

black ground. The detail, colour and texture are alluring but what we are witnessing is a smeared, smudged and squashed form, literally captured at the moment of death. The butterfly is caught between two glass slides and then scanned at high resolution before being subject to further digital manipulation. Their twisted and distorted forms still appear seductive and compelling yet we are also aware of the brutal act that has contained these creatures for our consumption. The images hover between life and death, combining the familiar with the shocking and the alluring with the repulsive. We are reminded of the popular Victorian pursuit of lepidoptery, of capturing, collecting and classifying butterflies which were commonly pinned through their torsos to a display board, so that they could be studied, classified and admired. Collishaw's process apes scientific study where organisms are placed between glass plates to enable them to be studied through a microscope. He allows us the opportunity to marvel at nature but only at the expense of the subject.

As part of this project, artist Mark Fairnington was commissioned to curate an historic exhibition to complement *The Nature of the Beast*. This is what he writes regarding *Our Creatures*;

This is an exhibition of portraits of animals. It is an historical exhibition that gives glimpses into the ways in which

artworks have described the different relationships between human beings and animals. These are images and objects that depict in particular the domestic and local relationships between people and animals and show how these could be pragmatic, eccentric, brutal and loving. Here are the creatures that provided friendship, entertainment and sport, they could be made to fight, they could be raced against each other, they could be bred and sold for profit and they could be eaten as food. In these roles they inspired a huge range of human responses; they were and still are a vital part of the human world both emotionally and economically.

This is an exhibition of portraits of animals where the individual animals are sometimes named. The creation of each of the works was invested with time and care that reflected both the nature and the value of the animal to the person that commissioned or made it. The making of an image of an animal through photography, sculpture and even taxidermy was a way of describing what that animal meant to its owner. A very valuable animal gave importance and social status to its owner and a painting of the animal acknowledged this. The works in this room indicate above all possession and ownership by declaring the fact that "These are our creatures".

Deborah Robinson
Head of Exhibitions
The New Art Gallery Walsall

Events

In Conversation

Saturday 18 May, 2pm
Join Steve Baker in conversation with Olly & Suzi

Saturday 22 June, 2pm
Join Giovanni Aloï in conversation with Mark Fairnington, Tessa Farmer and Polly Morgan

Book your free place in advance by calling 01922 654400.

Artist's talk

Mat Collishaw: Beautiful and Cruel
Wednesday 22 May, 6-8pm

Hosted in partnership with the Library of Birmingham at BIAD, Margaret St, Birmingham – £3. Please contact hello@grainphotographyhub.co.uk for information and booking.

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Publication

A publication accompanies this exhibition. It is available in the Gallery Shop at the special exhibition price of £6.

The Nature of the Beast

Mat Collishaw, Mark Fairnington, Tessa Farmer, Polly Morgan, Olly & Suzi, Patricia Piccinini

Our Creatures

Curated by Mark Fairnington

26 April — 30 June 2013

Exhibition guide

Humankind has long been fascinated by animals, who in turn, have been subjected to research, collection, categorisation, documentation, display and experimentation as we struggle not only to understand nature but to control it, to manipulate it and to harness its energies.

Each of the artists selected for *The Nature of the Beast* creates works which involve an intensive scrutiny of animals and nature as well as a critical engagement with the ways in which we have attempted to understand and control the natural world.

Mark Fairnington is represented by six portraits of bulls, the titles revealing their intensely masculine and slightly aggressive sounding names such as *Turbo Tommy* or *Duncombe Aga Khan* (2011). These paintings are striking in their physicality, grandeur and meticulous attention to detail. Each bull is represented as its actual size and so as viewers, we are struck by their apparent bulk, strength and virility. Indeed these are prize-winning stock bulls whose sales and services for breeding are advertised online.

Fairnington's bulls do not occupy an artificially painted landscape but instead, they hover against a bright, white ground. They are caught as if they are specimens for observation and study yet they also engage with the history of painting, recalling both religious icon painting and abstract colour field painting. When seen in reproduction or at a distance, his paintings appear to have more in common with the history of botanical or zoological painting. As we approach them in real space, the illusionism

slips away to reveal a hauntingly beautiful painterly surface. It reveals itself as a range of fictions, not least with regard to man's interventions regarding the breeding of these animals which is bound both to the power of market forces and distorted notions of aesthetics.

It is against the context of Fairnington's bulls that Patricia Piccinini's *Sphinx* (2012) carries additional poignancy. Piccinini transports us to a not so distant future age where genetic experimentation and scientific developments have resulted in the creation of other-worldly hybrid creatures. Her sculptures appear scarily convincing, created as they are from fibreglass, silicone, human hair and clothing. *Sphinx* is clearly a creature designed for procreation, its sphinx-like form revealing references to both male and female reproductive genitalia. The organ-like form that rests within the crevices of what might be a face, give a sense of fragility and vulnerability to the work. The

sphinx of course is a hybrid creature familiar to mythology and legends and is commonly represented with the body of a lion and the head of a human. Piccinini has evolved the traditional sphinx into a 21st century incarnation which implicates mankind and his intent on the control and manipulation of nature.

Piccinini's work holds up a mirror to the future and what it might hold. She also reminds us of our responsibility for all living creatures that we bring into the world and challenges our ability to accept those that might be different.

In many ways, the works of Patricia Piccinini and Olly & Suzi could not appear more different but each share a respect for nature and the natural world and encourage a sense of responsibility with regard to the future.

The paintings and drawings of partnership Olly & Suzi are frequently created in the natural environment of the animals they observe. Such a practice brings its own challenges. Their subjects might be dangerous, they may move swiftly or be threatened by human presence. Their habitats might be inhospitable. They often need to act quickly, to work together in perfect harmony to execute a drawing in a matter of seconds. In many works, direct evidence of the animal's presence is apparent through bite marks,

footprints or smatterings of blood. Through their work, they seek to evoke a powerful experience of being close to an animal within its natural habitat and re-affirm our own, often humbling relationship to nature.

For *The Nature of the Beast*, Olly & Suzi are represented by an installation bringing together drawings and paintings produced over a four year period of research into wild dogs in East Africa. The pair have become increasingly fascinated in these now highly endangered species. Wild dogs are apex predators. Their strength is in their numbers as they operate in packs, working together and supporting each other to maximise their efficiency as hunters. They are highly intelligent and community-focused creatures who should command our respect and appreciation but instead, they hover on the brink of extinction.

In an age of computer technology where we can connect with the virtual world within seconds, there is something both nostalgic and comforting about Olly & Suzi's primary research and their direct connection with the animal world. These paintings and drawings are part of a wider performance that involves research, meticulous planning and sheer courage and curiosity to encounter the world at first hand and to share their experiences with us, the viewer, not as documentary evidence, but as a much more complex experience of their encounters with nature.

Fantasy and imagination lie at the heart of Polly Morgan's sculptures. Drawing on the language of taxidermy tableaux found in museums, Morgan creates fantastic scenarios which, as with Piccinini, appear compelling and persuasive, yet her works present almost impossible encounters and relationships. *Hide and Fight* (2012) is probably one of her most ambitious works to date in which she has used her skills in taxidermy to re-vitalise a dead stag. Even in death, his presence is majestic. Looking more closely at the creature, we can observe that his stomach is ripped open, revealing a large family of nesting bats seeking sanctuary inside. Meanwhile, tiny goldcrests search for ticks in the animal's fur. Morgan reminds us of the uncompromising cycle of life, the complex relationship between life and death in nature and ways in which they consistently sustain each other.

Morgan was commissioned to make a brand new work for *The Nature of the Beast. Myocardial Infarction* (2013) presents a group of love birds ripping apart a human heart like vultures, literally evoking a heart attack. Morgan is cleverly playing with our associations and expectations of certain creatures. Love birds are regarded as sweet and beguiling and are commonly kept caged in pairs, fuelling our need for sentiment. They can in fact be aggressive creatures and have been known to peck their partners to death. The heart is commonly associated with love and

here Morgan's love birds literally tear apart the organ associated with emotion and sentiment.

Like Polly Morgan, Tessa Farmer captures the beauty, complexity and cruelty of nature and she also draws upon the language of the taxidermy tableaux found in museums fused with the fantasy and darkness of fairy tales. Her materials are drawn from the natural world and include animal and insect carcasses, plant roots and other found natural materials. Farmer's creations are frequently populated by demonic fairies, constructed from roots and insect wings, mercilessly executing acts of mischief and torture on their victims. Her works are sinister yet playful as she delights in the detail, the violence and the humour of her theatrical installations. For *The Nature of the Beast*, Farmer was commissioned to create a brand new installation, her largest and most ambitious to date. The installation presents a complex battle involving a python, crabs, flying skull ships, ants, beetles, butterflies and bees as well as the ever-present fairies.

Insects are also the subject of Mat Collishaw's *Insecticides* series (2006 – ongoing). In the larger works, butterflies become the exclusive subject matter. They are powerful symbols of beauty, fragility and transformation and are frequently used as metaphors in art, literature and culture. Here, the insects are scaled up and set against an inky