



Wendy Peart: ARK

September 3 - October 11, 2008

Art Gallery of Regina

Born Regina, SK

Resides Regina, SK

Education

1995 MFA Visual Art, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC

1993 BA Art History, University of Regina, Regina, SK

1991 BFA, University of Regina, Regina, SK

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2001 *"In Lantern Land"*, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, SK

"In formation", The Art Gallery of the South Okanagan, Penticton, BC

1998 *"Fabric"*, Rosemont Art Gallery, Regina, SK

1996 *"Busy Work"*, Neutral Ground, Regina, SK

1992 *"Who/What Made You?"*, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, SK

Selected Group Exhibitions

2007 Aneco Project, *"Rolling Composter"*, Public Art Project, City of Saskatoon, SK

"Turning the Tap", Royal Saskatchewan Museum, Regina, SK

"The Two Roads Join Here: Intersection", Mysteria Gallery, Regina, SK

2005 *"site reading"*, Faculty Show (University of Regina), MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, SK

"Wake Inure Nation", Neutral Ground, Regina, SK

2003-04 *"Biennial SCAM"*, Touring Exhibition, Estevan, Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, Swift Current, SK., Brandon MB, Medicine Hat, AB

2003 *"The Sacred Balance"*, Fifth Parallel Student Gallery, University of Regina, Regina, SK

2002 *"Relocation"*, Flatlands Artist Studio, Mary Cooper Gallery, Regina, SK

"Smaller", Neutral Ground, Regina SK

2001 *"Mapping the Body"*, Open Space Gallery, Victoria, BC

"In House", Flatlands Artist Studio, Mary Cooper Gallery, Regina, SK

2000 *"The Erotic Art Show"*, The Exchange, Regina, SK

"Out of the Studio", Rosemont Art Gallery, Regina, SK

1996 *"Ethni-City"*, Neutral Ground, Regina, SK

1995 *"Strengths and Strategies"*, MacPherson Gallery, Victoria, BC

"Bumper Crop", Rogue Art, Victoria, BC

1993 *"The Next Generation: Regina"*, Rosemont Art Gallery, Regina, SK

1992 *"Ten Years Now"*, Neutral Ground, Regina, SK

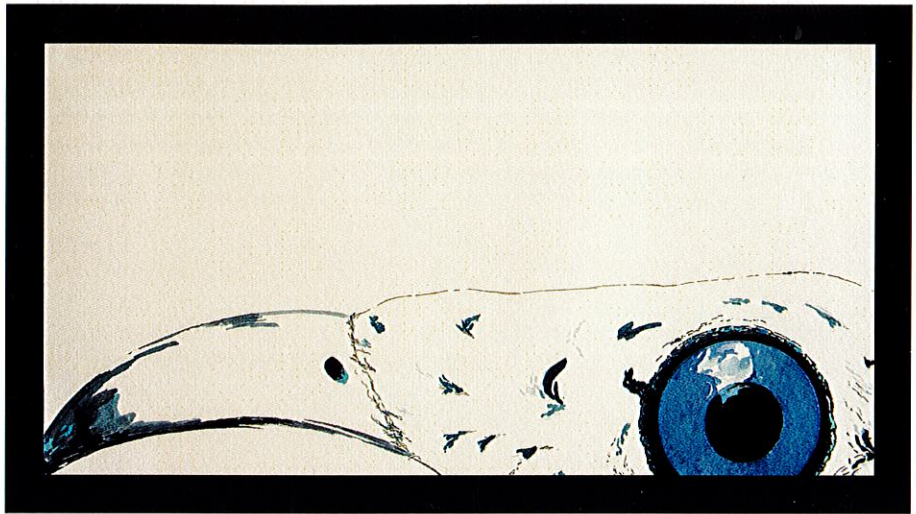
"I Worked in a Grocery Store", Solo Performance Piece, Neutral Ground, Regina, SK

"Retriever", The Exchange, Regina, SK

Commissions

2003-2007 *"Rolling Composter"*, University of Regina, Academic Green, Regina, SK

2001 *"PODS"*, Sculpture Installation, Collection of the City of Regina, Regina, SK



detail "Drawers", mixed media installation, 2008

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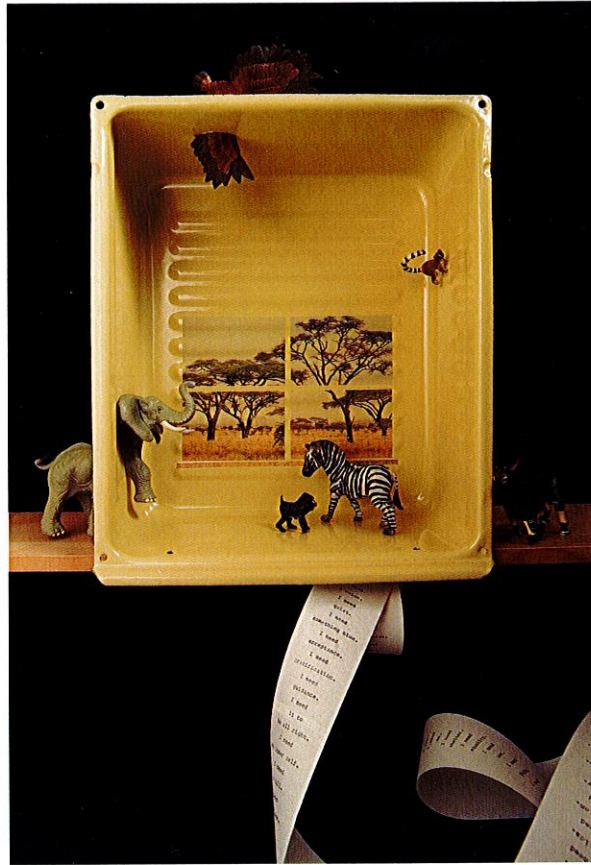
Melancholy is not enough

Michel De Certeau¹

In 1738, Swedish botanist, physicist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus published his *Systema Naturae* - the first European attempt to classify, organize and name all living things then known, from plants to animals. Still the taxonomic standard in the scientific community, his system examines relations and similarities among life on this planet, declining hierarchically step by step from kingdoms to classes to orders to families and to species. Clearly an attempt to rationally order and intellectually manage the fearful and intemperate 'chaos' of nature, Linnaeus' systemizations respond to and are an outcome of the rationalist Enlightenment project of the eighteenth century which codes a structured world view that presumes the superiority of the human species: he offers a way of thinking about the world that locates homo sapiens in a position above all life on earth.²

While aimed at identifying the biological associations, links and intersections between various life forms in all their minutiae, it is clear that Linnaeus' system also codes difference: it inversely proposes a nature of plants and animals separate from and inferior to humans - a nature of 'others'. Wendy Peart's *Ark* seeks passage through these two polarities of sameness and difference not offering alternative models but alternative possibilities to this coded system of knowing animal species other than ourselves. Here Peart negotiates the lingering residues of a nature that has for almost 300 years been formally schematized, addressing our current engagements with and disengagements from what she refers to as 'other animal beings'.

Peart's particular phrasing here is of note: it is itself a gentle inclusive form of address that recognizes, emphasizes and respects both similarities and dis-similarities. Clearly, hers is not an epistemological inquiry aimed at 'knowing' the world via the relationships, links and connections already established for us by science. Instead, her wall works, *Drawers*, is more a world view that not only proposes de-categorization and thus new ways of establishing proximity but that pays attention to the gaps and assumptions present already in the existing system. Responding initially to familiar National Geographic-style depictions of the natural world which claim to represent the nature world dispassionately through the objective lens of the camera, this body of work - more a disordered series of charcoal, ink, pastel and pencil drawings - is more personal and partial: here is a patiently created private image bank filled with delicate close-ups of various animals' bodies, both seen and emotionally felt. A subjective visual mnemonic where parts stand for the whole, Peart's exploratory drawings must be seen as a personal gesture bending towards nearness, a closing of the distance between herself and our animal others.



Detail "Continental Shelves: I must have (Africa)", mixed media, 2008

But what animals are included here and why? In one set of drawings we find a parrot alongside a lemur; in another a bowerbird with a cuttlefish. Certainly strange bedfellows without any apparent connection, we are reminded of another famous but unlikely animal duo: the *Owl and the Pussycat*. Written by Edward Lear in 1871, this nonsense poem speaks to the circumvention of science and rational linear thinking - to an imaginative bridging that leaps to impossible coalitions (in the poem, these two unlike creatures get married). Peart's drawn pairings - unlikely as they might seem - seek the unlikely, recognizing and simultaneously overturning difference by being somehow granted an undefined equivalence. She clearly understands Lear's poetic anthropomorphizations - understands his granting his animal subjects the capacity to speak and act as human beings - not as a trite creative trope that defines animal experience and identity only in the context of human experience (thus refusing the autonomy and independence of the animal itself) - but rather in positive terms: here, the so-called impossible is over-ridden and rendered possible.

Drawers transforms the gallery into a Natural History Museum of sorts but one that refuses a wholly ordered historical re-presentation of the natural world.³ Displayed on the wall

in frames that resemble the kinds of slim specimen drawers we encounter in the libraries of natural history museums everywhere - ones filled, for example, with collections of desiccated butterflies - her images deny containment as a way of grasping and representing the world. And, as much as Peart tries to de-compartmentalize her understanding of the animals - as much as she tries to de-link from the established order - she recognizes the impossibility of fully doing so. In the end both she and we must understand that the space between us and other forms of animal life can never fully be bridged - either by objective or subjective means.

The odd, old refrigerator drawers filled with plastic toy animals that comprise *Continental Shelves* further refute and refuse the constructed reality the Museum claims to offer us. Withdrawing from that, Peart's small constructions of store-bought plastic toy animals⁴ - here classified in museological fashion by the continents from which they came - are displayed in artificially 'real' diorama-like environments. They are of the kind we indeed might find in the museum - but, here, on a far less spectacular scale. Immobile (as if taxidermied), these animals are arranged as a passive depiction beyond the urgencies and realities of wild nature (like the predator/prey question) - beyond anxiety. Although accompanied by an anthropomorphic text that seems to identify these animals' wants and yearnings ("I desire.", "I'm looking for.", "I require."), we might ask ourselves whether these phrases are ones we are - with best intentions - sympathetically imparting to the animals, or whether they articulate our own human desires, needs and lacks - articulate our own confusions regarding our relationship to animals - and perhaps even our own desires and yearnings.

Surely, these and other kinds of confusions arise when we consider the zoo - another way in which our culture organizes and displays nature.⁵ Arising at first in the age of exploration to display biological curiosities and now ostensibly maintained for educational purposes, zoos fill us with wonder, curiosity - and sorrow. In the end they are false utopias - like the idealized, orderly world we think we inhabit - and in the context of this exhibition, a utopia possible only via our alienation from and control of the other.

Of course the notion of human empire is played out even further when we consider the way we occupy the planet as a whole - where, it seems, we pay more attention to our technological conquest of it than to our retreat from nature that arises from that. In *Stork Project*, Peart locates five sculptural plinths in a cluster in the gallery. More props for the charcoal drawings of storks in nests displayed atop them, they resemble and refer not only to industrial structures such as posts, scaffolding, chimneys, etc. that these birds negotiate daily as co-inhabitants of Northern European cities but by extension more metaphorically to the notion of 'city' itself - to the sites of narcissistic human habitation that fail to consider their presence.

Surely, if the stork nests can be identified metaphorically here as arks, the city too is identified as 'ark' as well - but a leaky, listing one. Obliquely referring to the story of Noah and the ark - to moral and ethical imperatives to preserve our animal others - Peart understands the earth itself as another kind of ark: as a vast shared "pea green boat".⁶ In the end, Peart's work interrogates how we represent, systematize and code nature and the earth and, through that, how we think about and interact with the life forms that live on it. This exhibition asks for a re-thinking and revision of the complex relationship among living beings - proposing intuition, a kind of instinctual intelligence beyond rationalism, as a fertile possibility. Beyond mere empathy and sympathy, its potentiality lies in mitigating alienation.

Jack Anderson
2008

1 Michel de Certeau, from the *Practices of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, pp 24-30.

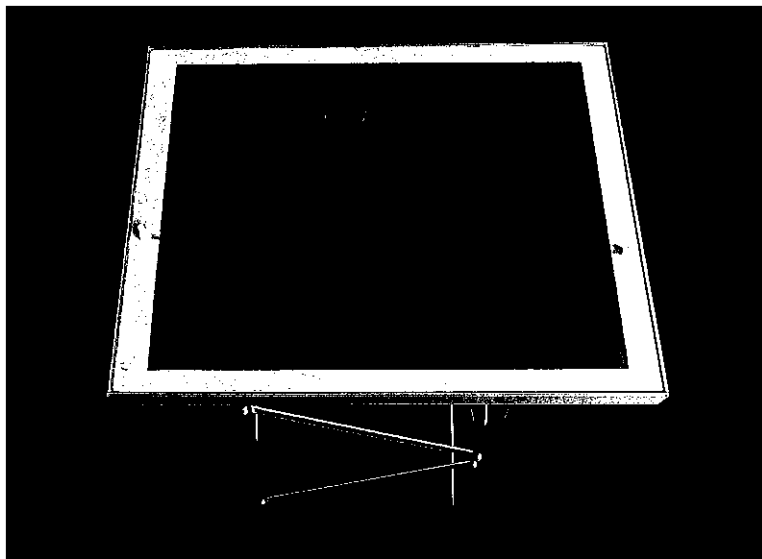
2 A contrary position was famously staked out by twentieth century French philosopher Michel Foucault, who, when encountering a description of the way in which the world is classified in Chinese culture, felt, "... as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought - our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography - breaking up: all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other." See the introduction to: Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things, An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1970.

3 for a discussion of the way natural history museums code the natural world in a specific and clearly hegemonic way, see: Reynolds, Ann. "Visual Stories" in *Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, Routledge, London, 1998, pp132-147.

4 It could be argued that these kinds of toys (as well as stuffed animals) from early childhood on code a sense of attachment to animals that is artificially fuzzy, and at the same time code notions of ownership and control of them as well.

5 see in this regard, Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping's 1993 sculpture, *Theater of the World*.

6 The owl and the pussycat went to sea in a pea green boat, in Lear's "Owl and the Pussycat".



detail "Stork Project: Tower", mixed media, 2006

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ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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