

GRADUATE SCHOOL REVIEW COMPETITION

A Review of *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing*

Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing, Turner Contemporary, Margate, May 25 - September 15, 2013; Norwich Castle Museum, September 28, 2013 - January 5, 2014; de Appel, Amsterdam, June - August 2014

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How to approach an exhibition like *Curiosity: Art and The Pleasures of Knowing*? There is no obvious narrative on offer here, no straight-forward explanation as to what that curious might entail. Instead, we are offered a catalogue of ostensibly unconnected artists and artefacts: Thomas Grünfeld's hybrid taxidermy creatures; pictographs by Leonardo Da Vinci; business cards related to the nuclear weapons industry. These sit alongside grainy black-and-white photographs of Loch Ness, eighteenth century anatomical figures and remarkably lifelike sea creatures made entirely from glass. It is a central thread of this Hayward Touring exhibition that the incongruence of such items often leads us to overlook their deeper commonalities. At the very least then this collection introduces a host of beguiling objects and artworks one would otherwise have to search far and wide to encounter.

It would be easy to suggest that *Curiosity* sits neatly between art and science, but, in fact, the exhibition dissolves such boundaries entirely, persistently conflating a positivist search for 'truth' and acts of wholesale fictionalisation. Some might see this as unfocused, but in the hands of curator Brian Dillon there is a

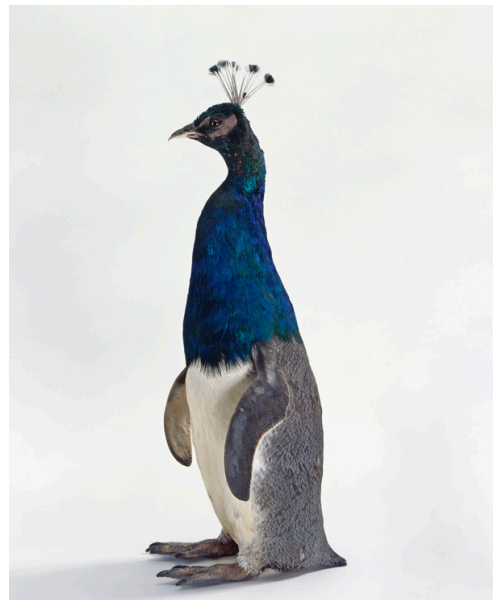


Fig. 1: *Animal Misfit* by Thomas Grünfeld.

purpose to be discerned, a precision among the apparently haphazard. In the process, the nebulous concept of curiosity is given form, with paintings, photographs, sculptures and soundscapes deployed to reveal the diverse means through which people have attempted to navigate the strangeness of the world.

Despite this roving spirit, there is at least one clear point of reference to help orient

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Fig. 2: Cabinet by John Evelyn.



Fig. 3: View of installation.


visitors: John Evelyn's cabinet of curiosities invites viewers to imagine the current exhibition as one vast *Wunderkammer*, a space in which oddities from nature, science, art and history might be juxtaposed in thought provoking ways. Crucially, the movement between these disparate fields is deftly handled here, with a lightness of touch to display and interpretation, which allows for the curious affinities between objects to emerge. This is drawn out by the work of Pablo Bronstein, whose specially commissioned illustration, *Museum Section*, reassembles items from *Curiosity* in a make-believe building designed around the very objects it houses. Bronstein's drawings also adorn the souvenir guide, an evocative little booklet, which, like the exhibition itself, does more to excite and intrigue than it does to explain.

Needless to say, many of the objects on display here provoke wonder (a gargantuan stuffed walrus first shot and mounted in the late nineteenth century stands out in this respect). Other works, less showy perhaps, nevertheless encapsulate the essence of the exhibition. *Words and Years*, by Toril Johannessen, charts the frequency with which certain terms have appeared in academic journals: 'greed' and 'desire' in *Genetics*; 'hope' and 'reality' in *Political Science*; 'miracles' in *Nature* and *Science*. The resulting diagrams are oddly poetic, distilling years of research into graphic representations that open up new questions on the motivations underlying scientific enquiry. Johannessen's deceptively simple method lets slip the complex layering of curiosity in the modern world, from science to art and back again. With great success, the exhibition as a whole strikes a similar path.

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