THE BESTIARY VIEWED

BY

Norbert John Charles DeKerchove, Jr.

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Charles Werberig
Charles Werberig, Chairperson
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences

John Head
John Head
Assistant Professor
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences

Anthony Bannon
Anthony Bannon
Director, Burchfield Art Center
PERMISSION STATEMENT

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SIGNATURE: N. J. C. DeKerchove

DATE: April 1986
DEDICATION

To my spirited partner, Evadna, especially for her encouragement, cheer and sacrifice.
INTRODUCTION

My thesis project, THE BESTIARY VIEWED, grew out of a variety of concerns. Museums of Natural History are places of great curiosity, fascination and repugnance; I continue to be engaged by them. Man's response to other species is perplexing. Natural History Museums (and zoos) are places where people go to meet, observe and catalog animals. I find the absurdity of animals in contexts not their own frightening.

The intention of my thesis project was to explore man's relationship to beast. A diorama is a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. I have never been interested in reading the information provided on the animals and their habits; I find it to be tedious and uninteresting. My attraction is with the metaphysical implications of these suspended narratives. I allow my imagination and vision to interpret these constructed worlds.

Although this verbal thesis examines my personal concerns, the photographs themselves should provide an opportunity for the viewer to interpret and question his or her own relationship to natural history.
DISCUSSION

I began photography during my middle years of undergraduate school while I was living in Idaho. I was a Communications major and at the time I was being subjected to large doses of communication, information and media theory. This academic study proved to be a very dominant influence on my image making. I look at the photographs I have made for my thesis project and, although they look much different from past work, a similar conceptual thread has always weaved its way through my photographs.

How I came to photograph in Natural History Museums has early roots in a bicycle tour of the northwest with a few days rest and relaxation in Victoria, British Columbia. Having never been to a Museum of Natural History before, I thought it to be a fine way to spend an afternoon. As it turned out, I spent the afternoon in the museum until it closed and then was back again the next day.

My interest at the museum centered mostly on the dioramas. Dioramas are life-like settings using stuffed animals, curved and painted walls, and real dirt and rock surrounded and kept safe by plates of glass. People were crammed together trying to find the best vantage point. There was a lot of pointing, yelling, coughing, pushing and generally a very frenetic atmosphere. Being a tourist, I made a few snapshots during my time there, and in the meantime did my share of pushing and pointing. The snapshots ended up in a slide tray with the other few hundred and was only really looked at in the context of a visual diary of my tour. Only later (3
years) did those photographs become important in the development of my thesis idea.

Moving to Rochester to attend Rochester Institute of Technology proved to be very frustrating. I was really lost for the first year. I became too absorbed in process without much regard for content. Subsequently, nothing I made had any meaning or feeling. I found the Rochester landscape to be inhospitable, the weather uncooperative and living quarters too small for large scale studio set-ups.

Sometime during my third quarter at RIT I took a walk and escaped the Rochester weather by going into the Rochester Museum and Science Center. I wandered around for awhile looking at the animals. The tranquility of that space was very powerful because I was the only observer, as far as I could tell, in the museum. It was so quiet and so thought-provoking. The experience was quite different than the one I had remembered in Victoria. There were no people competing for the space I was in. It was warm, dry and comfortable. I looked at the beasts and I wondered about how strange it really was to do this. Do they, museum people, go out and entrap and kill a moose or a bear, or whatever is available, and gut it, stuff it and make it up to look as if it were only resting and then build a tableau around it? It was very frightening but magnetic. Enthusiastically I returned the next day and began photographing; I was very curious about this phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, my photographic images have been influenced by my study of communication theory. During my undergraduate days, I became an
advocate for the elimination of television. At the time it felt like a noble cause. Sometime later I did a series of photographs that dealt with the issues of my anti-television cause. The images were collages that utilized televisions, baby dolls, mannequins and torn and ripped pages from popular magazines. These elements were assembled in my garage into a staged creation — a tableau. I had built a diorama made up of objects that represented contemporary society. These constructed worlds expressed, rather ambiguously, my concerns about violence, sexism, religion and most importantly, the representation of events that are not experienced. The problem with the television was not the flickering image of dots, but the unquestioning attitude of the viewer or the masses that absorbed those images. Television images were being substituted for real experiences. Television pictures showing the Grand Canyon in Arizona became a real-life experience to the viewer — they don't want to go to the Grand Canyon because they can see it on TV. It becomes a superficial attempt to view the world and position yourself in it. Photographing dioramas of stuffed animals in contexts not their own became an extension of misrepresentations of information via the television. This became important to me and I needed to explore it more.

I began photographing in the Rochester Museum and Science Center with a preconceived, controlled idea in mind. I was interested in the animals and the environment in which they were placed. I wanted to emphasize the theatrical nature of the diorama. My intention was to show the structure of the diorama within the environment; to photograph the piece and
emphasize the frame and reflections on the glass. The early photographs were made using a tripod with slow film. I wanted to make large prints so sharpness, detail and resolution seemed important at that time.

It turned out my first attempts to photograph in a museum were unsuccessful. Technically, there were no problems with the photographs, but what I was after aesthetically and emotionally was sorely lacking. The images were stagnant, controlled and rigid. They were also too vague and did not seem to express the concerns that were important to myself or my project. My thoughts returned to my experience in the museum in Victoria. All the noise and chaos, the "people-intense" environment that had so effected me, was lacking in the photographs. The element that I needed to express how I felt about these animals was people.

I rescheduled my time photographing at the Rochester museum to coincide with rush hours. Saturdays were family oriented days so I prepared my equipment hoping for a convergence of people to the museum. People were there on Saturday, but were uncooperative. They were too polite and insisted on not getting in the way while I made pictures. I couldn't convince them that I wanted them in my way — to act as if I was not there. I was getting nowhere so I attempted to orchestrate a few scenes with people, but it became too contrived and manipulative.

A new approach to my unsolved problem of photographing was needed. The images I had made up to this point were unsuccessful. I had to somehow
photograph people in the environment at a Natural History Museum without changing the situation. I wanted to be an unobtrusive observer with a camera. The frustrations in unresolved photographic attempts at the Rochester Museum and Science Center forced me to search for Natural History Museums in different locations. I thought larger cities might have the intense traffic of impolite people who wouldn't care if they got in my way or not. My first museum excursion took me to the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

The Natural History Museum in New York is an overwhelming place. It is very large and very old. The dark, spacious corridors feel cold and impersonal. Adding to that feeling are hallways and galleries of various beasts posed for audience. My earlier problem of too few people was resolved in this museum. There was a frantic energy of people rushing through the museum in what appeared an attempt to absorb as much as possible in the shortest amount of time. There were rows and rows of dioramas each representing and recreating a narrative. The mind puts the puzzle together and resolves the narrative, however fleeting it may be.

A tripod was impossible in the New York museum so I attached a flash to my camera and began pacing with the rest of the visitors. I began shooting spontaneously without spending too much time looking through the viewfinder. This became a significant junction in my approach to this project. After viewing prints from this work, I decided the flash and quick shooting in an atmosphere of chaos was most agreeable to my sensibilities.
After discovering my strategy for acquiring the pictures for my project, I determined a schedule for photographing at large natural history museums in Toronto, Philadelphia, Washington, DC and Chicago. For each of the excursions I would set out without any preconceived or specific image in mind. The underlying premise for the work was established, providing a framework in which the photographs evolved naturally. I would drive to a museum, spend time photographing and leave the museum without really knowing whether or not I had recorded anything significant on film. After the film was processed I would make work prints of almost every negative. Since I was shooting 35mm film at a fairly rapid pace, I was faced with a major task of editing the pictures.

I had decided early in the project to make large prints because I felt the subject matter — the animals, the people, the structures and the dramatic flash-lighting demanded a representation of the scale and space of a diorama. Because of the size of the photographs and the gallery in which the work was hung (28 Arlington) I was limited to 20 pictures. It became a formidable task to edit the work prints from all of the rolls of film that had been shot. Between myself and my board members we would go through a series of editing sessions and then I would retire to the darkroom to make prints.

The printing was extremely time consuming because it was very important to make precision photographs. Although I was using 35mm film and making large prints, resolution and clarity could not be overlooked. Flash has a
way of giving unusual detail and hard-edgedness to whatever is in front of it and I wanted to take advantage of that element. The photographs would naturally undergo a change when going from a rough 8x10 work print to a finished 18x22 print. Consequently, this led to several disappointments as well as surprises. Editing and printing continued until I had 20 photographs that I would show for my thesis exhibit.

The decision to exhibit my work at 28 Arlington was twofold. First of all, exhibition space at RIT was booked solid and secondly, the physical characteristics of 28 Arlington could possibly enhance my photographs. 28 Arlington, Gallery of Photography, is an old Victorian-style house with the exhibition space downstairs where you would normally find the dining room, living area and the foyer. Track lighting on the ceiling and a spacious bay window compliment the intimate space. Because the walls are very "chopped up" by entryways and windows, I thought this architectural style would add to my photographs. I did not have long wall space to hang the photographs, therefore, narration between images was less important. The space reiterated the formal qualities of a Natural History Museum. With the combination of lighting and wall space, I could successfully control the illumination level to allow for individuality and isolation between the photographs.

An element of the exhibition that was not entirely planned was the fact that I had to use frames to display the work. The walls were plaster and therefore very susceptible to crumbling under stress. I had envisioned
using only glass without matts and letting the white border of the print (18x22 print on 20x24 paper) function as the mat. Because of the composition of plaster on lath board, only substantial hangers could be placed in the wall for each piece. I rejected the idea of framing the work because frames are obtrusive to me; they are unnecessary and get in the way. I prefer the pristine quality of glass only over a photograph. I tried to find alternatives to framing the work, but after a lot of struggle decided my only feasible choice was to mat and frame the work.

When I was hanging the show I came to the conclusion that the frames did not detract but possibly enhanced the overall concept of my project. The track lights were directed to each photograph, leaving a darkness between the pictures. Additionally, the overall light level in the gallery was kept to a minimum. These controls amplified the sensation of looking at pictures of beasts in a Museum of Natural History.

The opening on Saturday, May 4, 1985, was crowded and chaotic. Being an intimate environment, the gallery became a condensed Natural History Museum. As the viewers moved from photograph to photograph, the parallel between moving from diorama to diorama became evident. People in the photographs became people in the gallery — looking, pointing and chatting. Moving through the dimly lit gallery, with all the twists and turns, the viewer would be confronted with another picture around each corner (as in a Natural History Museum). Confrontations would take place between viewer and photograph and diorama. Reflections of the glassed-in dioramas at the museums would visually extend to the reflection of the glass of the photograph.
I chose not to title the photographs in any way. The only printed reference to the exhibit was a brief statement near the entrance to the gallery (Appendix A). I wanted the viewer not to be concerned about species and habits — but about the impossibility of their own relationship to these suspended beasts. My attempt to isolate the absurdity of an animal in a context not its own was taken a step further by photographing and exhibiting these animals in contexts not their own.
CONCLUSION

When I set out to photograph in Natural History Museums, I had a great deal of concern for the cultural and intellectual significance of the concept of the diorama in a Natural History Museum. I thought it to be a repulsive and morally questionable thing to do to animals. I questioned equally that segment of society that visited the museums and spent time observing and cataloging the beasts. My thesis project began with these concerns in mind.

Throughout the course of the project I began to realize that I could only touch the very surface of these concerns. The relationship of each individual to the natural kingdom — to the process and hierarchy of life — is a complicated and deeply intimate question. My photographs are not an answer to this question, but only an inquiry into what I feel is an important subject. The viewers, though, make the final decisions for themselves.
The photographs for THE BESTIARY VIEWED were made entirely with a Nikon 35mm camera with either a 21mm or 28mm lens. A wide-angle lens was used because I wanted to include as much layered information as possible. This included diorama, background, foreground, people, artificial light controls, etc. Also, the wide-angle lens flattened out the curved backdrop of the diorama, giving a truly animated feel to the photographs. A small Sunpack flash was used exclusively to highlight and dramatize subjective portions of the frame.

The film choice was Kodak Plus-X or Tri-X, depending on available lighting conditions. The film was developed in Kodak D-76 mixed 1:1. I had experimented in color, but was dissatisfied with the results. I felt the color was overly blatant and distracted from the content. I preferred the drama and subtleties that occurred using black and white film.

The negatives were printed on 20x24 sheets of Kodak Polyfiber, double-weight, glossy paper. Negatives were printed to 18x22 using a full-frame negative carrier which provided a black border around the print. Kodak Polycontrast filters were used to control contrast. The prints were processed in Kodak Dektol usually mixed 1:2 and occasionally mixed 1:1. Archival processing, including a two-bath fix and selenium toning, was used exclusively.


Statement Posted During Exhibition

Museums of Natural History are places of great curiosity, fascination and repugnance. I continue to be engaged by them.

Man's response to other species is perplexing. Zoos and Natural History Museums are places where people go to meet, observe and catalog animals. Dioramas are monuments (or tombstones) to the impossibility of such encounters. The absurdity of animals in contexts not their own is frightening.

I am never really interested in reading the information provided on the animals and their habits; I find it to be tedious and uninteresting. My attraction is purely visual and I allow my imagination to interpret these suspended narratives. Confrontation takes place that can only be resolved in the mind.

Norb J. DeKerchove
APPENDIX B

THE BESTIARY VIEWED

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A Thesis Proposal

October 1984
PURPOSE

The intention of my thesis is to visually examine dioramas of the bestiary found in Natural History Museums. Through my images I plan to investigate the cultural and the intellectual significance of these constructed worlds.

BACKGROUND

The motivation for photographing dioramas of animals initially began on an excursion in 1982 to the Victoria Museum of Natural History in British Columbia. My interest, when viewing and making tourist snapshots, was not limited to only the framed diorama, but moreso to the surrounding environment of the animals and the people who were reacting/interacting within that space.

Since that time I have had occasion to visit and photograph dioramas at several Natural History Museums. To me, dioramas are truly a visual medium. I am never really interested in reading the information provided on the animals and their habits; I find it to be tedious and uninteresting. My attraction is purely visual and I allow my imagination to speak the timeless tale frozen in front of me. I see the animals as actors and the dioramas as theatre. Confrontation takes place that can only be resolved in the mind, and, finally in the photograph.

An additional impulse for photographing dioramas is the complex layering of information which continually shifts depending on your position in relation to the dioramas. Information is altered when the transparent glass enclosing the diorama becomes reflective. Animals, people, light, texture and space overlap and merge, creating unnatural and enigmatic analogies in the environment.

When I see and photograph dioramas, significant concerns come to mind. I question the morality behind these constructed images of a diminished world. The lifeless creatures raise questions regarding cultural views of our social hierarchy. The animals were sacrificed for the sake of a suspended narrative. Through my images I hope to reflect these concerns.
PROCEDURE

My thesis project is divided into three parts, which are described below.

Photographing

I plan to my photograph at Natural History Museums within reasonable proximity to Rochester, such as New York City, Philadelphia, DC, Chicago and Toronto. I hope to have all of the shooting done by December, thereby avoiding hazardous road conditions.

Printing/Finishing

I plan to print and sequence the images until the time of my show. My finished images will be toned silver prints.

Exhibition/Writing

My exhibition will be towards the end of spring quarter. I will then begin writing the results and the procedures involved in completing my thesis.