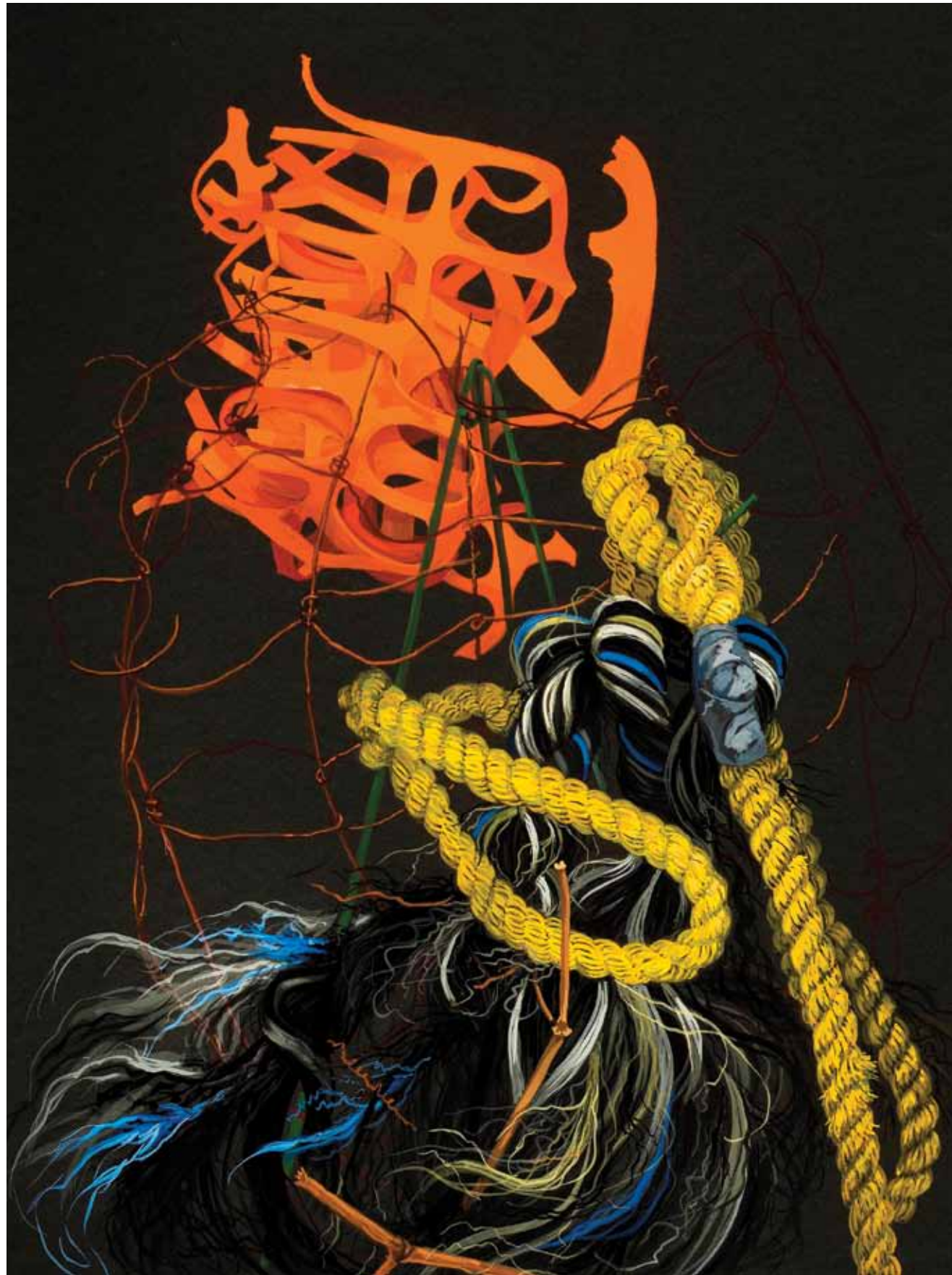
ally experiencing resurgence, in a way. It poses an interesting question of who's overtaking who?" The artist has no shortage of tools and techniques with which to effectively depict these timeless concepts of growth versus entropy, regeneration and decay, and alteration either by man or simply through the passage of time. Curran chooses to play up these tensions through the use of richly layered blacks and stark whites, which she diligently preserves from the moment she chooses a composition until she adds her final strokes. "I build up the image slowly through hatching," she says, noting that it may take



LEFT
Fence II
2009, charcoal,
22 x 30. Private
collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Branch
2008, charcoal,
30 x 22.





LEFT
Growth
2009, charcoal,
30 x 22.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Orange Fence
and Rope**
2011, gouache,
30 x 22.

her two weeks or longer to complete a drawing. "I'll use some smudging and erasure to get the lights I want. I like to have the full range of values so that I can really convey a sense of drama." She works on Stonehenge paper because its vellum surface can withstand repeated erasure without fuzzing. "But in order to make sure I get the light lights that I want, I have to be careful how I construct the drawing."

Curran's focus on structure enables her to take a draftsman's approach to her work regardless of the medium she uses. Accurate drawing requires careful observation and dedicated analysis. "I look at any subject from a draw-

ing perspective," she explains. "I'm concerned with the way the visual information comes together to form an image and create content." Her latest work is done in gouache and features construction debris, packing materials, and other objects that offer challenging structures and the potential for a compelling visual rhythm.

The artist continually stretches her limits not only with her materials and techniques but also by immersing herself in new environments. She has been an artist-in-residence at institutions around the world, and she is particularly excited about a recent trip to Ireland. "I was painting man-made objects that washed up on the

beach, such as lobster traps, ropes, and bottles," she says. "It was very different from my previous residency, when I spent a month in Wyoming. I was fascinated by the form and colors of the rocks there. I liked playing with the scale so that you couldn't quite tell how big they were."

Regardless of her subject or materials, Curran's approach is informed by her extensive training as a draftsman, and she aims to instill this same mastery in her students. She notes that many of her students are interested in new media, and she sees nothing wrong with that. "I think that drawing skills apply to every kind of art," she says. "If it's taught in such a way that it's about learning to see—both perceptual accuracy and developing one's own vision—and learning how to manipulate visual attributes to highlight concepts, then it fits perfectly in any artist's education. It's all about learning to see and translate what is seen so that you can communicate ideas to people." ❖

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