

TAXIDERMY

Michele Beevors

Once upon a time a student bought a dead dog to an art school to exhibit it as an art work.

This problem has led me to various places where I wouldn't normally go, to read things which I'm not interested in, and to examine the inadequacies of my own productivity in relation to it. The dog was not taxidermied, but frozen. The dog had been hit by a car, stolen from a freezer, and exhibited as a memento-mori with other bits of detritus on an upturned milk crate as a plinth, there were scrawlings on the wall, against this and that. Death punching life in the face.

In light of this incident, I find the art work of Polly Morgan outrageous, particularly the twisted snake sculptures.¹ I'm repulsed by taxidermy, but I use the stuffed versions of animals at various museums as reference material in my own practice. Polly Morgan uses taxidermy in her art work. The twisted and knotted skins of snakes sometimes displayed floating in space, sometimes twist around some other abstract modernist form or display device. The objects are quite small, to go in your home, on a shelf, or a side table, beside a lamp or a book. I imagine one here, in the living room, on the coffee table. I don't think it would be a happy arrangement. Snakes coil when they are trying to kill something. The death of an animal is enacted doubly in these works. The snake, and whatever its absent prey was, is alluded to by the coil. In Australia, we have an admiration, and respect mixed with fear of snakes; this is healthy, it keeps you alive. "They won't bother you unless you bother them" and "walk lightly, carry a big stick", are some of the things we were told.

Polly Morgan's sculptures of taxidermied snakes, scare me. I tell myself that the snake is not alive but my animal brain thinks the snake is harmful, my animal brain wants to flee. My rational brain understands why this is happening, and also about that dead dog. Who buys these works? How do they live with them? Is the invocation of the nearly alive snake, the vicarious thrill, the threat of it, motivation? Is it an indifference, a fashion statement, a curiosity? Is it because it is innately beautiful /scary or have we just become so accustomed to seeing taxidermied things, that the commodified and coded animal skins are now so ubiquitous, and encounters with the natural world so rare, that the fundamental fear associated with the animal has dissipated?

If we were to look at the animal skin as a formal device in Morgan's works *Metanoia*, the viewer is allowed the pleasure of consuming the skin without threat of the skin. The pattern moves as the eyes of the viewer follow the curves up and down and around the work, and this allows a concentrated view, a view that moves over the surface of the thing. This is a practice highlighted in modern sculpture and draws on specifically modern strategies. A formal reading handed down from Antony Caro and Henry Moore, whose strategy "truth to materials"², sees the material, in this instance the dead animal, conform to a shape.³ Since the snakes in Morgan's sculptures in many cases don't have heads, or if they do the head is buried within the coil of the body so it looks like the animal is sleeping, thus allowing the fascinated gaze. Understanding the business end of the snake is very important. A headless snake ensures that fear is suppressed in favour of pleasure. Botched or otherwise (taste and horror) are entwined in Morgan's sculptures.

Steve Baker's 2000 book, "The Post-Modern Animal", addresses some of the concerns that were beginning to be highlighted around arts interaction with issues relating to animals at the turn of the century.⁴ In a passage from

an essay called "The Human Made Strange", Baker describes some more notable artworks using what he terms "botched taxidermy" Baker has himself admitted that the idea of botched taxidermy has been taken and turned into something else by some artists who missed the point, and also that he included works by artists who were not really concerned with the animal at all. It is artists who have taken the term and turned it into something else, which concerns me about the work of Polly Morgan.

The clearest example of botched taxidermy that Baker gives is the work of Thomas Grunfeld. Since 1990, Grunfeld's combinations of miss-aligned animal taxidermies under the title *Misfits*, leads to more questions than answers, and this is what I have come to expect of any art work.⁵ Grunfeld's work asks: what is the significance of the hybrid nature of such animals and what kind of mistakes did scientists of the enlightenment make? What are the possibilities for evolution in the future? What happens when you combine an ostrich with a giraffe, or a penguin with a peacock? Grunfeld's work anticipates a Jurassic Park of the future different than that of Michael Crichton.⁶ It is one that looks forward and backward at the same time. During the 17th century, a parlour game of sorts existed where taxidermy examples of hybrids were presented as new species, not only to fuel the fires of conquest, but to demonstrate knowledge of the exotic and the wonders of the natural world for an audience primed for the next new thing. Classification and destruction of exotic species for European collections (both private and later public), go hand in hand. Grunfeld's work draws from these ideas, and places human exploitation as the critical centre of the works. Unpacked so blithely by Monty Python's famous "Dead Parrot" sketch⁷, the dead exotic species of Norwegian blue parrot (purchased at a local UK pet shop) has been replaced by a flocked plastic novelty prop (made in the thousands), lying at the bottom of the cage and then banged on the counter: Nevermore Polly. The commodity here enacts that replacement of the animal with the thing. – So used to the act of othering, of replacement, this for that... we laugh.

In Polly Morgan's work, the animal-as-commodity short circuits all other meanings. One is free to do whatever with the skin of a dead animal, to make it the other of the monolith in miniature, a coffee table sized monolith. Something profound is lost and different between those works that can be explained best as a commodity, and are therefore closed to other more critical discussions, in contrast with works that are that are open⁸ and resist this closure.

In his 2017 book, "Speculative Taxidermy"⁹, Giovanni Aloï has described what could be considered an open work. Looking at the work of Stephen Bishop and Nicolas Galanini, Aloï examines the material relations to meaning as a demonstration of an open work; the viewer closes the gap between the objects displayed and various meanings. In Galanini's *Inert*¹⁰ (made from the skins of two wolves) and Bishop's *It's Hard to Make a Stand* (a polyurethane taxidermy model of a horse, with a fur coat wrapped around the head)¹¹, Aloï insists that the viewer is encouraged not only to gasp in horror at the animal death, but to think about the social, political and cultural forces that have led to the animal death being demonstrated in this way.

Aloï uses Foucault's term "despositif"¹² to unpack these works. The despositif unearths the hidden relations of power that are institutionalised and carried by the docile bodies, burdened with the responsibility of carrying out the actions and activities mapped out for them, by those forces that underlie societal controls. Although Foucault says very little about animals, Aloï's use of the despositif, to open works of art to a material reading, is useful as it reveals a critical edge to some works that is absent in most. This reading of works relies on the material realities of the work (so the focus is on sculpture not painting) and questions about representation are side stepped by the real animal skin that has been manipulated by the artist (in Galanini's *Inert*, it is the wolf skin, and it is the fur coat that is shaped like a dog, in Bishop's, *It's Hard to Make a Stand*). Reading things materially, instead of semiotically, makes the unpacking of these works more direct. The meanings of the docile bodies of wolves, as well as dogs and horses referred to in such works, move out from the material thingness to the discursive spaces of the institutional practices of race and speciesism through the dispositive. This includes: within the sport of hunting and racing, dogs and horse are trained in particular ways to perform; the institution of the commodified breeding and the class relations of the hunt; and the power relations of scientific investment in breeds and

classification since the enlightenment. As the power relations are laid bare, so too are the commodity relations. All material comes from somewhere, to make anything, you have to be willing to destroy material in its form.

Yet Aloï's examination of taxidermy in art stops short of a critical engagement with work that uses the animal body as decoration, as furniture, as fashion. Ethical taxidermy, "well they were dead anyway", or "respect for animal skin" is at odds with the decorative and commodified in some works by Polly Morgan, Angela Singer, and Julia De Ville. These flight of fantasy artists use the animal body as a sign of the beauty of nature, in favour of its decorative, patterned, sparkly, kitsch surface. What is problematic about those works is that they lay more heavily on the side of the thing, than the being they once were. The easy relationship of decoration to commodity, is a nod to formal abstraction. Skipping ahead from any discussion about the animal's death (they were dead anyway) to the formal relationship of patterned skin to monument or furniture: decoration suppresses the material reality in the same way that representation sometimes does. It's a mirage, an illusion. Alluding to the status of ownership, the surface of the skin relates to handbags and to cowboy boots. The snake skins in Morgan's works, become emblems of conquest as abstraction. The empty snake skin with its soft curve balanced against hard coloured and aerated concrete is the centrepiece to today's sterile homes. Is this different than the Victorian fascination with dead things?

Rachel Poliquin gives some much needed perspective on the history of the taxidermy animal, aesthetics, science and the whole thingness in her book *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Culture of Longing*,¹³ beginning with the rise in popularity of cabinets of curiosity in the 17th century, to the aesthetic and scientific gathering of knowledge in the Enlightenment, through to present day practices in museums, and hunting trophies. Poliquin traces improvements in the production of taxidermy specimens, from skins stuffed with straw, to experimentation with chemicals, to some Twentieth Century museums discarding of those specimens thought to be of no use or botched beyond recognition, (because even the most carefully prepared specimen remains perishable and therefore temporary).

Poliquin uses the idea of longing¹⁴ to unpack the pursuit of the exotic animal body in Victorian parlours and museums, as fulfilling a desire for adventure in areas as diverse as art and science. Driven by the quest for everything exotic, the delight in different species than the familiar; the aestheticisation of the dead at the point of their obliteration, until all that remains of the species that we have led to the brink of extinction and beyond is evident in the drawers and store rooms of museums, and representative of entire species. As Poliquin reminds us, aside from classification systems there is a limited vein of knowledge available in the skins and specimens that are on display. Surely this sense of longing has been replaced by something more. But just because we did this historically do we still need to do it now?

The remarkable efforts of digital artists to replace and replicate animal skins, and filmic traces of these in photography and the TV Documentary so eloquently discussed by Johnathan Burt in his book *Animals in Film*¹⁵, leave us wanting more. The encounter with the animal body is analogous for us in the visit to the tiger enclosure at the zoo, or the stuffed tiger in the museum, but these are a poor substitute to the encounter with the tiger in the wild. However, as Burt notes, this may be all that is left, as soon as animals appear in film, they begin to disappear from the wild. One doesn't have to look further than Disney's live action "Lion King" or the recent remake of "Dr Doolittle" to understand the confusion between realism¹⁶ and fantasy. For an hour and twenty five minutes the spell is unbroken, as we cavort with, understand, go along with the action; taxidermied animals can't begin to give us the vicarious thrill of playing with a tiger, or of cavorting with a chimpanzee. Not only has film replaced the all other encounters, digital film surpasses the animal, makes it redundant because the digital animal can out-perform every tiger, and every chimpanzee. Everything we can do, can be done better, on film. – Except in the 2020 film "Cats".¹⁷

Michele Beevors is a Principal Lecturer in Sculpture. She lectures in the undergraduate programme specialising in Modernist Sculpture and postmodern practices. Michele holds a Masters of Visual Arts degree from the Canberra School of Art (Australian National University) and a Masters of Fine Art from Columbia University (New York). Her art practice concerns a feminist perspective, related to the commodification of culture, together with an interest in animal studies.

- 1 Polly Morgan, *Metanoia*, 2016, jesmonite, Burmese python skin, polyurethane; *Depression in a surface*, 2014, taxidermy albino corn Snake, ocean blue marble, slate; *Should you have any questions?* 2016, plaster; taxidermy royal python, cardboard box, <https://www.PollyMorgan.co.uk>.
- 2 Moore's idea of "truth to materials" reflects a problem, that a material has innate qualities, that any shape decided on by the artist to be used should highlight the qualities that the material already has... and the other side is that the material should not therefore be painted. Essentially it is a rule against decoration.
- 3 And the sensitive observer of sculpture must also learn to feel shape simply as shape, not as description or reminiscence. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/henry-moore-the-sculptor-speaks-r1176118>
- 4 Steve Baker, *The Post Modern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books 2000), 75. "A botched taxidermy piece may be described as referring to the human and the animal without itself being either human or animal and without its being a direct representation of either: It's an attempt to think, a new thing"
- 5 Thomas Grunfeld, *Misfit (giraffe)* (1997), <https://www.designboom.com/art/misfits-by-thomas-grunfeld/>
- 6 Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (Alfred A Knopf 1990).
- 7 *Monty Python's Flying Circus* BBC 1969–1974, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2hwqnp>
- 8 What is an open work? Eco describes an open work, as a work that is completed by the viewer – a temporary closing, in bringing together the history of the work and the history of the viewer: The viewer, in completing the work, is participating in its composition, butting ideas words and meanings together in their imagination as they move through the work. While in the area of music, and literature one can conceive of a modernist work remaining open, but in the area of the visual arts that seems more unlikely. Examples Eco used at the time, including works by Giacometti, have now become emblems of status and wealth, hardly the meanings intended for them by the sculptor: The commodity shuts down these other meanings (In Giacometti, alienation haunts the gnarly, abject, surreal figures) as the work is subsumed, and consumed into exchange. The Open Work really anticipates interactivity as an intellectual activity, not as an entertainment factor: We see the entertainment factor everywhere now expressed at biennales, as viewers are encouraged to lie down, stand here, dance, sing, and take off their clothes. Eco strived towards a systematic, semiotic structure of meaning, that could be used to unpack each art form: music literature, visual art, dance etc. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 9 See Aloj Giovanni. For an analysis of *It's Hard to Make a Stand* using the dispositive in, "This is not a horse: Bio power and animal skins in the Anthropocene." *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2018).
- 10 Nicolas Galanin, *Inert*, 2009, wolf skins, felt, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/nicholas-galanin-indigenous-art-contemporary-traditional>
- 11 Steven Bishop, *It's hard to make a stand*, fur coat, polyurethane, polythene, mirrored acrylic wood, 2009 https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/steve_bishop_its_hard.htm
- 12 M Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-77*, ed C Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
- 13 Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (Pennsylvania: The Penn State University Press, 2012).
- 14 Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 15 Johnathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).
- 16 *Dr Doolittle*, trailer, Universal Studios (2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEf412bSPLs>
- 17 *Cats* (2019) Thomas Hooper (Dir.) (Don't watch this movie)