Inside the Banff Park Museum the animals are all watching. They are transfixed, or, so it seems. This natural history museum is a strange suspension in time. Designated as ‘a museum of a museum’ this unique space and its specimens serve as inspiration for three artists and a curator. The exhibition title MUSE plays on the word as both noun and verb where the museum acts as muse for the artist, and, as a place where visitors spend time musing over its displays.

Museums are not simply repositories; they are also sites for creative endeavor.

–J. Drobnick and J. Fisher, Museopathy

As a collaboration between artists, curator and museum the space is transformed from being ‘a container of cultural artifacts to a cultural readymade, a medium for artistic analysis, commentary and reconfiguration.’ (J. Fisher). Each artist creates work that is a direct response to this collection, its history and its site; an artistic intervention.

Within the natural history museum the taxidermic animal is often a spectacle of display. As a still or stilled life taxidermy allows for a closer examination of the animal than would normally be permitted in nature. Although, what we see seems real, it is not real. Instead it is a cultural construction, the taxidermist’s reconstruction, of the animal in its natural state. Taxidermy literally means ‘an arrangement of skin.’ Essentially it is a re-ordering that has become the art of preparing, stuffing and mounting the skins of specimens for display. Taxidermy grew out of the culture of colonialism that developed with the expansion of Empire and became part of the growing interest in taxonomy, science and natural history. In this so-called post-colonial period artists have been intrigued and challenged by these stuffed and classified objects, many opening up new dialogues for interpretation.

Part of the allure of the museum is the abundance of its glass vitrines, cabinets and cases, even its glassed-in office. The invisible/visibility of glass layers our viewing within the museum. As cultural historian Bill Brown observes, ‘We look through objects (to see what they disclose about us).’ In the space of the museum the objects are telling us about ourselves. Sometimes this history is uncomfortable.

In the exhibition MUSE, the artist/art mediates the experience, revealing another layer. There is an elegiac quality in the work of these artists, hauntingly prescient, in their response to the spaces of the museum.

READING ROOM

Tuck, D’Arcy Wilson, video performance, 14 min, 24 second duration, 2011.

Lullaby Series, D’Arcy Wilson, 6 hand-colored etchings and silk-screen on Somerset.

D’Arcy Wilson’s Tuck, a video-performance, originally filmed in the museum, is returned to animate the space of the “Reading Room”. Accompanying this work are a set of six etchings of the lullabies composed and sung to the taxidermic specimens within the museum. The artist notes:

This activity of singing lullabies presents an alternative to the liaison formed between the specimens and their creators (the hunters and taxidermists who prepared them a century ago). Nevertheless, there is a perversity in both our actions: the animals were killed for display, and now I propose to sing them to sleep, overlooking their inability to abandon their posts.

Certainly the dead watch us, but not as opera, nor as the Great Grey Owl tunes in gophers underground.

We are their day-time television.

–Don McKay, excerpt from ‘Edge of Night’, Camber
Wilson’s work is an attempt to reconcile the differences between nature and culture. She openly admits that:

Throughout my art practice, I try to bind myself to the natural world either by inserting myself into wildernesses, or bestowing acts of kindness upon nature; nevertheless, the ability to truly know and partake in this other world eludes me. My awkwardness in the landscape and lack of understanding highlight my destructive potential as a human, and keep me isolated from other species of animals.

This intentional otherness is made apparent as she sings lullabies to the ever-vigilant specimens. Her maternal sense of longing to reconcile the living with the dead is made visible as we follow her through the darkened space of the museum. The writer Rachel Poliquin in her aptly titled book, *The Breathless Zoo. Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing,* explores what she terms ‘a poetics of strangeness’ that viewers often encounter when confronted with taxidermy. There is a sense of the uncanny in our desire to animate or reconcile our difference with these dead animals. On the one hand we are seductively drawn into the spectacle, admiring the sublime beauty and stillness of the specimens, while on other hand, we are repulsed by our actions, the inevitable sense of mortality that is before us. This push and pull of emotion is played out before us in the potential absurdity of Wilson’s performance, as she attempts to sing the animals into a deep slumber.

To begin to address these questions the artist turned to Morgan Mavis’s idea of ‘the cultural afterlife’ of taxidermic objects. One is made to wonder, who touched these objects, these skulls, furs, antlers and horns, borrowed from the ‘Discovery Room’ of the museum. This sense of feminine touch is further fetishized in the white kid-gloves the artist transforms into a hybrid-object, neither animal nor human, with its found bones and claws. Its potential threat is made supine, in its gesture – of upturned palms/paws – suggestive of surrender.

Wright Cheney’s sense of the whimsical is played out in these found objects, intersecting nature with culture. A ram’s horn is transformed into a ‘horn of plenty’ with its flaxen wool spilling into crocheted abundance. Everywhere the artist’s touch and sense of humour is present. Dressing up a fox stole with an antique doll’s dress the artist plays with these objects, re-dressing not only our sense of the absurd, but also our tendency to anthropomorphize animals. There is a dialogue set up between her skilled crafting of needlework into antler, placed alongside a deer’s antler. We are made to consider the beauty of both art and nature. This theme is again explored in how she uses snake bones to re-create ornamental display often found in Victorian fretwork.

**READING ROOM**

*Surrender,* Janice Wright Cheney, site-specific installation, mixed media, 2014.

In the tradition of the ‘Cabinet of Curiosities’ or ‘Wunderkammer’ the artist Janice Wright Cheney has intervened making the work *Surrender* where she sees nature as surrendering to culture. Her conception for the cabinet came from her understanding of the museum of as a collection of cultural artifacts, not a museum of natural history.
DISCOVERY ROOM


Facing up to the others, before the others, its fellows, here then is the apparition of a strange creature: at the same time Life, Thing, Beast, Object, Commodity, Automaton — in a word, *spectre*.

— J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*

In Derrida’s notion of Hauntology: the paradoxical state of the spectre, is neither being nor non-being. The spectre makes visible that which is not seen, as invoked by Wright Cheney’s *Spectre* of a polar bear. Popularly known as Buddy, the polar bear was housed in the zoo/menagerie adjacent to the museum. His memory is made visible through this spectral display of crystals and crocheted snowflakes suspended from a cage-like armature. The artist’s ability to conjure up this spectre of Buddy is all the more remarkable as her design anticipated her knowledge of the photograph reproduced here. Buddy lives on in this uncanny likeness.

This liminality of inside/outside, visible/invisible is enhanced by the notion of the zoo animals as living taxidermy mirroring the displays within the museum. One questions: which is more life-like? This is a sentiment echoed in John Berger’s essay ‘Why Look at Animals?’

The zoo cannot but disappoint. The public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal’s gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond.

More recently the writer Robert Everett-Green commented on the strangeness of going from a zoo to a natural history museum in ‘Why I’m Never Going to the Zoo Again’:

We all found it eerie to go from live animals to stuffed specimens in such a short time. In some ways, however, the dead animals seemed the more lively, caught forever in aggressive poses or preparing to spring from predators that would never emerge from the diorama. At the zoo, most animals just seemed to be hanging around, enduring a long death of what it means to be a natural creature.


The history of Buddy the polar bear is a complex and sad narrative, more telling of the period in which he lived. Housed in the Banff Park Zoo from 1922 until 1938 Buddy was moved to the Calgary Zoo and died from pneumonia the following year.
MEZZANINE OFFICE


This audio work is an re-imagining of the sounds that the curator and collector Norman Bethune Sanson may have once made in his office during his tenure at the museum from 1896 to 1932. SansSanSon references the visible/invisible presence of Sanson as he moves about his office. Sanson was an avid collector and the samples of specimens and herbology were all classified according to Linnaean taxonomy. Christie’s audio piece documents the sounds of Sanson’s footsteps, as he is leafing through the pages of books, dipping his pen in ink, and speaking aloud the Latin names of animals as he writes. There is a strong sense of his presence as he opens and closes doors, and leaves the room. We become aware of this absence. In French sans means without, a wordplay on Sanson, whose trace remains, although he no longer occupies this office.

In much of Christie’s audio visual work there is a haunting quality of – what remains – the ‘momento mori’ as suggested in her representations of loss and longing. Her recent work Spectres of Shortwave, a media-based installation explores the mysterious web of international shortwave radio towers that once dominated the Tantramar Marsh in Sackville, New Brunswick. Now regarded somewhat as an obsolete technology this work also recalls the now defunct weather station that Sanson helped to design on Sulphur Mountain in Banff in 1903, the same year that the current Banff Park Museum was built. Sanson climbed the mountain to record the weather, weekly and every fortnight as he aged. He was retired from his role as curator in 1932 and soon after his role as meteorologist became obsolete with new technology. Sanson was honoured for the one-thousand times he climbed the mountain in a sunrise celebration and the peak was named Sanson Peak in 1948, the year before his death.

This performance is scheduled during the opening of the exhibition and is a play on the notion of the curator in the space. It will temporarily interrupt Christie’s audio-work situated in Sanson’s office and be staged only once during the duration of the exhibition. My impetus for this performance is the desire to occupy this now defunct space as the contemporary curator of MUSE. The glassed-in office acts as a vitrine displaying the curator as yet another specimen in the museum. Seated at the desk, once used by Sanson, I animate this space as the contemporary curator.

Initially, I was tempted to historicize the curator by dressing in costume of 1914 (the period the museum is set in), as Mark Dion often does in his performative work. I felt, however, that this would undermine my role as the contemporary curator of this exhibition. The reality of a curator’s job is that much of their time is spent at their desk on computer. But like all performances there is much more that goes on behind the scenes. In a sense, the curator’s role is more like the stage-manager in theatre, dressed in black to be intentionally invisible, while the artist/actor is illuminated. In a way the role of the curator is to facilitate the art and to not be visible. So, like Christie and Wright Cheney’s art, I am making the invisible, suddenly visible in my performance as curator. The Office of the Curator also references my curatorial blog of the same title as a documentation and archive of the research and installation of the exhibition MUSE.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHIES

Janice Wright Cheney is a textile-based artist who explores themes pertaining to natural history and domestic labour. She graduated from Mount Allison University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1983, and completed a MEd in Critical Studies at UNB (2003). She teaches at the New Brunswick College of Craft & Design in Fredericton.

In 2004 she was the recipient of the prestigious Strathbutler Award for Excellence in the Arts, and was elected to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 2010. Last year she received the Lieutenant Governor’s Award for High Achievement in the Arts for New Brunswick. Her work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the New Brunswick Museum, and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. She has received numerous creation grants from the New Brunswick Arts Board and The Canada Council for the Arts.

Her solo exhibition *Cellar*, held at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton NB in 2012 will also be shown at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (Halifax) this fall. She was selected to exhibit in *Oh Canada*, a survey of contemporary Canadian art, held at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA, in 2012, that travels to the Maritimes this spring and summer.

Amanda Dawn Christie is an interdisciplinary artist working in experimental film, video installation, photography, and electroacoustic sound design. She completed her MFA at SFU in Vancouver before moving to Amsterdam. Since 1997 she has been actively serving on various boards of artist-run centres, teaching workshops, publishing articles, and serving on juries across Canada. She now works as director of the Galerie Sans Nom in Moncton, NB and maintains an active professional art practiceHer experimental films have screened internationally including the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Czech Republic), the Exls Film Festival (South Korea), the Madcat International Women’s Film Festival (San Fransisco), the International Film Festival Rotterdam (Netherlands), Cannes (France), Cine El Pocho (Oaxaca, Mexico), the Oberhausen Short Film Festival (Germany), and the Leeds International Film Festival (UK), among several other festivals and cinematheques. Her installation *Radio Towers Like Windchimes* was recently exhibited at the Confederation Centre for the Arts, for *Somewheres* curated by Pan Wendt. Solo exhibitions including, *Land Lost* curated by Mireille Bourgeois at the Galerie Louise et Reuben Cohen, and the Paved Arts in Saskatoon are scheduled to open in fall, 2014.
Anne Koval is an independent curator, art historian, and writer. She has a Ph.D. from the University of London and teaches art history in the Fine Arts Department at Mount Allison University, NB. Her recent curatorial project, the exhibition Paper Doll, (Owens Art Gallery, NB and the Mendel Art Gallery, SK), brought together an archival collection of paper dolls and clothing made by the poet Sylvia Plath with the contemporary work of Cindy Sherman, Jeannie Thib, Anna Torma, Barb Hunt, Ed Pien, Lynne Yamamoto and Cybele Young. She has also written on Anna Torma in her essay ‘Her Fingers Dream a Garden’, (Art Gallery of Hamilton and Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery, Halifax). Her essay ‘Grez-sur-Loing: A Quiet Life’, is part of the exhibition catalogue, Into the Light: The Paintings of William Blair Bruce (Art Gallery of Hamilton), which opens in June. She is currently writing an essay ‘The Rural Readymade: A New Brunswick Vernacular’, (The Journal of New Brunswick Studies), that will be published in the spring of 2015.

She also serves as an editor of RACAR (Revue d’art canadienne/Canadian Art Review) for the English book reviews and exhibitions, and is the Atlantic Provinces representative for the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC).

D’Arcy Wilson is an interdisciplinary artist who works primarily with performance. Much of her work is invested in animal human relations. She has a BFA from Mount Allison University and received an MFA from the University of Calgary in 2008.

She has exhibited her work across Canada in shows including Protect Your Love, a two-person show to be held in Arnica Gallery, Kamloops in September, a solo show at the Forest City Gallery, London, Fleshold, at la Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, Montreal and ARTsPLACE, Annapolis Royal, NS this year. In 2012 she was in a solo show Protect Your Love, at the Khyber Gallery and performed Tuck in a Nocturne at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History in Halifax. Recently she was in the group show Somewheres at the PEI Confederation Centre. She has received numerous grants and awards from artsnb and won the Royal Canadian Academy of Art Scholarship for Graduate Studies and the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship for graduate studies in 2006, as well as Carl O. Nickle Graduate Scholarship, from the University of Calgary in 2007.

She currently sits on the Board of Directors at Eyelevel Gallery and is also an art educator in Halifax.

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At the Banff Park Museum a very special thank you goes to Michael Gair (Collections Specialist) whose knowledge of the museum, its history and its collections was invaluable. Also to Meg Stanley
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Finally, Janice and I would like to express our deep gratitude to Peter Ramey and Owen Corrigan for their continual support of this project.

–Anne Koval with Janice Wright Cheney, D’Arcy Wilson, Amanda Dawn Christie

http://akovalblog.wordpress.com

LIST OF WORKS

*Tuck*, D’Arcy Wilson, site-specific video performance, 14-minutes 24-second duration, 2011.


*SansSanSon*, Amanda Dawn Christie, recorded, edited and mixed, site-specific 21-minute audio work, performed by Jean Phillipe Raiche, 2014.