

By Frances Jakubek

Tara Sellios

In Tara Sellios' exhibition *Ask Now The Beasts* at the Fitchburg Art Museum, visitors are invited into a world where the boundaries between the living, the dead, and the divine blur. The installation is decadent, wholly engrossed with references and metaphors, yet welcoming to anyone wishing to enter. The gallery space is intentionally dark; displays include deep black backgrounds and elegant, cherry-colored frames that present the artworks as sacred objects. The space is subtly angled, shifting the gallery from a simple rectangle into an area that encourages quiet reflection. One feels compelled to whisper.

There are reverberating energy pulses between the works, many presented in pairs or groupings, though treated as individual pieces. As a series, they are reminiscent of stained glass, presented as story and narrative throughout the gallery. An education steeped and stirred in religion, Sellios discovers those deep fears, threats, and promises that pervade the scripture she was taught. Through the darkness, she finds her own light.

"The photographs of *Ask Now the Beasts* are contemporary allegories of suffering and transcendence which share the Apocalypse as their

metaphorical foundation. Through allusions to a variety of sources and her unique materials, Sellios deploys both dark humor and empathy in her poignant observations about the human condition and the complexities of religious extremism," cites text in the gallery.

Sellios' process is meticulous. Every bone, flower, and fragment in the photographs is carefully chosen and deliberately placed, reflecting a deep engagement with ancestral narratives and the artist's personal history. The captions, accompanied by a binder available in the gallery, further break down the materials used in each piece and offer insight into each multilayered image. Created in collaboration with curator Emily Mazzola, the pages uncover specific Bible references, Latin identifiers, and approachable names for the flora and fauna appearing in each work. They also describe the stages of Sellios' life that led her to these ideas, and we learn more about the artist's journey, making the works feel even more alive. The exhibition will be on view for an entire year, reflecting the amount of labor invested in creating the work.

The placement of pieces *Messis Nos. 1* and *2* anchors the space. These works take time to



digest, and upon closer look, one realizes that the entire "leafy" structure comprises only hundreds of leaf-mimic insects. In *Vinea*, the two sides of darkness and lightness are presented together in an immaculately constructed frame, speaking to the contrasted yet all-encompassing *The Last Judgment*, depicting Jesus centered between heaven and hell.

Sellios works from watercolor sketches, many of which are also on view in the museum's Elevator Gallery. Her time-staking work sketching, sourcing, constructing, and photographing exemplifies a meditation on creation. Her strict religious upbringing unmistakably influences

her methodical process. However, knowing she works in a day-lit studio in South Boston, living and dining in the same space as these setups, brings life back into the animals whose flesh has already decomposed. After years of bartending in music venues, the artist has committed full-time to her art practice, finding a new sense of time and space. A funny thing about resurrection is that it isn't linear despite our human desire to make literal sense of it, and sometimes, it suggests that it is more about our spiritual or personal growth in a dedicated lifetime.

In Sellios' apocalyptic vision, the ocean becomes a site of both creation and destruction. Fish skeletons swim above a decomposing crocodile, and we see turtles, seahorses, starfish, and black sea whips, all fighting for survival. Some fish are represented only by their jaw bones, symbolizing the fragility of life, the search for nourishment, and the inevitable decay that accompanies all living things. "Sellios is fascinated by art historical representations of the end of the world, particularly the bizarre and otherworldly imagery of artists like Hieronymus Bosch and Albrecht Dürer. Sellios also draws from 17th-century still life painting, specifically Dutch vanitas paintings, which traditionally depict human skulls alongside representations of abundance. This image type functioned as a reminder of death and a warning against greed for wealthy merchants and aristocrats." We enter this exhibition feeling eerily contemporary tangents. In contrast to humankind, we question who exactly are the beasts.



"Ask now the beasts," the exhibition's central passage from the Bible, urges viewers to seek guidance from the animals surrounding us and the ancient wisdom they offer. Similarly, our bodies contain information and abilities that our minds couldn't comprehend, so we are urged to trust what we cannot explain. The exhibition reminds us to seek ancient advice and heed repeated warnings. Challenging the notion that man is all-knowing, we seek guidance from



the primordial fossils and trust the spine of a pufferfish as protective, providing defense and survival in its very build. A turtle's shell is armor and a home for a defenseless reptile. In this deep dive, the exhibition piece *Abyssus* appears as a constellation; the darkened windows of the gallery heighten the sense of being submerged underwater or perhaps floating in the cosmos. The lightness of the pieces contrasts with the heaviness of their themes; the frame disappears into the wall, and the white of the skeletons bursts out in perfect porcelain contrast as if you could capture the objects from thin air.

The recurring image of the hourglass signals the end of days and our perception of time. In *Abyssus*, the hourglass is held tightly by the crocodile's jaw. In *Triticum No. 1*, it is gently delivered by a locust, linking the creatures to resurrection, the harvest, and warnings of the end of the world. These references to time and nourishment, to the earth and sky, remind us that the beasts of the earth have ancient wisdom to impart knowledge we often ignore or overlook.

Sellios herself appears serious from head to toe. Her style is all-black; she stands confidently and creates without apologies, yet she speaks to the insects and animals used in her pieces as "critters," unveiling the tenderness beneath all of these works. These creations are collaborative, as Sellios has worked with vendors worldwide to source specific bones, insects, and skulls. Her vendor from Vietnam is flying into the show to meet for the first time and see how his creative endeavors feed this artist's needs. The delicacy with which she treats the animal parts—fish bones and lamb skulls—imbues

Above: *Vinea*, 2023, inkjet print from 8 x 10 inch negative, 95 x 50.5". Below: *Abyssus*, 2024, inkjet print from 8 x 10 inch negative, 59.5 x 85". Opposite, from top: *Abundantia*, 2023, inkjet print from 8 x 10 inch negative, 40 x 26". An installation view of *Ask Now The Beasts* featuring works including *Messis Nos. 1* and *2* which are positioned adjacent to one another in the room. Courtesy of the artist.

them with a sense of life and purpose, making them characters in the unfolding story.

At the entrance to the exhibition, a vitrine displays some of the pieces and small assemblages featured in the photographs. This allows viewers to connect the objects in the case to their larger counterparts in the framed works. The materials in the vitrine serve as an invitation to explore the delicate scale, fragility, and expression of the pieces. Yet, there is a sense of playfulness in trying to match the miniature creatures to those in the photographs.

This body of work asks viewers to consider the impending apocalyptic event not as a new concern but as something that has been part of the natural world long before humans appeared. It reminds us that this metamorphosis cycle of life, death, and renewal will continue long after we are gone. We are reminded that there is light in the deep darkness of our understanding—waiting to be discovered and understood.

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Ask Now The Beasts, Fitchburg Art Museum
fitchburgartmuseum.org
Through January 18, 2026

