

THE PALM AND THE PRICE

By

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To Florida.

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I thank my family, both past and present. Though Florida is often mocked and always misunderstood, these flat lands are ours. It is a humble and diverse history stitched from orange groves and yellow road lines. I can only hope to honor this legacy with *The Palm and the Price* and future artistic endeavors. In the love and support of my native Floridian parents I found the strength to pursue the path of the sculptor-scientist, and I could not be more grateful.

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Abstract of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This Master of Fine Arts project in lieu of thesis examines the historic negotiation between Florida's inhabitants and the hostile landscape they seek to dominate and control. For the sculptural investigation *The Palm and the Price*, ten dead cabbage palm specimens (*Sabal palmetto*, also known by the common name sabal palm) were collected from regional wholesale plant nurseries, dissected, and juxtaposed with conceptually significant construction materials such as PVC pipe, steel rebar, and corrugated drainage pipe. Harvested from nature with heavy machinery, each native palm had been "repackaged" through extensive pruning of its shaggy trunk, crown, and root system, allowing for easy transport and replanting in traffic medians and housing developments. Initially inspired by the tree's journey as a transplant, the cabbage palm evolved in this investigation into a signifier of the indigenous Florida environment as a tropical paradise; alluring both in its lushness and its ferocity. Sculptural manipulations of the tree can be seen as analogous to taming paradise in order to best serve human needs. The goal for each of the seven sculptures of *The Palm and The Price* is not to define the entire complexity of the dynamic relationship between Florida's nature and culture, but to create moments of finite awareness of its residents' dependence on the

supportive infrastructures that make their existence possible. The works are analyzed and discussed through the following lenses: the natural history of *Sabal palmetto* as it pertains to the Florida environment, evolutionary psychology and the perception of exotic otherness, the cultural evolution of palm symbolism, particularly in Biblical narratives, the Florida sublime, and modern and postmodern conceptions of the Florida landscape.

CHAPTER 1 FOREWORD

As this is an investigation into the culture, iconography, and history of Florida's state tree, it is appropriate that I disclose my inherited and inherent bias. I am a fifth generation Floridian. I was born in a South Florida hospital beside a man-made canal built on dredge spoils that elevated it safely above sea level. My family has been involved in nearly every aspect of the swampy evolution of the state out of the wilderness and into the premier tourism, development, and retirement destination that it is today. I come from cattle ranchers, orange farmers, roadside hoteliers, trailer park owners, military men, developers, engineers, and road pavers. As a child, I took great pleasure in summiting the massive piles of dirt fill that would eventually be bulldozed and leveled to keep our pine flatwood lot dry during hurricane season. My brother and I rode our bicycles along the parched banks of straight canals we believed had always been there. Wearing a child's version of an airman's jumpsuit, my pant-legs tucked into coal-black cowboy boots, I would climb the nearest cabbage palm to survey our acre and a quarter of reclaimed suburban paradise. The spiky protrusions along its trunk served as footholds as I ascended its natural ladder, folding myself into the dusky green fronds of the tree's crown to escape the blazing sun. It is from this vantage, in one moment cradled by the fronds of Florida's state tree, seduced by the lush rustling of a lazy breeze, and the next parting them to peer beyond the lushness, and with objectivity, survey my surroundings, that I will complete my investigation into the upside-down, backwards, and sideways history of this palm and flower-strewn peninsula.

INTRODUCTION: SABAL AS SOURCE

For the sculptural investigation *The Palm and the Price*, ten dead cabbage palm specimens (*Sabal palmetto*, also known by the common name sabal palm) were collected from Gainesville, Florida-area wholesale nurseries, dissected, and juxtaposed with conceptually significant construction materials. These trees were the weak individuals of their species; those that failed to survive transplant after being cut out of the earth with a gasoline powered steel-shank digging spade (Brown, 2000). A normal byproduct of the landscaping industry- not all plants can survive- these ten trees were slated for the landfill, the burn pit, and the mulch pile prior to being salvaged and hauled to the studio. There they were cut into logs, hollowed with a chainsaw, disemboweled with a long steel scraping hook; they were sliced laterally, skinned, flayed and reassembled in taxidermy-like manifestations that favor the unreal and the bizarre over lifelike portrayal. Plucked from nature and reconfigured as such, this native palm evolved in this investigation as a signifier of the wild Florida environments that must be tamed; a tropical paradise requiring domestication in order to best serve its residents.

If *Sabal palmetto* is slated for such symbolic transcendence, then its characteristics and life history must guide the trajectory of this exploration. Each work in the seven-part series¹ seeks to examine a specific property or set of properties of the organism and compare those with the functional aesthetics of Florida's taming and development throughout its history. These properties include not only its physical structure and appearance but also its tolerance to a wide range of environmental

¹ Though the investigation began with ten trees, one early work is not included here and another sculpture, *Culdesac*, utilizes two specimens.

conditions, its remarkable resilience, and its cultural associations. Poetic juxtapositions of disparate materials such as palm husk and PVC pipe reference the technological advancements in drainage engineering that made Florida's colonization and development possible, while leaving the gesture open for additional interpretations. The goal for each sculpture is not to define the entire complexity of the dynamic relationship between Florida nature and culture, but to create moments of finite awareness of its residents' relationship with the supportive infrastructures that make their existence possible. Rather than delve into an exhaustive history of Florida's emergence from its swampy purgatory- for which many excellent volumes have already been written- this analysis will remain firmly rooted in the wisdom that can be gained from physical and conceptual manipulations of *Sabal palmetto*. We will begin with an interpretation of the greater meanings behind the life history of the species. Those aspects of Sabal's anatomy, growth, and development which are relevant to discussion of the Florida environment will be discussed and mined for symbolic significance. Then a critical understanding of the greater palm archetype- as exotic other and signifier of paradise- will be outlined first through the lens of human evolutionary psychology and then through a cultural-historical survey of palm iconography, particularly in Biblical narratives. Evidence of the relationship between this deeply rooted cultural image and *Sabal palmetto* will be examined as pertaining to the Florida sublime. In this unfolding eco-cultural analysis, the theorized species inventory of the Garden of Eden may be given the same weight as sabal's² remarkable ability to resurrect after even the

² Because the term "sabal" is here used to refer to the common name sabal palm, it is not capitalized. Though not a standard usage, it prevents confusion between *Sabal*, the genus of the species, and the capitalized, italicized titles of art works.

harshest wildfire. Through research-based sculpture, the *Palm and the Price* seeks to determine the ecological and cultural ramifications of the myth of the Florida sublime as embodied in the *Sabal palmetto*.

CHAPTER 2 SABAL AS SURVIVOR: THE FLORIDA PHOENIX

Why *Sabal palmetto*? Would not the coconut palm with its feathery fronds and its sweet white fruit better represent the concepts of paradise? You cannot make a piña colada with the berry-like seeds of sabal. With its spiky trunk and fluffy crown, it is a decidedly more disheveled tree; it lacks the smooth-trunked sophistication of other palms. When viewing the sabal any sense of paradise is richly laced with the primeval; the tree's wild Southern lushness reinforces its "oddity, its vacant and humid sulkiness, its erotic silkiness" (Logan, 2005, p. 434). Because the tree is a critical element of the seductive landscape so faithfully exploited by Southern authors, it is no surprise that it was selected as the state tree for both Florida and South Carolina. Florida's state seal features a cabbage palm against a backdrop of a radiant coastal sunrise. In an anthology of Florida folk traditions, Reaver (1984) notes, "On a deeper level of psychic symbolism, some aspects of the Florida landscape have been transformed into symbols of controlling significance because they have been charged with emotional meaning" (p 25). Expanding on this concept, sabal's meaning as a symbol of Florida derives not only from its role in the Southern landscape, but also from the unique properties of its species that have allowed it to thrive.

The life history of *Sabal palmetto* at times reads like a parable of persistence and determination. Before the plant can emerge from the ground to grow leaves, it must go through a subterranean establishment phase known as the "saxophone" stage (McPherson and Williams, 1998, p. 198). The bud must grow downwards approximately one meter before turning back upward, creating a saxophone-like shape. A single dagger shaped blade then emerges from the earth and gradually the plant adds

more leaves, although it will take years for it to form a trunk. Contrary to popular understanding of tropical species as fast growing, cabbage palm growth rates are extremely slow. The tree usually takes 30 to 60 years to reach full establishment. Even when coaxed with fertilizer and water in ideal nursery conditions, trees took seven years on average to emerge into the light of day. Under some conditions the growth is even slower: a palm growing in the sandy soil of an open field grew only one meter (~3.3 ft.) in 25 years. One Florida specimen planted in 1970 took *twenty years* to reach about knee height (McPherson and Williams 1998). Sabal is a kind of tropical paradox: though cursed with a painfully slow growth rate, the species is abundant and exceedingly common.

While the trees are prolific throughout the Southeast, it is a hard-won abundance. Throughout Florida's history they have been harvested for food and fiber. The common name cabbage palm derives from the 'swamp cabbage' that can be prepared from their stems. Because harvesting the palm for its edible terminal growing bud, or 'heart' kills the tree, this is no longer an accepted practice here. It grows too slowly to be a profitable nursery plant, and so today the market has moved towards harvesting mature individuals from privately held ranches and reserves. The tree's hardiness and tolerance of a wide range of environmental conditions: drought, flood, salt stress, nutrient-poor soils, high and low temperatures, make it the current tree of choice in a wide variety of landscaping applications; from private housing developments to public roadway beautification projects. Take a drive along any South Florida highway or housing development and sabal cannot be missed.

Ironically, the same attributes of the cabbage palm that have ensured its success, despite Florida's development booms, make it the ideal target for harvest and transplant. Not that it seems to mind much. Most of its root system is sliced away from the tree when it is scraped from the earth with a backhoe, leaving a cluster of tendril-like roots. The root ball is wrapped in burlap or plastic and, taking care not to damage the sensitive growing tip, all but a few topmost fronds are cut off in preparation for transport.³ The tree is then loaded with others onto a flatbed truck and often hauled to an intermediary holding site, where it may sit aboveground for months awaiting purchase and replanting. Nonetheless when the trees are finally replanted into neat rows lining some sun-scorched traffic median, nearly all of them will soon set down new roots, sprout new fronds, and resume its slow ascent skyward. When transplant guidelines for irrigation, maintenance, and care are followed loosely, it is exceedingly difficult to kill a cabbage palm (Brown, 2000).

A unique property of sabal is its tolerance to fire, a trait which evolved during a time when wildfires raged across the Florida peninsula. Here sabal's prolonged interment during the initial saxophone phase pays dividends; in its juvenile stage the soil serves as an insulating layer for its fragile bud. Furthermore, when the plant finally breaks the soil surface, the bud is "insulated by many layers of relatively nonflammable mature leaf bases and unexpanded leaves in varying stages of development" that keep it safe (McPherson and Williams, 1998, p. 203). In a study of fire tolerance in *Sabal palmetto* seedlings, University of Florida researchers applied a controlled burn to a heavily sabaed area and found that none of the approximately 1000 seedlings younger

³ Note: because they all came from plant nurseries, all the specimens utilized in *Palm and Price* sport this signature haircut.

than around three years of age died (McPherson and Williams, 1998). In older trees, only one individual eventually died over the 5-month period following the burn, but this individual was noted as in poor health prior to the burn. There were no palms in this class that burned and failed to re-sprout. The only palms that died were in the very smallest age to size ratio class, but the maximum mortality rate amongst even these vulnerable individuals was 31 percent, meaning that over two thirds of the tiniest palms survived the blazing inferno to sprout again. The species' fire tolerance is so great that the researchers observed that fire is "unlikely to reduce population growth rates even under the most frequent fire-return intervals" (McPherson and Williams, 1998, p. 205). In layman's terms the significance of this unique adaptation is that one can burn the *Sabal palmetto* to hell and back again, and again, but it will still sprout new green growth; it is Florida's photosynthetic phoenix.

This capacity for regeneration is evoked in the *Palm and Price* sculpture *Tolerant* (2012), likely the most allegorical of the series. In this work a gutted, flattened *Sabal* specimen has been snagged upside down in the crotch of a charred hardwood tree. The textured ridges and striations of the palm's trunk attain a featherlike quality as they spread outwards, evoking *Winged Victory of Samothrace*.⁴ Resplendent even after its cruel reshaping, *Tolerant* is a testament to sabal's strength. The hardwood's tangled, root-bound base betrays evidence of its past life in the landscape nursery, where it ended up in the burn pile. After it burnt and cooled, it was mostly intact but had to be cut into sections for transport. Somehow, the evidence of the axe on the hardwood

⁴ *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, c. 190 BC. Island of Samothrace (northern Aegean). Grey Lartos marble (boat) and Parian marble (statue). Louvre Museum, Paris. <<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/winged-victory-samothrace>>

reads as profoundly more violent than the actions inflicted on the palm; the deliberate scars emphasized by the freshness of its un-charred interior. Though the hardwood supports the unburnt palm, the grotesqueness of the wounds signals an inferiority and subordination to *Sabal*, which wear its wounds with grace. The palm seems to lose its anchor-hold and take flight. *Tolerant*, while perhaps risking over-glorification, is evidence of the effectiveness of its own material transformation.

With the relentless saw palmetto (*Serenola repens*), *Sabal palmetto* has driven many landscaping crews to lament its existence. An abundance of carbohydrate reserves stored safely beneath the surface assures that sabal will return. The seedling swells in darkness for years beside the crumbling sidewalk of the Kwick Stop. It burrows down one meter before turning abruptly up. When the palm finally surfaces, its tender heart will be heavily armored. This tiny plant can be trampled, mown, hacked, and doused with herbicide; all to no avail. Time lacks substance for sabal. However long it takes, however many palm fronds that are hacked off, the seedling will continue growing anew until a trunk emerges. If 50 years are required to finally begin its life as a tree, ascending frond by frond towards the sun, sabal will rise to accept this challenge. A primeval patience lives within sabal; a constant vestige of buried eternal youth. It was at this point in this research that the tiny amputated fronds from my collected specimens assumed a strange glow. I began to see them as a silent resistance; a slow indigenous rebellion. *Sabal palmetto* was here before us, and displays a defiant indifference to our presence. Sabal thrives despite us; it ascends. A more powerful embodiment of Florida nature does not exist.

If *Tolerant* is primarily a reverent homage to the species' ecological resilience, then *Yield* (2011) is a 'reality check,' an acknowledgement of its passive subordination to the will of Floridians. Like the rest of the natural environment, sabal is changed and altered by the hands of man to serve his best interests. The palm in *Yield* bows obediently to a small (5 x 2.5 x 3 in.) open-top cast bronze vessel that resembles the keeled hull of a capsized sailboat. Textured and organic, the form derives from an earlier series entitled *Urban Watershed Project* (2009-2012), which examined anthropogenic erosion impacts to local urban creeks. Although the step-by-step, data-driven process of developing the keeled shape will not be discussed in detail here, the form combines urban and non-urban topographic information to illustrate human-caused degradation of the natural environment. In both past works and *Yield*, the blade-like vessel is employed as a de-facto symbol of our destructive potential in managing the landscape. *Yield's* sabal bows to the bronze blade, tenderly grazing its frond on the sharp edge. In doing so, this sabal effectively subordinates itself to the authority of the land developer, to the operator of the backhoe, and to the steel digging blade.

This theatrical gesture animates and anthropomorphizes the normally inanimate tree. It is a transparent strategy to elicit a sympathetic stance from the viewer. If the sabals of *Palm and Price* symbolize the Florida landscape, then *Yield* represents the tame, controlled environment that was sought so relentlessly under the modernist paradigm. As one of the main drivers of tourism and development of the state, the palm tree ultimately led to the harsh treatment of its lands and waters at the hands of those attempting to conform it to ideal notions of paradise. While the Florida of today still bears this constructed façade on the surface of the landscape, it stands in stark contrast

to the land's history of fierce recalcitrance to colonization and development, to taming and domestication. While today Florida's palms all but bow at our sandaled feet, the construction of Eden has come with a heavy price.



Figure 2-1. *Tolerant*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto* and charred hardwood specimen.
5.0 x 2.0 x 6.0 ft.



Figure 2-2. Detail, *Tolerant*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto* and charred hardwood specimen.



Figure 2-3. *Yield*, 2011. *Sabal palmetto* and cast bronze vessel. 4.0 x 1.5 x 4.5 ft.



Figure 2-4. Detail, *Yield*, 2011. *Sabal palmetto* and cast bronze vessel.

CHAPTER 3 SABAL AS OTHER: EVOLUTIONARY EXOTICISM

The image of a swaying palm tree- as seen on glossy Florida postcards, for example- typically evokes notions of tropical paradise and the allure of the exotic. The palm is magnetized with uncanny power; the naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson (1924) gushed that it “has a glory, a stateliness, and queenly poise that are produced by no other vegetable production on earth” (p 189). The fronds are hypnotic and “there is the utmost delicacy in every superb leaf whether it be a perfect rest or is tossed by the strong breeze as it glitters in perfect sunlight” (Simpson, 1924, p. 189). The association is so ubiquitous that we fail to question why we all share this instantaneous reaction. In fact, landscape preferences fall into the realm of tacit knowledge resistant to introspection, that is, “Despite the ease with which participants in preference studies are able to make their judgments and the highly regular and meaningful pattern of their results, participants are generally unable to explain their choices” (Kaplan in Sommer and Summit, 1993, p. 566). Participants in these studies may prefer the image of an oak hammock to pine flatwoods, but they are unable to articulate why. In the field of evolutionary psychology, theories of environmental perception and landscape aesthetics psychology may suggest that our preference for a particular vista, in addition to being culturally wired, may also be influenced by hard-wired preferences that conveyed an evolutionary advantage for our species over time, a kind of “gene-culture co-evolution” (Sommer and Summit, 1993, p. 552). Because they are such an integral landscape feature, University of California Davis researcher Joshua Schmidt completed a fascinating study of preferred tree shapes that compared viewer preferences in regards to tree species groups as well as scale, proportion, and density. In theory, we should

have preference for trees that signify an ecological environment amenable to successful human habitation from a food and shelter standpoint. When presenting their subjects with tree imagery, they found that there was “a significant tendency for width preferences to increase with height,” such that as the tree grows taller, we much prefer it to widen its trunk (Sommer and Summit, 1993, p. 560). Because it fails to widen as it grows and retains the same diameter throughout its life cycle, the palm may appear to us subconsciously as a troubling anomaly compared to the more typical growth patterns of the oak or the maple. Interestingly, when comparing height preferences for the acacia, eucalyptus, oak, palm, and conifer, the palm was the only tree for which the largest specimen amongst various sizes presented was *not* preferred in the context of a natural or wild setting (Sommer and Summit, 1993). Participants preferred smaller versions of this species than would be predicted; possibly in a subconscious attraction to more agreeable proportions. In other words, a massive oak tree was pleasing to the eye, but a huge palm tree was disagreeable or intimidating.

Even more fascinating, the palm was rated most highly when presented in an urban context, at which time participants tended to prefer specimens that mirrored the scale of the surrounding architecture. The authors suggest this may be due to the palm’s poor suitability as a readily accessible refuge from predators (i.e. climbing a palm is difficult) or its relationship to an increased risk of falling. We seem to prefer a “spreading form” of tree on which we convey a greater sense of value and strength (Sommer and Summit, 1993, p. 565). We tend to prefer the familiar, although other research has also found that the desire for novelty and variety in aesthetic experience sometimes leads to preference for uncommon vistas (Berlyne in Sommer and Summit,

1993, p. 533). In this sense the towering, columnar palm can be understood from the Western perspective as comparatively foreign when compared to the deciduous trees preferred by study participants; it becomes at once both attractive for its novelty and repellent for its exotic ‘otherness.’ Following the discovery of the New World, this was the very phenomenon responsible for the European obsession with bringing back boatloads of tropical specimens for the titillation of privileged audiences. Because they were unsuitable for the cooler climate there, elaborate greenhouses and life support systems had to be constructed to maintain them. One can imagine the many specimens that failed to survive the long journey and subsequent planting or transplanting. All traces of paradise were lost when they met their ends in the incinerator or rubbish pile.

The first work of the *Palm and Price* series, entitled *Scope* (2011), specifically targets the specimen-tree obsession and the notion of placing the exotic on display as an object of curiosity. The investigation began when I located a recently deceased specimen of sabal palm at a Gainesville, Florida wholesale nursery. It had been harvested from a nearby ranch for use in landscaping but failed to survive the transplant process. The following is an after-the-fact field journal recollection that details the precise moment the investigation began in earnest, which would ultimately lead to the collection of multiple specimens for sculptural re-appropriation:

“Never before had I experienced such sheer joy upon discovering something so plainly dead amongst the living. There it was, propped lifelessly towards the middle of a clump of burlap-wrapped sabals stacked vertically against a retaining wall. It was important to me that it is not killed by my own hand; I have a sentimental attachment to the species that would make vivisection difficult despite my guiltless consumption of a myriad of other wood-based products (not to mention the widespread abundance of *Sabal palmetto*). I watched as the nursery’s owner wrapped a canvas sling around the twelve-

foot tree, raised it to eye-level with a mechanical arm, and drove it to a shady spot in the rear of the property. There, alongside the scattered and decomposing husks of other trees long since dead, I fired up a gas-powered chainsaw, sliced it into sections, and loaded it into my truck. Despite the violence of the motorized blade and the acrid smell of combustion, I couldn't help but feel that I was rescuing the tree. As I drove my truck out the open chain-link gates, I fantasized that I had saved this *Sabal palmetto* from a grotesque fate of slowly melting into an ooze of slurping worms, fat-to-bursting grubs, chomping insects, and galaxies of hungry microorganisms. I began to think of myself as some kind of palm liberator, a chainsaw-wielding desperado, a 5th-generation Floridian uniquely qualified to create some sort of honorable end for this salvaged specimen of Floridana. It felt like a damn big responsibility, but I knew I could do it."

The end result of this preliminary investigation, *Scope* presents three consecutive hollowed sections of *Sabal palmetto* placed horizontally along the stark white backbone of a narrow shelf-like plinth. While the whiteness of the surface evokes the sterility of the exam table, the scale of the plinth positions it in an unexpected configuration in close proximity to the viewer, generating an embodied- perhaps sympathetic- response in relation to the object. Furthermore the sections are arranged such that the viewer can look through the tree's entire length like a looking glass or telescope, subtly referencing the age of exploration that led to the discovery of Florida. When looking from the base of the tree to the gently fluted topmost section, a glowing aperture is created that can be viewed as a hyper-real, literal embodiment of the lens through which we view the exotic other. Evolutionary psychology suggests we may possess a hard-wired cognitive dissonance in regards to perceiving the palm tree; it is my hope that in the space between subliminal attraction and repulsion to the object, there is a climate supportive to pronounced introspection in the viewer. While environmental preference and landscape aesthetics provide valuable clues into our perceptions of otherness in the palm tree, they do not go far enough. They cannot explain the depth

and breadth of a cultural programming that never fails to lure paradise pilgrims to Florida by the droves, that sends its sweet honey song on the wings of an orange blossom breeze to enchant and entrap, that shines through salt-speckled windows of roadside souvenir shops, dusting every surface with kitsch coconut palms, pink flamingos, and ripe sunsets. For that, we must selectively examine key points in the evolution of palm symbolism throughout history, focusing primarily on the development of the aesthetics of Eden in Christian mythology and modern understandings of Utopia.



Figure 3-1 *Scope*, 2011(left) and Detail (right). *Sabal palmetto* and pedestal. 8.0 x 1.5 x 5.0 ft.

CHAPTER 4 SABAL AS EDEN: BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

Investigation into the history of the evolution of palm symbolism reveals that the tree was originally associated not with paradise but with diverse notions of eternity, triumph, victory, and justice across many cultures (Caba, 1998). The palm is a classical architectural adornment dating back to ancient Egypt, where the tree's natural form made it the ideal choice for stylized palm columns (Simpson and Smith, 1998). However, *Palm and the Price* deals explicitly with Florida. While specific instances of palm iconography across cultures throughout the world were researched, they will not be detailed here or addressed specifically in the series beyond one work, discussed here. A definitive throwback to this classical heritage, *Inverted Capital* (2012) is a freestanding, upside-down specimen of sabal palm that reverses the natural order of the palm column by placing the fronds at its base rather than apex. It is the most straightforward and least intrusive sculpture of the series, a conscious acknowledgment of the cultural richness and symbolic depth of the palm as archetype, signifier, and sign. Through its title, it also references Florida's natural capital, ecology, beauty, and climate, which is continuously harvested in the name of tourism and development. That being said, *Inverted Capital* is also, by the nature of its inversion, a subversive gesture with ample precedent in the works of artists such as Robert Smithson, Reinhard Reitzenstein, Natalie Jeremijenko, and Mark Dion, all of whom have all employed reconfigured inverted trees in their works. While the themes vary by artist, the generalized thought is that a new understanding is generated by reversing the natural order, subsequently turning history on its head; thus *Inverted Capital* serves both as a beacon of its symbolic heritage and a forceful parting of ways. The uprooting and

upending of a tree is an inherently violent act, and the salvaged nature of the specimen does little to dull this awareness. Like an autopsy, *Inverted Capital* and the other works in the series seek to locate a sickness, not within the organism, but within the culture of a Florida that perpetuates false perceptions of paradise.

When tracing the roots of Florida's dilemma of the plastic paradise, all roads lead to Eden. Biblical Eden is the setting for the story of original sin, which art historian Victoria Soto Caba believes is so powerful that "it passed into Western culture like volcanic lava that spreads and solidifies cracks and breaks up, becoming one with the land" (Caba, para. 1). Her article, "The Other Tree of Paradise⁵," details the prevalence of the palm tree in religious depictions of the subject since pre-Renaissance (Caba, 1998). In the story of Adam and Eve, Eve is enticed by a serpent to eat fruit from the forbidden Tree of Good and Evil, which has been traditionally depicted as an apple tree. Although representations of this narrative have always included Adam, Eve, the apple tree, the serpent, and the apple, "every epoch and artistic style has created a different garden of Eden" with each artist populating it with imagery culled imagination, local flora, and botanical references (Caba, 1998, para. 4). Despite all this variation, Caba (1998) notes, "painters and printmakers have never failed to include the palm tree" (para. 4). The question then forms; What makes the palm so ubiquitous?

The answer lies in a corruption of the same potent symbolism invoked by *Inverted Capital*. The palm has been associated with the virtue of Justice, one of the seven virtues of the Catholic Church, since the beginning of Christianity (Caba, 1998).

⁵ An early find, Caba's analysis was crucial in illuminating the conceptual basis for *The Palm and the Price*. Though her arguments appear sound (based on additional literature I've reviewed), it should be disclosed that the article was originally written as an opinion piece for general information website created by Palmasur, a Spanish wholesale palm distributor.

These virtues were espoused in Christian texts long before they were ever depicted in images: *The just will flourish as the palms*, says David in *Psalms* 91.13. This, Caba (1998) suggests, is the result of our interpretation of its formal properties, a “perfection of form” quite different than that suggested by previously examined theories in evolutionary psychology (para. 9). The “straight line of the trunk and the circle of branches or fruit” are “mathematical concepts that correspond to the tenet of justice” due to their geometric minimalism (Caba, 1998, para. 9). This is a metaphor for the prescribed straight and narrow path: a tree that in its ideal form grows away from the earth, representative of darkness and depravity, upwards towards the sun, representative of illumination and righteousness, in one straight line; a path uninterrupted by tangential branches or distractions. If this metaphor is commonly accepted, then *Inverted Capital* can be interpreted, not only as a corruption of natural order, but as a perversion of justice as well.

In tradition, the palm’s presence in Eden symbolized the divine justice handed down by God to Eve for her sinful consumption of the apple. In the modern age, the association of palm trees with justice and punishment was gradually lost in Western culture, leaving only a guiltless connection with paradise that epitomized “the promise of a land in which for a brief time, mankind was happy” (Caba, 1998, para. 40). One can imagine that a palm on a postcard would pose as a less effective bait for tourists should it conjure images of gavels, verdicts, and tipping scales. This is a strange evolution of thought where we have stopped the clock in the Garden of Paradise in the moment before the apple touches Eve’s lips, before the booming voice of God casts judgment, and most significantly before that fateful expulsion. The serpent’s glowing eyes remain

glacial in their delightful anticipation while we are free to frolic as children of paradise, so long as we avert our gaze from this frozen tableau.

Where once the palm embodied the profound dualism of paradise and punishment, today the richness of this interplay has been lost. *The Palm and the Price* seeks to return the long-lost sense of justice to the meaning of *Sabal palmetto*. In her analysis, Caba (1998) notes the importance of a palm tree's crown to its formal properties, for if it lost its fronds, it would lose its perfection (para. 10). Stripping *Sabal palmetto* of its crowning foliage was, for this investigation, a de-facto strategy to dethrone it from its lofty Edenic mount. If just a bit of paradise could be scraped off, then the naked husk that remained might be more freely re-appropriated to describe Florida's paradoxical relationship to nature. Therefore the works of *Palm and Price* represent a remedial environmental justice for the previously uninitiated, a new depiction of the Florida sublime in which lushness has been supplanted by structural steel, drainage pipe, and survey flags.



Figure 4-1 *Inverted Capital*, 2011. *Sabal palmetto*. 1.5 x 1.5 x 7.5 ft.

CHAPTER 5 SABAL AND FEAR: THE FLORIDA SUBLIME

When the Edenic narrative encountered the New World during the colonial period, a physical embodiment of that biblical paradise was also discovered in the tropical flora and fauna. Artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster defines this merging of ideals and landscapes as *Tropicality*: “a combination of landscape, abstract desires, and organic sensations, a very sensorial but also complex sensation mixing the modernist will with an immature drift into the rainforest” (Gonzalez-Foerster in Bossa and Martinez, 2010, p. 2). Bossa and Martinez (2010), further make the assertion that exoticism as a historical construct drove the early Spanish colonization of the Americas (p. 2-3). The same rhetoric also applies to the great Florida land booms of the 20th century. In both instances of grand re-settlement people were lured by the echoes of compelling myths to travel to faraway lands, while upon arriving in their often-disappointing paradise, they then sought to remake their new reality into the image of their fantasies. Their first challenge working towards the fulfillment of these fantasies consisted of eliminating their immediate fears, of death, disease, and financial ruin, and manifesting control over the untamed wilds. Paradise could not be fully realized until it was domesticated.

Fear however is an essential component of the sublime. Burke believed that “mere beauty without an aspect of terror is inferior to the sublime” (Lowe, 2011, p. 90). In its most potent form, awe begets fear. Such was the experience American settlers of the southern United States, who were “constantly awed, astonished, or terrified by the beauty, mystery, and menace of nature, and by its sudden eruptions of violence through animals, hurricanes, floods, fires, burning heat, and bone-deep cold” (Lowe, 2011, p. 90). The South’s concept of the sublime, with its winding blackwater rivers and bubbling

swamps, becomes in “undeveloped, larval” Florida “the South beyond the South” where “surrounding everything was that air of strangeness, otherness, of things newly seen and yet always known, a place slightly hostile to human presence” (Logan, 2005, p. 434). The Florida sublime is experienced on flat land hardly above sea level, but it still holds a potent capacity to affect this experience, as exemplified in the following excerpt from my personal writings:⁶

“A child ventures from her house as the hurricane’s eye surrounds her in eerie calm. She stands on a small island in the muddy floodwaters and looks out, first west to what has passed and then east towards what will come, towering cells of gray velvet destruction both. She vacillates between terror and awe until somewhere deep within her the scales balance and she holds both emotions without conflict. The eye envelops her and she envelops the eye; it is both terrifying and beautiful. The emotions are one and the same.”

If only other residents of this state shared in this sentiment of awe and respect to a greater degree. Whenever possible, Floridians have sought to evolve it from its “undeveloped, larval” beginnings (Logan, 2005, p. 433). Modernist thought has dictated that nature be subdued to serve man, particularly when applied to Florida’s unpredictable waters. This attitude is gloriously detailed in the 1950’s propaganda film *Waters of Destiny* produced by the Army Corps of Engineers to drum up support for the massive flood control projects initiated in central and southern Florida. Florida’s natural cycles of rain, drought, and wildfires are cast as “crazed antics of the elements” that leave the state “helplessly waiting to be soaked and dried and burned out again.”⁷ In dredging the Kissimmee River and building a massive dike around the perimeter of

⁶ A depiction based on loose recollections of my experience weathering many hurricanes in my childhood home.

⁷ Army Corps of Engineers film quotes as transcribed in: Hauserman, Julie. "Waters of Destiny." *St. Petersburg Times* 31 May 2000, South Pinellas Edition 6D.

Lake Okeechobee, Corps engineers attempt to vanquish the fear associated with the unpredictable nature of the land. In controlling water, they subdue “water that once ran wild. Water that ruined the rich terrain. Water that took lives and land and put disaster in the headlines and death upon the souls.” Domesticated, the water is now “calm and peaceful, ready to do the bidding of man and his machines” (Army Corps of Engineers in Hauserman, 2000).

Tropical modernism wages war on the aspect of fear in the sublime. Florida’s natural ecology was radically altered to stamp out collective fears. The modernist landscape is a fabrication, a constructed hybrid of natural and human elements. If the tree specimens of *Palm and Price* are stand-ins for the Florida landscape, then their Frankenstein-like recombination with drainage structures can be seen as a metaphor for the modernist agenda. Its title hinting at a common design feature in the more exclusive Florida developments, *Culdesac* (2012) presents two palms threaded onto a large ring of PVC pipe, a construction technology integral to Florida’s draining and taming. The palms are nearly turned inside out; their fur-like surfaces spread across the floor in peaceful submission- the palm equivalent of a hunting trophy. Like a dredging barge cutting a canal into the moist Florida earth, the white PVC pierces and molds the trees into the desired shape.

Remnant (2011) also deals with construction technology. For land to be colonized and developed, it must first be surveyed, mapped, and plotted. Land that is well understood is less fearsome to a potential colonist. *Remnant* consists of a palm’s base and root ball that has been hollowed into a refuse receptacle for the material remnants of a topographic survey. The root ball rests on a stand of steel rebar, the

preferred concrete reinforcement material. Wooden survey stakes of various shapes and sizes and orange survey flags are interwoven with tangled masses of brightly colored survey line. These materials are genuine artifacts of an extensive topographic survey completed for *Urban Watershed Project* (2008-2012). Here they have been haphazardly discarded as trash in a container made of the holiest of Florida's trees. *Remnant* signals a radical departure from the rational empiricism favored in previous *Urban Watershed* works towards a metaphoric approach. Once Florida's lands have been surveyed, all living and nonliving elements are subject to being remodeled into the image of paradise. Like a spider we take comfort in stitching webs of candy colored survey line into the landscape. Surveys enable us to make changes Nature might never allow; in wild lands day-glo orange survey flags are beacons of the promise eventual domestication. *Remnant* serves as a reliquary for such artifacts.



Figure 5-1 *Culdesac*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto* and PVC pipe. Dimensions variable.



Figure 5-2 Detail, *Culdesac*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto* and PVC pipe.



Figure 5-3 Detail, *Culdesac*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto* and PVC pipe.



Figure 5-4 *Remnant*, 2011. *Sabal palmetto*, survey line, wooden stakes, marker flags, steel rebar. 2.5 x 2.5 x 5.5 ft.

CHAPTER 6 BIONIC SABAL: POSTMODERN RECONSTRUCTIONS

Moving beyond modernism's obsession with the domination of nature, the post-modern conception of the environment is more applicable to the ecological reality of Florida today. In this paradigm, unspoiled nature no longer exists; what is left is "a hybrid of human and non-human designs whose result is precisely an image without an original" (Barrett and White, 2001, p. 233). Though *Culdesac* hints at the possibility of such hybridization, the natural and synthetic materials remain separate; the pipe pierces the material but does not fuse with it. Seeking to evoke this new human-natural dialogue, *Meander* (2012) combines hollowed palm sections with 20 feet of black corrugated drainage pipe to form a continuous closed channel. A structurally integrated hybrid, it stands as the most decisively postmodern work in the series. Slumped and serpentine, the pipe-like base and nozzle-like crown create a theoretically functional object compelling in its strangeness. Such reconfigurations signal what Puerto Rico-based artists Allora and Calzadilla refer to as "the monstrous dimension of art" consisting of "inverted, mutilated, and doubled parts" that carry continually mutating meanings (McKee, 2005, p.96).⁸ Representing a surreal fusion of nature and technology, *Meander* foreshadows an increasingly bionic landscape. This strange device could be as essential as PVC pipe in the imagined environment of Florida's postmodern utopia.

The Floridian postmodern framework is exemplified in the mission of the Everglades and Kissimmee River restoration projects. Modernist thought dictated that

⁸ Interestingly, this idea seems to be reflected in the artists' 2004 work *Cyclonic Palm Tree*, a potted palm tree outfitted with a fan motor in an ironic reference to inclement tropical weather. *Feedback Loop* similarly joins a palm tree with found materials to create an uncanny amalgamation of forms.

Florida's wetlands be brought under control. Paradise was a row of condos by a straight ditch lined with planted palms. Over time, science has taught us that the negative impacts of this vast reconstruction far outweigh the benefits. We now seek to reverse most of the Army Corps' original flood control projects to the tune of billions of dollars. Aerial photographs of the Kissimmee restoration highlight its absurdity. Beside the arrow-straight shadow of a filled-in canal an approximation of the original, oxbowed path of the river has been carved out. If the straight canal is a modern construction, then the curvilinear "restored" river is a postmodern reconstruction (Barrett & White, 2011). Scientists and engineers work together to determine the ideal path of the restored river. While a modernist paradise could be achieved only through domestication, the postmodern paradise requires the opposite. It dictates that we put the wildness back into nature; as the popular Florida tourism slogan goes, we need to get back to the "Real Florida." In truth however no authentic Florida exists. It was a fabrication from the very beginning. Restored segments of the Kissimmee may appear "real" at first glance, but they are made by humans and laced with our technologies. They embody our collective cultural understanding of "wildness" but they are not wild. Like *Meander*, the Florida environment today is a patchwork of synthetic and natural elements, a continually mutating construct.



Figure 6-1 *Meander*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto*, ADS pipe, galvanized steel couplings and bolts, chain, nylon lifting strap, forged steel hook. Dimensions variable.



Figure 6-2 Detail, *Meander*, 2012. *Sabal palmetto*, ADS pipe, galvanized steel couplings and bolts, chain, nylon lifting strap, forged steel hook.

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Earlier works of *The Palm and the Price* such as *Scope* and *Inverted Capital* sought to navigate and move past the historical and cultural baggage of palm iconography from the Spanish conquistadors to ancient Egyptian palm columns. However, it was critical to the credibility of the investigation that a comprehensive understanding of the symbol's rich lineage be achieved prior to narrowing the research towards Florida-specific applications. The investigation began with the following straightforward questions:

A: *Why is the palm tree synonymous with Florida paradise?*

B: *How can Florida's state tree be manipulated as sculptural material?*

What initially seemed so simple amounted to falling down into the proverbial rabbit hole. Through the research needed for the creation of this work, I was presented with the opportunity to delve into our collective psychology, beyond the Western obsession with the Biblical Eden, to the universal human perception of the palm as an other; a perception perhaps hard-wired from birth. We may indeed be pre-programmed to both enjoy and fear the novelty of a tree that deviates so flamboyantly from traditional arboreal proportions. These proportions were exploited to maximum sculptural and conceptual benefit in *Palm and Price*.

As an artist, scientist, and 5th-generation Floridian, I feel a profound responsibility to accurately portray Floridians' relationship with our bizarre physical and cultural landscape. The palm tree served as an effective vehicle to explore my personal heritage in relationship to these greater issues. Although each work exemplifies a key stepping stone in the unfolding narrative, *Feedback Loop* represents most accurately

the current state of affairs in Florida. There is a pronounced tension between the modernist desire for control of the landscape and the postmodern impulse to return it to what is perceived as its natural, wild, or undisturbed state. In Florida's case, the natural state is particularly fearsome; laced with alligators and lush tropical tangles. The translation errors in this attempted facsimile- and the mutations that can only occur through generational and cultural drift- are where real opportunities for future work lie.

Perhaps a throwback to my scientific training, *The Palm and the Price* enforced rigid material and procedural parameters (controls) as a strategy to mitigate the complexity of Florida's ecological-cultural interface. Materials were limited to *Sabal palmetto* and a selected sample of infrastructural materials (PVC pipe, steel rebar, survey tools, corrugated drainage pipe, etc). It should be acknowledged at this juncture that this is not a magic formula. Although these limitations produced illuminating results, there are many other combinations of materials that might serve the same conceptual end. In creating the sculptures of *Palm and Price* I demonstrated a marked aversion to interfering with the material, be it palm or pipe, in any way that might obscure its original origins. There is no paint, preservative, or glue in these sculptures. Their power originates exclusively from responding to and manipulating the raw properties of each individual specimen. With this intimate knowledge I was able to locate the appropriate synthetic material for each sculpture's re-contextualization.

Though I have provided ample explanation of the rational basis for these choices, intuition also played a key role in the final selection process. I have no desire to deny or relinquish my innate authority regarding Florida. Under the harsh Florida sun, my shoulders grow freckles like a slow-growing leaf mold. Dusk calling cicadas chant in my

chest. As I write this on my covered back porch a storm thickens. The breeze builds and carries a single drop of moisture to my cheek. I feel the thunder in my fingertips. To the sound of storm water cascading down a concrete spillway, I realize that I too have become enchanted by Florida, but not in the traditional sense. On the micro- level I am enamored with the continually shifting boundaries between natural constructed elements of our plastic paradise. On the macro level, these elements assimilate into a dystopian hybrid, a Frankenstein landscape I find staggeringly engaging. In my art practice, this paradigm grows sculptures like weeds. Hundreds of them bulge within me now, all born of this intimate knowledge of the state, all waiting for actualization. Embracing my birthright and position as a sculptor-scientist, I will create them.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kate Helms, a 5th generation Floridian, was born in West Palm Beach, Florida to native Floridian parents who instilled in her a deep appreciation for the natural environment. Helms cannot recall a time when she wasn't simultaneously interested in both the ecological sciences and the visual arts. These parallel interests began to merge at the University of Florida, where she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Science and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Visual Arts in 2007. After working in the environmental field, she returned to UF to complete her Master of Fine Arts degree in Sculpture. Primarily interested in water resources, Helms often relies on direct field research to guide her artistic process. Her science-based research culminated in the 2012 exhibition *The Palm and the Price*, which examined the impacts of development on Florida's natural heritage.