

26 October – 26 November 2011
Dunedin's Cabinet of Curiosities

Exhibition Preview: Tuesday 25 October 5.30pm



Unicorn Skeleton, Dan Roberts, 60cm x 40cm

featuring:

Craig Freeborn

Dan Roberts

Mariya Semenova

Anne-Mieke Ytsma

curated by Blue Oyster curatorial intern Suzanne Claessen



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Tuesday to Friday 11am-5pm
Saturday 12pm-3pm



“Let me tell you about my story,” a dark voice whispers, blowing a foetid stench of rotten carcasses into the wind. Only a select few know about this particular history of Dunedin.

On various places in the Dunedin hills, obscure events have taken place in the past. I have taken notice of them all. It was against my will. Always was I safe in my cave, until a human community decided to interrupt my solitude and settle down there. Their rituals, smells and strange noises made me shiver. I saw how they observed me eagerly. I had to escape.

I ran and ran, until I stumbled upon a nature worshipping, religious sect deep in the forest. I was starving. They must have smelled my anxiety, yet they invited me to join them in their sacraments of honouring the moss, flowers, branches and wandering spirits. What else could I do but rip them to pieces and leave their exposed flesh to ripen in adjustment to my taste?

Soon I noticed my strength began to fade. The pagan souls had left me empty and unfulfilled. I had to start a journey in search of more fortifying sustenance. It was near Signal Hill that I found another human settlement. These people were different. Although they lived in a completely enclosed environment, they had high standards of craft and art. They were especially proud of their jewellery. Hands covered in giant rings, an indulgence of necklaces around their necks. Sincerely, I wanted to keep their civilized culture untouched. I only needed their iron...yet, as soon as they smelt my presence they fled, leaving all their belongings behind in chaos.

It was all going well for me. That was, until the scientists came. I saw them arrive on an exploration ship, a blue, red, and white flag waving out. As soon as they spotted me, they tried to lure me with an untouched virgin, as if I were a unicorn. This would have been a vain attempt, were it not that Fate decided that this particular virgin had just had her first, irresistible, menstruation...

They captured me, they killed me and put me on display. The only joy that satisfies my wandering spirit now is the fact that my true nature will be a mystery to them, forever.

‘Dunedin’s Cabinet of Curiosities’ is a show that combines the historical phenomenon of *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* with contemporary critical exhibition(-practice) values.

In displaying objects scientifically accompanied by elaborate descriptive labels, this Cabinet of Curiosities follows tradition. The *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* that date back to the 17th and 18th centuries in Prussia can be seen as the predecessors of museums and galleries. These ‘rooms of art and wonder’ were often personal collections in big palaces; an attempt to create microcosms through a variety of objects. From natural history (skulls, reptiles, feathers, shells, monstrosities), to artefacts from what were considered primitive or exotic cultures, to contemporary (scientific) inventions and antiquities. These collections were an attempt to understand, study and collect everything that was present in the world. Often there was an immediate relation between art and science: the two disciplines were not strictly separated from each other as they are today. Objects could capture the imagination or enhance myths while simultaneously serving as scientific material.

Contemporary exhibitions always represent ideologies.¹ One tactic to make these ideologies explicit is through writing about them. This writing can be seen as a politicized attempt to consider works of art as interrelated rather than as individual entities.² In this Cabinet of Curiosities, these ideas are taken to an extreme. By combining the scientific method with a narrative and an experimental display to create a particular Myth, the exhibition brings attention to the idea that in more than a few cases the imagination has taken over in such a way as to openly break down the scientific aspects, while constructing a story.

The cave painting illustrates the fantastical possibility of an unusual encounter with an artistic object in an environment that people in the past have considered uncivilized. The jewels bare traces of a rich cultural identity. The absence of their lived origins implies an historical tragedy. The notion of longing for the existence of mythical creatures in our world is made explicit by the Unicorn skeleton, whose true nature remains unidentified. Finally, the photography serves as a form of documentation of the unusual, while it simultaneously becomes clear that there are specific ideas, wishes and values behind the photos in their framed modes of display.

The elements of fantasy and treasure simultaneously point towards the unreliable nature of the narrative. It allows a space for deconstruction and opens up the possibility to pose critical questions: what, in fact, is a Cabinet of Curiosities: is it a museum? A gallery? A domestic space? A scientific archive? Or is it a personal obsession? In order to enter the Cabinet, the viewer has to enter the gallery first. One has to shift through various worlds that are presented from macro to meso to micro scale - the outside world, the gallery, the cabinet, the imagination - and explore how they all relate to each other. Thereby the viewer is not only challenged to distinguish between elements *known* and elements *imagined*, but also to question the role of the Cabinet in a contemporary art gallery (as opposed to its original function), as well as the significance of both phenomena in society.

By peeling off all of these layers, we seem to reach a core. Part by part it becomes apparent how humankind has always tried to introduce an order in the world and universe; how we attempt to capture and make sense of our large environment as much as possible; trying to give meaning to all existence.

- Suzanne Claessen

1. Paul O’Neill, ‘The Curatorial Turn: From Practice To Discourse’ In J. Rugg and M. Sedgwick, *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Intellect Books, Bristol, 2007, p.14

2. Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne, 1996 in Paul O’Neill, ‘The Curatorial Turn: From Practice To Discourse’ In J. Rugg and M. Sedgwick (eds), *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Intellect Books, Bristol, 2007, p.15