

Houston Baptist University

Indistinct Visions of Divided Wings

Art: *Wings*

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## Indistinct Visions of Divided Wings

A step into the *Get Ready* exhibition hosted in the University Academic Center unveils walls lined with creative works of art made by HBU's students, but distinguished from the rest hangs a mysterious glowing box at the far side of the room. Upon closer inspection, the glaring light subsides and reveals a glittering multitude of severed monarch wings. Like broken shards of stained glass, the vibrant wings shimmer a brilliant orange as grooves of black lines pattern their edges, laying against the white backdrop. The illuminated wings blur against the coated glass, a mysterious out-of-focus effect that pulls people to observe from another perspective. This enigmatic box is the artwork, *Wings*, intricate not only in its use of innovative media, but also in evoking messages that are as layered as the artwork itself.

It's no surprise to see such an eye-catching piece of Aaron Novak's work at this exhibit. The exhibit, *Get Ready: A Survey of MFA Candidates, 2019*, displays HBU art students' best works to be displayed and judged. An art student chosen as a candidate for the MFA program at HBU is given the opportunities to continue a specialized education in art as well as their own studio space. The artwork that Novak submitted for this survey reflects this as it shows the expertise and style he developed over years. Novak works often with light projection in his art, categorizing it as light art or luminism, when light is used as a medium in artworks (Lamp, sec.5). He has kept hundreds of butterflies in the past and used them in his art, such as projecting butterfly wings onto walls (Novak, 2:37-2:57). *Wings*, with its shifting light effects and spotlighted monarch wings, captures what's so unique about Novak's works.

The artwork itself is categorized as mixed media, though it can be classified as luminism as well for good reason. Mixed media is art created by two or more mediums, which fits this multiplexed artwork. There are roughly forty separated monarch hind- and forewings within the

box, some of them slightly chipped, all encased in a resin sheet for protection. They're placed on top of a silk sheet, creating a bold contrast between the vivid orange wings and the sheet's white backdrop. There is a hidden light in the upper left corner illuminating the inside of the box and emitting an attractive glow to bring viewers from far away. Between the glass and wings is a textured film making an interesting glare effect from the hidden light as it breaks apart and spreads across the glass. The wings underneath the film then appear blurry and out-of-focus, similar to how a straw appears broken in a water glass, prompting the viewers to move around the box to adjust their eyes to the wings. This invites the viewers to see the box from different angles and distances. The film contributes even more to the lighting as its texture results in bouncing light between the butterflies and the glass. Butterfly wings have thousands of microscopic scales that reflect light numerous times in between themselves, which causes their iridescent effect (Horton, par. 2-3). Basically, the light gets fractured from the film and bounces back between the wings and glass, bringing out the vivid color of the wings and constantly shifting the viewers' visual perception of the artwork, an excellent use of light as a medium.

Novak's artistic intent was to experiment with fractured light and pieces, but the thematic content he wanted to convey goes deeper as he explains:

I live in constant pain. I have a shoulder surgery I never fully recovered from, so that's kinda part of what I try to convey in my pieces. Living in pain and feeling like only parts of a whole, which have to do with that fractured sort of existence. (0:52-1:06)

Certainly, the longer the artwork is observed the more it feels ominous, as the wings are separated from their body and from each other, laid chipped and isolated in display, giving an impression of pain and loneliness. The bleak atmosphere the art piece has may lead to the assumption that in the process of its creation the artist has ripped off the wings from the

monarchs' bodies, leaving the now wingless butterflies to die in misery. Such an act is reminiscent of butterfly collections as collectors would kill butterflies by pinning them to a board for display, the eerie likeness emphasized even more with their similar appearance to the artwork. The viewers should not worry, however; no butterflies were harmed in the making of this art piece. These wings belong to butterflies that were dying from a disease and were humanely euthanized through freezing, a method that puts the butterfly into painless sleep, in order to protect the other monarchs from a disease outbreak. Novak confirmed that he was in contact with associations that raise butterflies, and after seeing he was an artist, they offered to donate the wings for any use (Novak, 2:20-2:30).

Novak is an amazing artist who presented butterfly wings in such extraordinary ways that people who come across them may start to look at monarchs differently, as precious living works of art. It's hopeful that these artworks may start to bring awareness to the monarch butterfly especially as of late since its population has been dwindling. Monarchs have been decreasing at an alarming rate, around 90% over the past two decades, for various reasons such as severe climate change and loss of habitat (Mizejewski, par. 1-2). Organizations have been pushing for environmental education through monarch-based programs and projects, covering children and adults across regions to develop a necessary understanding of monarch conservation, as any environmental challenge is best faced with combined effort (Oberhauser, pg. 6). Many programs use such strategies to combat the population decline: fighting against the use of pesticides that kills insects and poisons plants, growing habitats that can raise monarchs, and most importantly, raising awareness about the issue so more people can help. The goodness of this artwork revealing the beauty and fragility of monarch butterflies shines when the viewers appreciate it and develop interest in the monarch butterflies' survival.

## Works Cited

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