



THEM THAR HILLS: A BACKWOODS ALPHABESTIARY

VERONICA VERKLEY

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The Dilemma of Knowing

A fixation on describing the world as a finite or controllable entity has resulted in countless Western systems of knowledge. Unfortunately, much of this collected information in Europe and North America has been employed to callously alter innumerable ecosystems and utterly destroy many species for purely Capitalist gains. Veronica Verkley's exhibition *Them Thar Hills: A Backwoods Alphabestiary* hinges on such a dilemma of knowing, as she makes colloquial references to a human psychosis of ordering via twenty-six roughly hewn dioramas.

The phrase "them thar hills" recalls a series of gold rushes that swept across North America throughout the nineteenth century. These hopeful words may have been originally uttered during the late 1840s by the mint assayer Dr. M.F. Stephenson as a means of convincing miners to stay in Georgia rather than join the exodus to California. The famous American author Mark Twain supposedly lifted "Thar's gold in..." as spoken by the character Colonel Sellers. However, upon closer inspection of Twain's 1873 novel *The Gilded Age*, which references the Golden State's history, the phrase actually never appears. Such an ambiguous and yet inspirational call was no doubt repeated among Canadians and Americans alike, who at the close of the nineteenth century flooded into the Yukon Territory seeking the riches of the West's most precious metal. In some respects, Verkley's re-iteration of "Them Thar Hills" for this exhibition is intended as a familiar cue for local viewers to look beyond the obvious concept of material wealth. She may want us to reconsider the real losses of ravenous consumerism that hamper humanity's current relationship with land and animals. And yet, not all of the wonderfully crafted vignettes here focus exclusively on a problematic message.

The West's efforts to circumscribe nature dates back thousands of years, and Pliny the Elder is believed to be among the early authors to innumerate various species for ancient Greek readers. In Medieval times bestiaries were a central tool in describing real and imagined beings that included dolphins, herons, and unicorns. English illuminated manuscripts of the twelfth century such as *The Aberdeen Bestiary* also incorporated a moral undertone in the text that accompanied each rendering. Animals were thus infused with Christian values. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an insatiable effort by European and North American nations to gain dominion over the creatures that inhabited their respective territories motivated the development of "natural" history museums. The countless glassy-eyed stuffed animals set against manufactured terrains in so many institutions that purport to educate seems like the celebration of a murderous neurosis. Verkley mimics and yet avoids this fatal

phenomenon through the use of miniature animals whose artificial construction is blatant as well as clever.

This artist, who chooses to live of the grid in the bush near Dawson City, has assembled an eclectic assortment of beings from A to Z for the ODD Gallery. Her diorama *SCAVENGER: Coyote learns to forage* is the most impassioned plea for a change in how the environment continues to be thoughtlessly spoiled, as viewers are faced with the unsightly reality of an animal surrounded by human refuse. However, not all of Verkley's deftly rendered tableaux offer a moral reckoning. Some like the *MAMMOTH: Mammoth sifts through pay dirt* are witty fascinations with the rich history of the planet earth and its' colder regions. Perhaps, my discussion should end on an unreal note that parallels Verkley's quirky mechanized *JACKALOPE: Jackalope is late for something important*. This hybrid creature of surreal origins is not unlike the Alicanto, a mine shaft-dwelling bird that feeds upon gold, featured in the Spanish author Jorge Luis Borges' 1957 publication, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Ultimately such visual and literary productions underline the futility of complete knowledge, while promoting a new found respect for the bounty of nature.

— Dr. Curtis Collins, May 2013

ARTIST STATEMENT

A **Bestiary** was historically a book describing all the beasts of the world. An **Alphabestiary** illustrates one animal for each letter of the alphabet, storybook style. The **Backwoods Alphabestiary** transforms that ABC book format into a series of 3D dioramas, with the creatures, settings, and descriptions all decidedly Backwoods and Northern.

I wanted the sense that these dioramas were created years ago and have fallen into disrepair, their mechanisms rusted or broken; the 'specimens' collected within trapped forever in their dusty worlds. Real and imagined northern creatures find themselves negotiating strange new-world situations as best they can, and the 'earnest' scientific explanations may or may not be accurate (as with museum displays of yore). It's a contemporary blending of our romanticism of the north, skewed taxidermy, and the poetics of storytelling.

— Veronica Verkley

BIOGRAPHIES

VERONICA VERKLEY is a media artist, sculptor and filmmaker who grew up in the wilds of southwestern Ontario and now lives and works in an off-grid Yukon bush cabin built with her partner. She has served on the faculty of the Yukon School of Visual Arts since 2007.

Verkley's work is founded in a wide-ranging, exploratory approach. Ranging from the mechanical to the ethereal, her creations often address concepts of a mediated, technologically enhanced Nature, juxtaposing our romanticism of the biological world with contemporary technologies. Her extensive exhibition record includes projects that traverse the mediums of sculpture, film and kinetics. Past professional work includes numerous designs for feature film, television, and theatrical productions in the field of animatronics, art direction, puppeteering, and animation.

Her short film *A Working Cat's Guide to the Klondike* won the Audience Choice Award at the 2012 Dawson City International Short Film Festival and has gone on to screen at the 2013 Tromsø International Film Festival in Norway. Her work is currently on view in *Larger than Life: Contemporary Art from the Yukon* at the Ottawa Art Gallery, produced in conjunction with the Northern Scene event.

DR. CURTIS COLLINS graduated with a PhD from McGill University's Department of Art History and Communications Studies in 2002, and during his studies was awarded a Doctoral Fellowship from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Over the past twenty years, Collins has also served as a curator and director for public art galleries across Canada, including the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in New Brunswick, the Art Gallery of Algoma in Ontario, and the Dunlop Art Gallery in Saskatchewan. Among those universities that Dr. Collins has been engaged as a sessional lecturer are: the University of Lethbridge, Trent University, and the First Nations University of Canada. His recent publications and broadcasts include: *DAG Volumes No. 1*, *Joe's Politicians*, *Prairie Postmodern*, and *Feigned Memories*. In January of 2013, Dr. Collins was appointed as the new Chair and Program Director of the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City. His upcoming curatorial work will feature the Toronto-based artist Bill Burns, and the Regina artists' collective known as Turner Prize*.

FRONT IMAGE: *SCAVENGER: Coyote learns to forage*

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