

Creature Discomforts: Decorating with Death

Exhibition introduction wall text

Taxidermy is currently an international phenomenon in contemporary art. This revival is quite different from past fashions for taxidermy in that it takes a critical look at the tradition of preserving animals for educational or decorative purposes. In this respect, contemporary artists are reflecting, and stimulating a larger debate within society about the ongoing relevance and purpose of taxidermy, particularly given our heightened sensitivity toward “human uses and abuses – both past and present – of the natural world and its inhabitants”.¹

Taxidermy is derived from the Greek words: *taxis* meaning arrangement and order; and *derma*, meaning skin. This etymology reflects one of the original and most persuasive purposes of taxidermy; to collect, archive and organise the natural world. The most exotic specimens from faraway lands were sought for private and public collections as well as being put to use as accessories and interior decorations. The fashion for taxidermy reached its peak during the Victorian period and this threat to species was well known and documented at the time. Insidiously, as a species became rarer, the appetite and value for them increased until inevitably, the only examples left were ‘stuffed’.

Attitudes toward taxidermy began to change in the mid-20th century when “it was felt that television and zoos now give people, and especially children, opportunities of obtaining a far truer picture of wild life in other parts of the world”.² It was also felt that museum collections of natural history were “an embarrassment and besides the animals were in a ‘dreadful condition, many of them were so badly stuffed as to be mere caricatures of the creatures they were supposed to represent.”³ From this period onward, many natural history collections in museums were ‘rationalised’ which is a nice way of saying that unwanted specimens were sold or destroyed.

Fashion using dead animals, as testified by grandmother’s fox fur stoles (complete with heads, tails and legs) which has been relegated to the spare room closet or the children’s dress-up box. This is not to say that the use of animal products for fashion or interior decorating has decreased - quite the contrary. Rather, it is just not considered tasteful to recline on a leather couch that is quite so obviously of animal origin.

This begs the question about what we should do with these gruesome, but equally, intriguing and beautiful artefacts of the past? Speaking from experience, it takes a brave person to step out in a full length fur coat these days (antique or not). Should such redundant objects simply be buried or burned? Considering this, it is interesting and possibly heartening, that so many artists have begun to use taxidermy as an artistic material. As taxidermy historian, Rachel Poliquin has remarked:

Animals are hot topics especially considering the emphasis on conservation, species protection, animal rights and fears surrounding genetic modification and cloning ... Using animal parts instantly conveys a strange visceral intensity to a work of art, and animals really are the new edgy and confrontational medium ... but not fresh taxidermy. Always vintage.⁴

¹ Poliquin, R. (2008). ‘The matter and meaning of museum taxidermy’ in *Museums and Society* 6 (2), p. 126.

² Saffron Walden Museum Society, (1960). *Annual Report*, Saffron Walden Museum: Essex, United Kingdom, p. 7.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Poliquin, R. (2008). ‘Ravishing Beasts’ in *Antennae* (6), pp. 10-11.

But taxidermy is not just artistic or decorative material. The art works and artefacts in this exhibition represent living creatures that have been killed, preserved and arranged for high-brow (educational) or low-brow (decorative) human purposes. In essence, these objects say much more about ourselves and our attitudes toward other creatures and the environment than teaching us about particular species and their habitats. As Wellington-based artist, Angela Singer, describes:

The exploitation of non-human living beings by humans is one of the core issues raised with my work. I do not kill, have killed or taxidermy animals. I recycle old discarded taxidermy in my practice, much of it trophy kill ... I resist the temptation to have explanatory information at my exhibitions because I want the audience to come away with questions not obvious answers.⁵

In keeping with Angela's approach, I have resisted the temptation to explain the art works and artefacts in this exhibition. In many ways, the tales of death and destruction documented in this room are, from a moral and ethical perspective, quite unexplainable. During the course of my research, I have encountered the most distasteful and immoral objects, read awful accounts of exploitation and generally marvelled at the arrogance of the human species. I have also been delighted by the terrible beauty of some of the things now displayed in this room. What I have tried to do, instead of dwelling in our awfulness, is to create comparisons between historical and contemporary objects, and set images alongside 'things', in order to encourage discussion and reflection about our penchant for decorating with death.

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Curator

⁵ Aloj, G. (2008). 'Angela Singer: Animal Rights and Wrongs' in *Antennae* (7), p. 17.