



REVOLUTION
ANA TORFS'
TRIAL ANATOMY

FLESH
SKIN, BODY, TEXT:
MARY BETH HEFFERNAN

BLINDNESS
JOÃO LOURO'S
PARADOXICAL PLAY

SHADOW
PROJECTING
DISPLACEMENT

CRYPTOZOOLOGY: OUT OF TIME PLACE SCALE

LEWISTON, MAINE AND KANSAS CITY

Cryptozoology consists of "damned" knowledge, "inexplicable facts and empirical fragments that are disappeared by 'hard science'"—or so posits Chris Thompson in his catalogue essay. Indeed, cryptozoology is first and foremost the hunt for Bigfoot, Mothman, Skunk Apes, the Beast of Bray Road, and the Mongolian Death Worm, denizens of a shadow world that may or may not exist. Its residuum of evidence includes pink tentacles in liquid-filled jars, shaky, hand-held videos, inexplicable eyewitness drawings, and an unknown anthropoid's petrified droppings that could be taken for abstract sculptures. It is also a field of research where folklore and pop culture mix with artifice and nature to produce a *modus operandi* so taxonomically anomalous that it brings to mind Jorge Luis Borges' fantastic Chinese Encyclopedia.

Seizing on cryptozoology's taxonomical equivocation, curators Mark Bessire and Raechel Smith have produced an exhibition that contributes to the practice of institutional critique, while paying homage to David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. Like Wilson's cabinet of wonders, *Cryptozoology: Out of Time Place Scale* is engaging for its artifacts and for the way it delicately unravels the classificatory norms of natural science, and of the art gallery. The exhibition was appropriately launched at the Bates College Museum of Art in Lewiston, Maine (June 24—October 8, 2006), due north of Lovecraft's crumbling Arkham, deep in the woods that inspire Stephen King's macabre imagination. It was then transported to the HSR Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute (October 28—December 30, 2006).

Cryptozoology: Out of Time Place Scale is precisely installed. Nothing is crowded, sight lines are clear, lighting is exact, at times even understated. Its strangeness comes about gradually. Upstairs, Sean Foley's painterly project and Mark Dion's installation share space with bizarre taxidermed animals made from road kill. Sarina Brewer's uncanny updating of P.T. Barnum's *Foetus Mermaid* out of found animal parts is one of the most memorable attractions of the exhibition. Brewer is a member of the Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermists (MART), which includes circus sideshow performers, trained visual artists, and amateur taxidermists. Marc Swenson's nearby *Killing Moon*, 2001–2006, a comically eerie self-portrait as a bisexed Yeti, is also striking. Brazilian artist Walmar Comba's fantastic anatomical charts are equally arresting. His four canvases make up *Project Unheimlich*, 2004–2005, which depicts legendary Brazilian fauna that hybridize human with inléster, dog, jaguar and seal.

If photographic evidence is important to most scientific fieldwork, it is essential for cryptozoology. A vague blur behind dark woodland foliage becomes proof, for some, that a cryptid was present. For others, it is another

symptom of the unraveling of enlightenment reason. For those who appreciate the spelt of this exhibition, such indirect evidence offers verification that fantasy and wonder have survived the numbing hegemony of a seemingly rational consciousness industry. Dating back to the late 1980s, John Fortcuberta and Peter Formiguera's *Fauna* series includes aged photographs purportedly showing a natural history tableau wherein fragmented evidence of a flying monkey species is being painstakingly reassembled. Rosamond Purcell also uses photographic documentation to catalog medical renderings of monsters. Her bestiary ultimately traces the radical shifts in popular and scientific perception over the ages. Photo-based evidence also underpins Jill Miller's *Wailing for Bigfoot: 51 Days in the Forest*, 2006, which documents the ledgers of the hunt by training a camera on Northern California's Bigfoot Country. Initially a real-time, 24/7 satellite broadcast of the unchanging landscape over the fifty-one-day duration of an exhibition, the piece is here represented by recorded footage, achieving a Zen-like monotony worthy of Michael Snow's canonical work, *Le Hégion Constat*, 1971.

Off the Grid, 2003–2005, similarly takes place in a forest. It also involves a series of tableaux whose genealogy can be traced to the 1970s shamanistic goddess art of Betsy Deamon and Mary Beth Edston as Ellen Lesperance and Jeannine Olson document a performance of a female Sasquatch who is befriended by a woman escaping civilization. Meanwhile, Vik Muniz resurrects the best-known cryptid photograph—Robert Kenneth Wilson's grainy Loch Ness Monster image—by way of his signature, syrupy print technique, heightening the irony of the iconic image, now known to be a forgery.

Photography's indexical representational power also underlies the work of Rachel Berwick and Alexis Rockman. Berwick's resin sculpture replicates the failed cloning of the extinct Thylacine from frozen tissue samples in 1999. The Thylacine, a marsupial predator also known as the Tasmanian Tiger, ranged in and around Australia. Bessire and Smith use this vanished animal's spectral presence as a recurring motif throughout the exhibition. The creature reappears in Rockman's bookwork, *Carnivorous Nights: On The Trail of Tasmanian Tiger*, 2005, which chronicles his doomed expedition to locate a living Tasmanian Tiger.

The speckled, black and white film footage of the last known Tasmanian Tiger taken in the 1920s anchors one end of the Bates College Museum's lower gallery, a smaller and somewhat cave-like space. Two installations consisting primarily of traditional museum vitrines occupy the other end. One glass cabinet holds the work of Jeffrey Vallance, a reliquary filled with drawings, odd souvenirs, and taxidermed animals that simultaneously pays tribute to the extinct Tasmanian Devil and to the

"Widman." While some anthropologists take this beast to be a prototype for both Yeti and Bigfoot, Vallance also considers it a forerunner for Santa Claus. A maquette of the Fabre Museum of Cryptozoology—the work of Loren Coleman, the leading cryptozoologist in the U.S.—sits next to Vallance's mischievous display. Trained in both zoology and anthropology, Coleman's projected museum comes closest to a genuine cabinet of wonders. It is crowded with his collection of evidence brought back from Yeti expeditions to Nepal, including casts of the creature's footprint, hair samples, even a purported scalp. There are also newspaper clippings, maps, and a scale model of an allegedly modern-day pterosaur cast in plaster. Finally, there are artworks depicting encounters with various cryptids, drawn in the compelling fashion of the amateur by various eyewitnesses, including an improved serial killer claiming to have encountered Sasquatch while hiding out in the woods. Even Jamie Wyeth shows up here. Credited for the television series *Kingdom Hospital* based on a screenplay by Stephen King, his illustration showing a monstrous arseater appears here as a copy amongst the forensic evidence that Coleman has collected.

Cryptozoology: Out of Time Place Scale is certainly not the art world's first foray into natural history, and the realm of human-animal hybrids. Just last year, Nato Thompson curated *Becoming Animal* an exhibition that explicitly sought to explore the unstable border between homo sapiens and the rest of nature, for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Curiously, it is often women artists—including Becky Hawland, Christy Rupp, Kiki Smith, Jackie Stryzinski, Kathy High, Natalie Jeremijenko, and the tragically short-lived Paulette Nenner—who have produced the most focused bodies of work on the relationship between beasts and humans. *Cryptozoology: Out of Time Place Scale* sets out on a similar path, and then diverges. This departure only becomes fully apparent in the concluding section, with Vallance and especially Coleman. Here, Bessire and Smith intentionally reference institutional critique's 1970s display strategies, using archaic, nineteenth-century display fixtures set against the sterility of the white cube. This intentionally retrograde move serves up a playful, yet cautionary caveat about the current dialogue between art and science, insider and outsider art. The distance between margin and center is disappearing. The weight of excluded theories and practices presses down upon mainstream institutions like dark matter. Ultimately, *Cryptozoology: Out of Time Place Scale* illuminates an imminent danger: to lose the critical sting of marginalia as it infiltrates the center. In other words, how will we keep the damned from simply becoming the new order of things?

—Gregory Sholette