

Dead on Arrival

23 September – 5 November 2017

Dead on Arrival is not exclusively an exhibition of taxidermy but it contains elements of taxidermy so it's worth quantifying what contemporary taxidermy is and isn't.

The word comes from ancient Greek, *taxi* (to arrange) and *dermis* (skin). So taxidermy is the preservation of skin, fur or feathers with internal parts removed and replaced with foam, resins, wood, plaster or clay and of course glass eyes. Teeth, horns, hooves and beaks may be the real thing. Traditional taxidermy was, and sometimes still is, used to create natural history specimens or hunting trophies.

Contemporary taxidermy has become something quite different and includes a new genre sometimes called Rogue Taxidermy¹ - '*a genre of pop-surrealist art characterised by mixed-media sculptures containing traditional taxidermy materials used in an unconventional manner*'. '*Taxidermy is a mix of art, science, and a little alchemy*;² It is no longer about stuffing animals so we can see what they look like. Who needs that in an age of high definition film?



Using dead animals to make conceptual, fine art works has been most famously employed in recent years by Damien Hirst. Made in 1991, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of*

Someone Living provoked controversy and press coverage in equal

¹ Taxidermy Art – A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and how to do it yourself, Robert Marbury, 2014

² Stuffed Animals – a Modern Guide to Taxidermy, Divya Anantharaman & Katie Innamorato, 2016

measure. The shark has been exhibited in both the Tate Modern and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which had it on loan from 2007 – 2010. Many people, critics and audience alike, have derided the work but no-one can now argue with the shark's iconic status or Hirst's position in the contemporary art world. Unlike the works in *Dead on Arrival* the shark was neither ethically sourced nor properly preserved. The original shark had to be replaced when the liquid in the case became murky and an Australian fisherman was paid to catch a replacement.

Other twentieth century fine artists who have used taxidermy related techniques and materials include surrealists and postmodernists such as Joseph Cornell, Joan Miró, Robert Rauschenberg and Méret



Oppenheim. Just like Hirst's shark, many viewers could not comprehend how or why Oppenheim's fur cup and saucer constituted a work of art, but in 1946, The Museum of Modern Art (New York) acquired the work, the first by a female artist to enter its collection.

Object, Méret Oppenheim, 1936

In Greek mythology the Chimera is a fire breathing creature with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent. This particular Chimera (image right) was killed by Bellerophon mounted on Pegasus - another fantastical beast. This Chimera is on a red-figure Apulian plate, c. 350 – 340BC (Musée du Louvre) which proves



the point that we have always been fascinated by composite creatures with special or magical powers. And fantastic creatures have always been a subject for taxidermists, sometimes as a measure of imaginative skill and sometimes as deliberate fakes passed off as 'real' when our knowledge of natural history was not nearly as extensive as it is now. The authors of *Stuffed Animals* relate the story of The Fiji Mermaid, apparently a convincing creature, made from a combination of juvenile monkey and fish parts. The mermaid was widely exhibited by a number of different owners until it was destroyed by fire in the 1860s.

In addition to museum natural history exhibits, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the heyday of anthropomorphic taxidermy – kittens having a tea party, rabbits going to school and squirrels in a bar – were all made with minute attention to detail and absolutely no relationship to natural habitat. Tableaus of dead animals, anthropomorphic or realistically natural, gradually fell out of favour while media such as photography and film grew in sophistication and popularity.

Taxidermists, by the nature of their profession, are closely concerned with wildlife and the natural world so it is not surprising that many practitioners were in the vanguard of conservation and the growing awareness of ethical behaviour in relation to wildlife.



Famous 'amateur' taxidermists include Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882), who learned how to preserve the specimens he collected on his travels, and Theodore Roosevelt (1858 – 1919), the 26th President of the USA.

Image: Roosevelt's taxidermy kit

Roosevelt was a skilled hunter who donated many of his kills to the American Museum of Natural History. He personifies the curious and contradictory relationship between hunting and conservation in that he used his presidency to establish a number of national parks with a view to preserving wildlife and educating people about natural resources.

Attitudes to the practice of using feathers as fashion accessories were changed by the efforts of some dedicated campaigners. Harriet Lawrence Hemenway (1858 – 1960), an American socialite, was appalled by accounts of plume hunters who supplied the women's fashion industry with feathers. Harriet recruited hundreds of women to her cause, persuaded them to give up buying hats decorated with feathers, and brought about a much greater awareness of conservation which led to some significant legislation to protect birds and their migration routes. Other animal parts historically used as fashion accessories or ornaments include insect wings, tortoiseshell and of course ivory.



Beetle wing handbag c. 1890



The ten exhibitors in *Dead on Arrival* utilise diverse approaches and materials in their work. From Paul Biddle's photographs which consider man's rapacious relationship with the natural world, to the elegant grace of Silvy Weatherall's arrangements of bones, beaks and feathers, we are confronted with a rather unsettling array of works which pose awkward and sometimes metaphorical questions. What, for instance, is Janec Van Veen's work *Harbinger* (image left) a harbinger of? Janec's statement refers to possible future 'accidents'

with genetic manipulation as well as allusion to mankind's own peculiarities as a species. *Harbinger* is much more than a nonbinary, winged, pet-owning individual!

We realise that some exhibition visitors might find the use of animal parts disturbing but our exhibitors all subscribe to an ethical conduct code with regard to the materials they use. Devon Guild is pleased to be showing this thought-provoking exhibition and we hope our visitors enjoy it too.

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We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk & tour of a particular exhibition.