



One is almost led to believe that communication today is the invention—or at least the reinvention—of the computer revolution. But communication is perhaps one of the oldest and most deep-seated attributes of the human race. It is not necessarily something written or spoken, though both are among the greatest intellectual achievements of our species. As the ancients realized, and we have forgot, communication also arises from sources mute and inanimate. The message that comes to us may be infinite rather than finite, its meaning boundless rather than narrowly defined. The potential of communication is its capacity to spring into being after incredibly long periods of dormancy, only to fall back into the vacuum to await another instance of interaction. I'm reminded of the message plaque designed by the late Carl Sagan attached to the Pioneer 10 spacecraft, now somewhere beyond the solar system. We hope, but we do not know, what kinds of results the sending of that communication will bring.

The most potent quality of art is its communicative aspect. For me, art works best when it makes me think about something other than itself. Communication is the meta-subject for the kinds of art that seem to linger with me, long after the visual or physical encounter has passed.

Actually, you have seen this in operation in the above paragraphs. My assignment here is to write something about the work of Ross Coates, who is not only a colleague but also a good friend. Naturally I thought of the essential and masterful qualities of his art — the superb draftsmanship in his early pseudo-narrative drawings, his versatility with a wide range of materials and constructive possibilities, his depth of knowledge and experience in cultures worldwide. He is a dedicated educator, and with regards to the heritage arts of native America and Africa, he is a scholar (and a gentleman). Ross and wife/partner Marilyn Lysohir deserve great praise for *High Ground*, the innovative and groundbreaking publication on the contemporary artistic culture of the northwestern interior which they produce.

In much of Ross Coates' work, the recurring motif is mythic narrative and the possession of powers, be they spiritual, mythological, phenomenological or talismanic. This last attribute is particularly strong in Ross' work, and testifies to the communicative aspect of objects that have been invested with mythic power and wisdom (one recalls Giorgio di Chirico's remark about "the secret life of things"). Myths arguably are the first communicative structures to convey shared knowledge and to explore the inexplicable mysteries of nature and existence. One gets the unmistakable impression that his assemblages and installations call upon the chosen object to whisper its history, its potions, its victories and its regrets. On occasion Ross has asked this of

the viewers, by offering a chance to interact with his work in a similar fashion. We have forgotten the roots of myth, and Ross strives to reawaken that awareness in us.

Let us not forget that the ancient powers—that-be often had, shall we say, a sense of humor (at least among themselves and often at the expense of us mortals). I appreciate the fact that humor lurks in many of Ross' works — in fact it was a work of his with a mock-serious premise that first appealed to me, and which I happen to own. It causes me to believe that when the oracles at Delphi were done with a hard day's work weaving their spells and chanting their somber prophecies, they headed for the nearest retsina bar for gossip and laughter. Ross' art can be like that. It's a reminder that in our communication among ourselves and across the ages, there is always humanity at the core.

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ROSS COATES:
MYSTÉRIOUS
COMMUNICATION

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**Dream of the
Last Centaur**
Mixed media
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