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Aviary of the Reverend William J. Long

Shae Lewis Warnick

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Aviary of the Reverend William J. Long

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Humans perceive the natural world in a subjective and sensual way, yet over time science has turned the study of nature into a progressively objective pursuit. The Aviary of the Reverend William J. Long is an installation of anthropomorphic bird dolls that examines the roles of science and sentiment in our interactions with the natural world.

Keywords: science, nature, birds, painting, art

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Introduction

For most of us, a repetitive, immersive—or synchronous—relationship with nature is a thing of the past. We no longer walk from place to place, grow our own food, build our own houses, or hang laundry on a line. Nature fits into our day the way we want, like ordering lunch—heavy on the sunsets and singing birds, light on the bugs and weeds.

But modern conveniences aren't the only cause of this disconnect. I believe there are also perceptions that are distancing people from nature, and with this show I approach these dialogues as a curious layperson, trying to find a balance between science and sentiment, believing that a thoughtful consideration of both sides will engender a more tempered, truthful, and inviting outlook on the natural world.

Some History of Natural History

“The Hydra: with eel-like body, two feet, seven necks and as many heads...” is considered by most people a “real animal species but wrongly so.”¹ Linnaeus included this entry of the Hydra in *Systema Naturae*, the seminal work where he outlined the hierarchal classification of the natural world. *Systema Naturae* denounces several more creatures in this fashion, including unicorns, vegetable lambs, barnacle geese, and... *cough... pelicans, which Linnaeus thought reflected “the over-fervent imaginations of New World explorers.”²

Before Linnaeus, the world was a mystical place with mermaids, birds that floated without wings, and little lambs that grew on the tips of tree branches. In a sense, it was an age of “anything might be true.” Linnaeus worked hard to tighten the screws on the study of nature. Fanciful creatures were demystified, and naming systems were established that would expunge folk taxonomies. While the world seemed to explode with truth, limits were put on the imagination.

Whether our origins date back to pre-Neanderthals or Adam and Eve, organizing the natural world has been one of mankind’s initial priorities. The earliest cave paintings are of living creatures—bison, horses, peacocks, armadillos—and before Eve was ever formed, God “formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air”³ and brought them to Adam to be named.⁴

Historically, cultures organized their world using their umwelt—or their uniquely human perceptions⁵—but over time, taxonomy transitioned from these subjective realms into more objective and conceptual ones. As our classification of the world becomes progressively complex, New York Time’s journalist Carol Yoon proposes that science is getting in the way of its mission, which is to help us understand the world around us.⁶

Biologist Robin Kimmerer says there are emotional gaps that “cold facts and numbers leave behind.”⁷ The show *Aviary* of the Reverend William J. Long attempts to fill these gaps with imagination and inwardness, while reflecting on perceptual solecisms that drove science to objectivity.

“Aviary of the Reverend William J. Long”

Layout

Entering the gallery, the viewer is met with an unbroken line of anthropomorphic bird dolls, all facing the same direction and resting on a shallow ledge. Approximately 42 feet long on both sides and 12 feet wide, the space took 650+ birds to fully occupy. The dolls in the show come from 160 hand-painted parent dolls that were duplicated on printed fabric four times and laboriously cut, sewn, and stuffed. As the viewer walks through the space, small speakers hidden within the ranks play phonetic bird sounds at different but overlapping intervals.

For this show, I chose to present common birds in a linear way that goes against the modern grain of the experiential kick.⁸ The minimalistic display doesn't lead the viewer, who is free to read the installation as a commentary on distortion and misinterpretation, or whimsy and imagination.

Common Birds

Research shows that humans have a weird limit to the number of species they can recall, capping off at about 500.⁹ For most American children the first animals that roll off the tongue won't be local taxa, but elephants, giraffes, zebras, other zoo animals or even Pokemon species. In the 1940's and 50s, schools switched their focus from natural history to microbiology, and the focus from local conservation transitioned to national conservation.¹⁰ In the 1980s, scientists announced that the natural world was “going directly to hell in a hand basket.”¹¹ There was a mass extinction and the majority of people didn't even notice. In fact, says environmentalist writer Carol Yoon, the pronouncement was met with the equivalent of a “vast, collective yawn.”¹² I don't doubt there is a connection between the collective yawn and our transition away from natural history and local conservation. The greatest way to reconnect with nature is to

reconnect with the small-scale ecosystems in our yards and neighborhoods, and birds are perhaps the most noticeable and easily understood indicator species for those ecosystems. Consequently, most of the birds in my show are ones that people would see in their backyards and nearby nature areas—not species that would feature in the “sexy”¹³ nature documentaries that are Beyonce-ing nature, creating impossible standards that real nature can’t compete with.

Dolls

Growing up in Western New York, my family shared the streets with Amish buggies and rode the “Amish school bus” (a horse named Teddy). Our house was filled with rag rugs and lanterns, and we played with primitive Amish toys. The toys themselves were usually simple silhouettes with more detailed figures painted over the top, and when I made my first bird doll, I based it on these primitive forms.

The primitive is about preserving the early stage in the evolutionary development of something.¹⁴ Folk means relating it to the traditional culture of a community,¹⁵ and in the case of my project, the subjective tendencies of the whole human community before science educates our perceptions. I wanted to create birds that reflect their scientific names but at the same time seem to allude to their colloquial ones—names that would fit the protagonists of old, forgotten folktales: Hell Diver, Whiskey Jack, Old Squaw, Devil Downhead, Coffin-carrier, Corn Thieves. As a result, my dolls are a mix of scientific accuracy and folk-like whimsy.

In this sense, there’s an importance to the craft-like quality of the dolls. Clement Greenberg wouldn’t like them, probably condemning them as “derivative” and not original or autonomous.¹⁶ Instead, the dolls have a cultural feel that seems in line with the idea of folk taxonomies that are “collective representations rather than that of an individual”¹⁷—emphasizing that human perceptions have likely been evolutionarily honed for good reasons.

For millennia, children have used dolls as empathy test dummies for their interactions with real humans.¹⁸ I like the playful idea that my bird dolls were created to fulfill a similar function, to be empathy test dummies for our interactions with nature. But the decision to make the birds into dolls wasn't completely based on positive concepts. Depicting the birds as toys represents the positive and negative ways we sequester nature into our daily lives and how anthropomorphism creates a world of playthings.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism—attributing human characteristics to non-human things—was a driving concept for this show, and I introduce the concept into the space in several ways. The birds are standing upright, as though their spines are aligned vertically over their legs and hip bones, a uniquely human posture.¹⁹ The “bird songs” are not songs at all but human speech. Dolls are inherently anthropomorphized objects, and waiting in an orderly line seems uniquely human.

Anthropomorphism is an “innate tendency of human psychology,” and most cultures have anthropomorphized animals in fable and storytelling since ancient times.²⁰ In his essay “The Coyote is Us”, Dan Flores proposes that the purpose of these stories is to “hold up for scrutiny” what we call “human nature.”²¹ In this exhibition, I’m not only using dolls as avatars to scrutinize how humans interact with their environment, but I’m also using the dolls to question the very practice of anthropomorphism. Essentially, is there something vital and ancestral about this subjective way of connecting with the world? Or does it do more harm than good?

At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a surge in public interest in nature. Naturalists like John Muir were starting the first conservation clubs. Yellowstone, the first national park, was created in 1872, and a new type of literature emerged where nature and

animals were seen in a sympathetic, anthropomorphic light.²² Think *Black Beauty*, *The Jungle Book*, *White Fang*, and William J. Long's *School of the Woods*. The most famous naturalist of the time, John Burroughs, denounced this type of literature as yellow journalism, saying the authors imbued animals with impossible human characteristics. A six-year debate ensued. The *New York Times* dubbed it the "War of the Naturalists," and it only ended when Teddy Roosevelt took time from presidential office to write his own article condemning the authors as "nature fakers."²³

The seeds for this show were planted while I was reading *School of the Woods* and William Long's accounts of mother animals affectionately teaching their children. As I read, I found myself wishing it were true, wishing other living creatures shared our emotions. If our backyards were full of thinking, feeling, conscious creatures, wouldn't we lord over them a little differently? Research has shown that "the degree to which individuals perceive minds in other animals predicts the moral concern afforded to them."²⁴ So then I wondered, if the biggest underlying problem with the environment is that we're disconnected and don't care, does the truth matter that much? Maybe we could afford to unlearn what we've learned and get back to "anything might be true." Getting back to interpreting the world for ourselves, in a way that resonates, and not delegating the knowing to people who "know best." Connecting ourselves to nature in whatever way we can.

However, it was the very dangers of wishful fiction that drove science to this age of staunch empiricism. Take a relatively benign example, the discontinued idea of a Great Chain of Being in which "all life on earth, from the tiniest microorganism to God, is linked in a continuous chain."²⁵ The idea was a palatial one, but it gave the old heave-ho to many important truths, like extinction.²⁶ Thomas Jefferson, a firm believer in the Great Chain of Being, was

confident that Lewis and Clark would cross the Missouri River and find woolly mammoths grazing on distant plains.²⁷ The dodo bird had been gone for hundreds of years before its extinction was finally acknowledged in the early nineteenth-century.²⁸ You can imagine how ideas like these affected conservation.

Practices like anthropomorphism lead us to judge creatures in a warped way. The more we humanize something (seeing intent instead of instinct), the more that something's actions come under moral scrutiny. When I learned that white tailed deer will eat baby birds from their nests, I was horrified. Deer are supposed to be humane, wholesome...and vegan. Weirdly, I felt less haunted by my childhood memory of a deer I watched drown in a lake. All animals are wild and strange, but we've turned them into toys and playthings, part of a game. The rules are senseless and ever changing. How would our "moral concern" for deer change if they ate our house pets when we put them outside? What if a tiger had a face like a blobfish? What if spiders could sing pretty songs like a bird?

To highlight the manipulated status of nature, I decided to forego displaying hand-painted bird dolls and instead displayed hundreds of reproductions. These reproductions hint at the plaything-status and the commodification of nature. Like Carol Yoon says, nature is full of Tony Tigers and Geiko geckoes.²⁹ We no longer see killer whales as the giant, wet hunter that they are, but as the cute "pandas of the sea."³⁰ The natural world isn't a holistic Gaian web or a Great Chain of Being where everything exists in harmony and in its place (the place we put it). Nature is what Timothy Morton calls a "network of strange strangeness" in which we have to be "consciously committed to the other."³¹

A Dialectical Dilemma

My show reflects the difficulty in delineating uniquely human characteristics. Standing in a crowded line humanizes the birds, but the same crowded line would dehumanize humans. In fact, crowds take on animalistic tendencies. On the other hand, the single line creates equality and deletes dehumanizing hierarchies, but there's always the risk that a quest for equality will actually delete unique identity. In the show, rare species are peppered within the common majority. There is equality, but also a loss of sovereignty, with the birds becoming what Walker Percy calls mere "specimens of a species," and therefore, "nugatory."³²

The truth is, we've never been sure what other animals really are, what their consciousness is, and to understand them we've often tried to divorce them completely from personhood or we've tried to anthropomorphize them completely. By anthropomorphizing other beings, we encounter the dilemma of where to draw the line of sentience. What does it even mean to be human? What is animal? If animals are like humans, how are humans like animals? It's a dialectical dilemma. But like Jack London said to John Burroughs, by denying these characteristics in other animals, we may be kicking the evolutionary ladder out from under our own legs.³³

Bird Songs

When you walk down the line of dolls, you pick up the faint sounds of words that mimic bird songs. The sounds emanate from different hidden speakers and gently overlap one another to create a soft, quirky rendition of a bird chorus, one in which the birds are talking. At the heart of it, the voices help drive home the idea of anthropomorphism and the inescapability of filtering the world through our human perceptions. But the songs also allude to the loss of our immersive relationship with nature.

The songs playing are vocalizations of real phonetic devices used by birders. I've always been interested in these devices. They're included in most field guides, but unless you've heard the real song, they tend to be unhelpful. What exactly is a dry ctuk? And what would a sharp, chattery zzzzzzz-hic sound like? Other songs are mnemonic devices that are easy to memorize but difficult to imagine in a natural setting: if I see you, I will seize you, and I'll squeeze you till you SQUIRT! These devices present real information but must be unlocked with prior information and experience.

For all of my projects, I've been interested in finding ways to recreate my own encounters with nature without giving them away, and in the case of the phonetic bird songs, that encounter was a lavish dawn chorus I heard on April 30th, 2017. For me, the art mostly lies in experiencing that chorus and having the knowledge necessary to identify birds by ear—not really something that can be shared. So in a way, the phonetic chorus is like my postcard to the viewer saying “wish you were here.”

Context

The German naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt was second only to Napoleon as the most famous man of his age. Coming on the scene 70 years after Linnaeus, Humboldt felt the cold trend of science. In 1800, he was the first to predict human-induced climate change and sensed the beginning of a disconnect between man and nature. At a time “when other scientists were searching for universal laws,” Humboldt firmly believed in the importance of combining “nature and art, facts and imagination...”³⁴ Another famous naturalist of the age, Ernst Haeckel, wrote that art was “one of the most important educational tools” in nurturing a love for nature, even insisting that it was “essential for the understanding of the universe...”³⁵

Today, ecological and environmental art are a thriving practice. Arguably, environmental art began with the cave paintings and includes the landscape tradition of the early modernists.³⁶ While environmental art has a history as long as human history, the ecological art movement began comparatively recently in the 1960s and 70s. According to art historian Dr. Barbara Matilsky, one of the main differences between ecological and environmental art is that eco art has innate, ethical underpinnings.³⁷

Eco art took off in the 60s with monumental land artists—like Robert Smithson—who changed the way art was exhibited and conceptualized.³⁸ By the early 80’s the genre was firmly established in the canon by Alan Sonfist’s book *Art in the Land*, and today, eco art is strongly rooted in contemporary art culture with many branches in numerous directions.³⁹

When it comes to placing my own work in the realms of eco art, there are certain conventions that seem to include my work—relation to social concerns, the artists connection with nature, consideration of rural and industrial landscapes, etc.—and others that exclude my work—emphasis on systems, activism, site-specificity, the use of natural materials, etc.

Consequently, I place my work under the looser, longer tradition of “environmental art”—which can incorporate any and all of these conventions.

Didactic Versus Phenomenological

My greatest inspiration has come from contemporary artists who deal in “ideas” about nature, and they vary on the spectrum of didactic to phenomenological. According to Allen Carlson, knowledge and the didactic are important if art is to have an active and useful part in ecological deliberations and decision making. Arnold Berleant doesn’t agree, insisting that pure feeling and the sublime are more important than knowledge in experiencing works about nature.⁴⁰

Though Kiki Smith bases much of her work on didactic research—about ancient Egypt, wunderkamers, and the effects of pesticides—the execution of them comes from a more personal, phenomenological place.⁴¹ Her work deals with ideas about the spiritual connection between humans and animals, symbolic associations with folklore, and subjects of personal significance.⁴² Viewing Smith’s delicately bizarre images and sculptures can illicit strong emotional connections without any prerequisite knowledge of ecology.

Mark Dion’s work has an undeniable didactic flavor. Some pieces, like the Mobile Gull Appreciation Unit, are candidly informational. On the other hand, his ordered displays of anthropological digs only appear informational. The viewer is unable to draw systematic conclusions, since there is no apparent logic to the ordering and Dion provides no written clues.⁴³ The displays lure people in with the promise of didactic information but leave them with no choice but to access the work phenomenologically.

As a person who could easily spend the day reading every plaque in a museum, I had some difficulty navigating how didactic to make this exhibit. I’ve always thought knowledge was

key to conservation, but when I started to delve into the effects of fact and fiction, I began to wonder which was more important to a healthy relationship with the land. Is fact really more important? Or is it fiction after all? With this in mind, I decided to include enough truth to direct people's thoughts to the real, concrete nature in their backyards, and enough whimsy to help them reimagine it.

Objectivity Versus Subjectivity

In Daniel Steegmann Mangrane's work *Phantom*, he recreates the Mata Atlântica rainforest with a virtual reality headset. As the viewer looks around, they soon realize that their body is deleted from the scene. They may be unsettled or even experience a sense of nausea.⁴⁴ The work echoes the tradition that scientific procedures omit "any traces of the subjective observer to make their depictions seem truthful and objective."⁴⁵ Like Mangrane, I question the efficacy of this objective relationship with nature. My show is based on real birds and their real songs, but the show could be seen as a nature experience once it passes through the human mind. This exemplifies the uncertainty I feel about our ability as subjective observers to ever come up with completely objective truths.

On the other hand, Mark Dion's sculpture "Classical Mind" questions human subjectivity. With this piece, Dion creates a staircase based on Aristotle's great chain of being where all things are arranged in hierarchy. Entities with the least amount of soul (inanimate objects) fill the bottom step, and the steps work their way up to entities with the most soul (the humans). Dion calls it a poisonous practice of Western civilization, creating justification for "all sorts of rankings and modes of oppression."⁴⁶ For this reason, I based my show on dolls to exemplify the ways our subjectivity leads us to manipulate and toy with the natural world.

Conclusion/Potential

After installing the show, I've had the chance to assess how well certain concepts actually carried through. The majority of viewers I interacted with had a positive response to the dolls and seemed to quickly pick up on the whimsical and sentimental side of the project. On the other hand, I think the simplified format didn't convey the negative aspects of anthropomorphism quite as effectively (ie the manipulated, commercialized, play-thing status of nature).

In order to convey the other side of the issue more clearly, I would like to develop the show with several more iterations. The dolls would remain as the core building blocks, but slight changes would make the negative meanings more prominent. For example, I could reintroduce hierarchy by basing an exhibition on the fabricated hierarchies of the birding world. The displays for this exhibition would be like toy store displays and would include commercial labels like "New!" and "Discount!" that represent the birds' tongue-in-cheek positions on the birder's hierarchy. Or to further emphasize the negative aspects of anthropomorphism, the viewers could label birds with profiling statements like "resents his mother," or "microwaves bologna." Supplemental components like a yearbook (with birds posing in front of laser backdrops) or a field guide (with misinformation) could also be interesting. I'd even like to put the birds up for sale. Their price tags and monetary value would be another way to reintroduce hierarchy, and labeling sold dolls with red stickers would highlight the commodification of nature.

Working on this exhibit has changed the way I approach art and my relationship with the natural world. I think art lies in the curation and weaving of facts into imagined narratives, and surprisingly, I've discovered that a healthy relationship with nature may rely on the same. As

artists, we have the opportunity to re-imagine our relationships with the living world, creating a critical impact on our future response to the environment.

Images

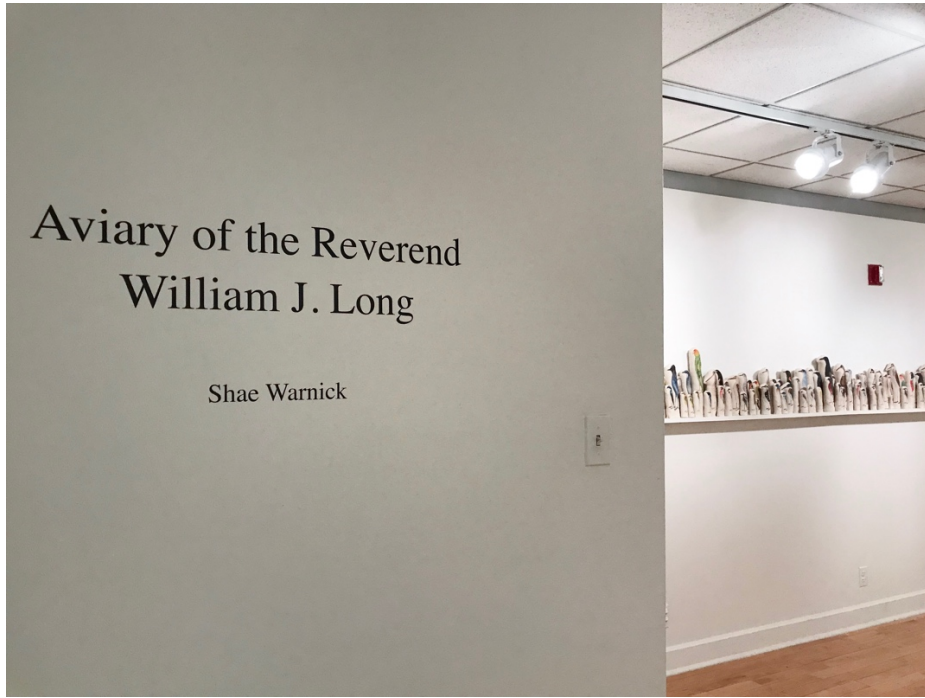


Figure 1 - Installation View



Figure 2 - Installation View



Figure 3 - Installation View



Figure 4 - Installation View



Figure 5 - Bird Dolls



Figure 6 - Bird Dolls

Notes

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