

Collections

Introduction

Neal Rantoul's photographs assess the nature of viewing as much as they offer an opportunity for viewing. These images insist upon deliberation--deliberation that seeks to find the intersection of provocation and valuing. In the three projects that this book presents he brings together images of animal and human remains photographed from three different collections. Beyond their common identity as collected objects—an awkward term at best in this case—these, shall we say specimens, mark a territory between their collectors and ourselves in which we become co-collectors. Our task as viewers is to consider the notion of the gathering and preservation—collecting—of once living creatures from our particular points of view and even from the points of view of the collected.

Viewing these photographs cannot be an act of mere identification nor can the experience proceed from a vision indifferent to primary respect for the 'other.' Rantoul's images are so thoroughly at the edge of entry to the spirit of the 'other,' that our own sense of ourselves as witnesses is necessarily and profoundly up against that edge.

Consider the undeniable evidence of humanity in the images of infant Siamese twins " No. 1 " and " No. 2 " presented in both a frontal and rear view, their eyes retain evidence of their brief and expressive aliveness, their effective and affective presence, even their natal cuteness. The rear view of the twins is stunning in its off-hand, intimate affection, its mythic innocence as their arms cross in a mutual act of holding.

Central to Rantoul's work is a generous regard for the spirit of what is superficially odd, indeed disquieting, but essentially worthy of our attention. One may ask, is our attentiveness equally worthy? The question holds in its anxious sensitivity its own answer of assumed respect. Rantoul asks of his viewer that we remain as assured of the aptness of seeing and knowing as his photographs assert. Viewing is the stance we take when we choose to see.

The eye sees what is there--as it is there. Burrowing more deeply we can easily enter a philosophical maze in search of the purpose for art, which is in part at least the same as the purpose of seeing. And seeing, well, seeing is navigation, finding the way.

The subjects photographed in the Mutter Museum and the Spallanzani Collection are forensic evidence of alterations within the genetic soup of living and the science that studies it, providing us with the terrible wonders that are interspersed with our own acceptable ordinariness. To receive the information of these photographs is to receive something of ourselves. Troubling and frightening, they are so because they are the extremes of our human and animal existence. We imagine us as them.

A human face preserved in a jar is a risk to our seeing. We project. Seeing is the start of the vicariousness that snares our imaginings, until we re-secure who we are in the short message of relief with which we reassure ourselves.

The taxidermy animals from the Cabela's stores may seem at first as complex constructions that entertain, but their 'liveliness' is subverted by that very purpose. Rantoul's photographs uncover the museum-like pretense that conditions the animals' posing for our superior vision, our 'colonializing' of nature.

This is one way to consider the photographs, but it is only a beginning, a possible way into and through the troubling aspects, which always remain. There is the possibility of an experience of beauty, a beauty understood as disruptive and unreasonable, like all beauty. The two-headed calf is extraordinary even after we cease to imagine petting it and feeling its breath. Was it beautiful as a calf, or was it a hopelessly failed calf and therefore too lacking in health to be beautiful? Indeed its viability was temporary, but it is now a more constant creature, constant in preservation, set into an artistic approximation of always.

That the remains of human beings and animals are preserved is certainly not peculiar to the present age. The preservation of bodies is an ancient practice. Taxidermy, which involves a precise arrangement of animal skins over artificial bodies, is perhaps the most theatrical preservation, since it has grown from trophy displays to displays of animal behavior with claims to 'natural settings.' The reasons for these preservation practices include religion and ritual, relic keeping, trophies, science and human curiosity. Neal Rantoul makes his images of these subjects in as direct a manner as photography can without the loading of critical commentary. If there were instruction and critique within the images they were there before Rantoul arrived. His pictures allow their further transmission as comprehensible and simultaneously confounding ideas. Are his pictures simply extensions of the preservations, records of records? Or do the pictures advance a vision that clarifies the traces of the psychic environments within which their subjects exist? A quiet truth in this collection is its capacity to reveal the cultural seeing that attends to these 'creatures' and that permits their contextualization as specimens for display. Like Rantoul's landscape work the pictures here reveal the edges of things, the borders between now and then. As such they are images about the power of vitality and the imagining of that power in the absence of vitality.

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About the pictures:

The Mutter Museum is a "forensics study museum" that is part of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Established as a center the study medicine in the 1800's, it is now a museum open to the public. The Mutter Museum pictures were made in 2003 and 2004.

Lazzarro Spallanzani, a preeminent 18th century Italian researcher in natural history, experimental biology and physiology, gave the Spallanzani Collection to the Reggio Emilia Civic Museum. The Spallanzani Collection pictures were made under supervision for one day in 2009.

Cabela's is a chain of thirty-one, large, specialty retail stores and a direct marketer of outdoor recreation merchandise. Based in Sydney, Nebraska, the stores are famous for their displays of taxidermy wildlife. The Cabela's pictures were made in 2005 and 2006 in stores in Nebraska, South Dakota, Idaho, Illinois, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

