

Anne Zahalka - *Wild Life*, 2007

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 1 February 2007

'The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times [...] Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you.' J.D.Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Anne Zahalka's exhibition, *Wild Life*, presents ten high-gloss photographs featuring actual dioramas from the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Part readymade, and also a site for manipulation and intervention, Zahalka's images of these famous dioramas bring into question the display practices of museums and the position of authority they reinforce with regard to knowledge, classification and collection. The world outside the museum has changed too however, with ready access to information and ease of travel. Why visit a museum when we can research via internet, watch re-enactments of dinosaur stampedes on TV, or pay for a spot on an eco-tour?

Wild Life marks a shift in the artist's recent project, exploring human leisure pursuits and the ambivalent relationship that exists between the natural world and its artificial depictions, the real and the copy. Beginning with the 2004 series, *Natural Wonders*, Zahalka investigated the concept that tourists experience the natural world as a spectacle, as if nature is a performing thing that we can visit like an attraction – from specially built lookouts, to the reassurance of a guard rail, a reproduction in theme parks. Zahalka's pseudo-objective stance critically examines how we seek out new experiences, while keeping the wild, or the uncontrollable real, at arms length.

You can't get much more contrived than the museological diorama, the three-dimensional scenes of figures, taxidermied wildlife or other objects arranged in a naturalistic setting against a painted background. While they are designed to teach us about species through the presentation of an example in context, they often teach us a lot about how institutions interpret their role, responsibilities and interpretation of what audiences want.

The diorama framework encourages a belief in the authority of the museum's knowledge, its selection, and theatrical simulation of the specially contrived habitat, the animal or bird posed just so to conjure delight, wonder, curiosity, excitement. Museum dioramas can reinforce our conceptions, like, 'lions are the kings of the jungle' for example. And because ideas like these are set-up in serious museums, the images are like a proof of themselves, and we believe things more (or perhaps do not question it as much as we could).

Science is illustrated by tapping into mythic stories that value-add to an exhibit – of the 'Dr Livingstone, I presume'-type imaginings of 'deepest, darkest Africa', or the Indiana Jones style artifact hunter. The beautiful and compelling scenes are disrupted by the ethical, moral and ecological issues that Zahalka provokes. *Jack Rabbit*, with its links to plague-like profligacy cocks its head in one image, and turns its big ears in your direction. A 'traditional' Japanese woman surveys a snow-capped Fuji whilst a pheasant fossicks in the leaf litter. Titled *Exotic Birds*, 2006 we see how racism can be couched in the most sumptuous of guises.

Zahalka also raises a number of questions in relation to the representation of place, primitive and indigenous cultures and the study of wildlife within the scientific/anthropological realm of natural history. Of *Birds of Australia*, 2006 she writes that it, "...presents a living aboriginal man, performer Gnarnayarrahe Inmurry Waitairie pictured within a constructed Australian bush scene. He strikes a bird-like pose and performs his cultural identity like an object on display within this natural habitat diorama. The powerful presence of Gnarnayarrahe and his relationship to the land in this image makes a strong claim for his cultural place albeit within the constructed habitat of the museum."

Actual dioramas allow some level of investigation by the viewer, in that we can move around and see the three-dimensional set from different angles. Zahalka's current exhibition of photographs does not allow you to do this as easily. With the technical access to digital manipulation, the lines between what is really there and what an artist decides to include or erase makes the situation less simple. In *Wild Life*, we see that prints are able to equalize materials like fur, silk, ochre and grass – it all becomes just pigment on paper in the end – and the ability to seamlessly produce a new scenic 'record' allows Zahalka to slip complex issues into the flattened plane, where it is not so easy to distinguish where painted backdrops end and pictorial planes begin.

Zahalka intervenes in the 'naturalism' of the museum settings by the insertion of objects that while entirely plausible to current experiences of the real natural world (eg. litter, tourists, hunters, transport systems etc), brings home the fact that these things have no place within the museum presentation of a natural ideal. They are like red herrings in the natural world – and yet these scenes are increasingly just what we encounter, out there in nature. The 'contemporary' elements hijack an easy and unproblematic view of nature as it is seen behind the museum glass.

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