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November 2011 Issue

By Open Letters Monthly

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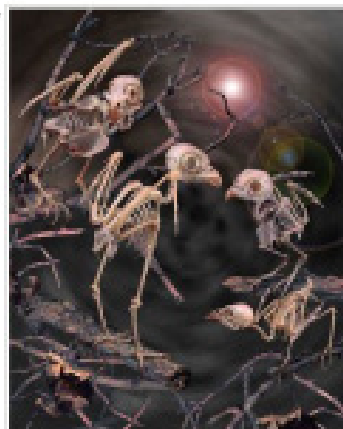
from "A Strange Beauty"
by John Bonath

John Bonath has transformed the west side of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science into a gallery of fact-made-fiction. The museum has thrown open its collection – the drawers and cabinets of natural samples: skulls, skins, birds, and roots, a full nine-tenths of their holdings, all unseen by the public – to Bonath's arts: photography, digital manipulation, paint, and a brilliant and constantly changing use of natural light.

"It's as real and fictional as that dinosaur skeleton outside," Bonath said of a manipulated photograph of a lion skull, "because of course it's real, but you can't imagine a thing like that in our world, but oh do you try, and it becomes more real in your mind than it is in real life."

Plucky and articulate, John Bonath clearly loves talking about his new exhibition, and our conversation was nearly as much of a pleasure as the work he toured us through last week, leading the Open Letters team up and down the museum's west staircase to visit all three floors of *A Strange Beauty*, a one-man show the size and scope of a late-career retrospective. One visit is not enough to take it in. Impressively, it's all been created and assembled in under two years.

"When I come here in the mornings and I start looking at specimens," Bonath said, "my heart just starts to pump. I'm exhausted by the end of the day." He begins by taking digital snapshots ("maybe 120 of them") and then painstakingly edits the selection down to maybe ten. "I have to make a huge commitment to each one of these things," he said, clearly sorry he couldn't work with even more of the drawers and bins and buckets of samples in the back rooms. "Luckily, a lot of these things I've been able to check out of the museum and work with in my own studio."



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For a piece like "Coiled Snakeskin," Bonath carried home a single Burmese python skull and two giant tubs of snakeskins. There he painstakingly arranged the skins around a paper cone and crowned them with the python's grin. Slanted in, its teeth resemble a shark's, and its skull is surprisingly solid – strong muscles, now gone, must have held those jaws in place. And the yards of coiled skin seem to represent the long life those teeth ensured. Of course the skin itself makes captivating abstract patterns: shining and dull, honeycombed, translucent, frail. A little farther down the wall, Bonath has captured an image of what appears at first glance to be baby shoes, torn and crumpled in a straggle. The caption reads, "Classified Python Eggs." "Think about them before they broke," Bonath whispered behind me, "they would be unshining..."

He couldn't bring all of the objects back to his studio. Some, like the black mink skull he photographed for two very different pieces, were, as he said, "worth more than my life." He added, "I mean on the black market. And with some of this stuff you don't really know what it's worth because you don't know what it is."

In order to reach *A Strange Beauty*, which is entirely worth a visit to the mountain west, you'll cross the museum's T-Rex-occupied entryway and take a right through the Space Odyssey rooms (spinning projections of the earth, Is There Water on Mars?, children jumping and pointing and squealing) until you emerge on the West Side. The room, the gallery, is three stories high with glass walls displaying the finest view in Denver: City Park Pond, backgrounded by the steel and glass towers of downtown, themselves backgrounded by the gold foothills and the white-topped Rockies.



At a distance, the images on floor one resemble their photographs (like the photographs accompanying this article), but as you get closer, the illusion of verisimilitude breaks down, and their painterly qualities become apparent. These are, in fact, paintings. They're single objects: gold nuggets, skulls, a bat, tagged birds, ammonites, set against black backgrounds that seem to let them float in space, anchorless. This makes them more solid, more tangible. Further inspection reveals other alterations to enhance their contours—pointillist colors invisible at a distance cause the objects to swing free of their frames, to pop. A transparent medium mixed with iridescent pigments catches the room light and makes the objects more real still. They're splendidly alive, far more than their originals, some of which are present under glass, and look, in comparison, strikingly dead.

"Cropping is everything in how you read a photograph," Bonath said. "Since the beginning of the medium. That I'm isolating these things and enhancing them, that's just part of the same illusion."

At every angle the pictures change. When the big windows send bright Denver light against a portion of the surface, metallic golds and purples float to the surface.

"These" – Bonath points at three images of gold nuggets – "have five different kinds of gold in them." Among these are the original gold-leaf nugget, of course, that was photographed, but also the gold-leaf paint Bonath used to accentuate its uneven shine. Nearby hangs a picture of sandstone embedded with sandgrains.

When I first heard about this technique – taring up specimens on a sort of black velvet – I pictured Bonath as a kind of forensic cosmologist. But the actual effect of seeing this work at close range is more transporting than I'd anticipated. They're beautiful and grotesque, but the dominant feeling is enchantment.



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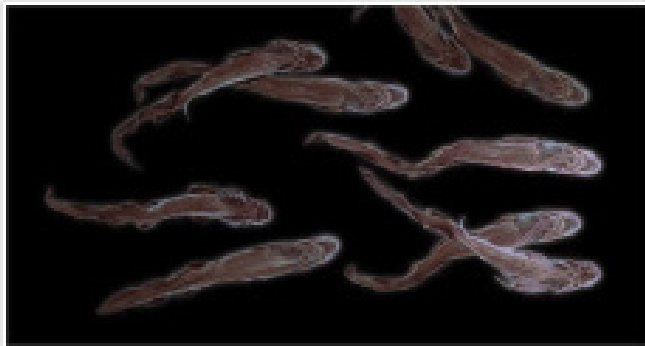
"People always want to touch them," Bonath said. "You're verifying this as an object in its own right. Most people will touch them if they can, and if I'm here I always encourage it. It adds a perception other than the visual." And this is only enhanced by the obviously rough texture of the paint on the canvases.

"People are conditioned not to touch art. And so when they're given permission their hand just hovers there, hesitating. And you see these breakthroughs and they can be joyous."

We paused for a while at a small school of juvenile cat sharks. They're swimming in bioluminescence, looking alive but otherworldly. "Were these in specimen jars?" I asked.

"Oh no," he said, "they were just dried skins. All that you see here has been done digitally, and then with paint."

They're extra-terrestrial, as though they float not in the sea but in space. Earlier Bonath had said, "No matter what they know, people believe what they see in a photograph," and that held true for me. Even though, on parsing the image, I could spot bits of stiffened skin and emaciation, the cat sharks couldn't stop being alive for me, journeying through some low-glowing dark. I touched them and found the surface rough and pocked. Oddly, though I was touching a painting, this made the fish feel more real to me.



I asked him if it was a source of frustration that most people outside of Colorado were destined to encounter the show in photo-reproduction, which minimizes the painterly touches that give the pictures so much, and which entirely removes the tactile experience.

He nodded. Yes, he'd thought about that. "With some works of art the reproduction is better than the image but with these..." He shook his head. "A photograph is a record of a moment in time. The camera has only one hole and so you're only able to create a static piece."

As we moved from picture to picture, it became obvious that Bonath had often used what was present in the collection to create whole new objects, like "Ammonite Sphere," where he rounded and shaped the picture of an ammonite fossil (an antique style of cephalopod) until he'd made of it a faux globe. Then he enhanced the pits and flats of the surface to create the impression of something like a planet, folds of shine and dark accentuating the curve. So is it a fossil now or a photo of the moon? I could see other patrons passing this picture, glancing at it, then stopping to look longer. This look-and-look-again phenomenon was a constant at the show.



"I'm a formalist," he said, "composition, texture, color theory... and I'm not using these things just to make a pretty picture. But maximizing the illusion is of utmost importance, and this has been the case since photography's invention." Bonath went on to talk about tricks and innovations in the early days of photography, ways practitioners not only froze but altered reality. "Like when Ansel Adams invented the zone system, so you can fall into the image. That black is going to be the richest black he can get from the silver molecule, that white is going to be just less white than the paper. Just like that I use illusion to create something you know is false but you experience as real." He gestures at a long picture of a muzzled wood stork. "I build edges with gels then I put on a thick veneer that ties it together and gives another dimension to the image. But because of the black background there's no anchor, no horizon light – nothing exists in their universe except them. And this is part of the fiction, the illusion."

And there's a whole different work upstairs – Bonath's own vanitas. In all of these lushly colored and absorbingly detailed pictures he's posed a model with a large specimen (an old man with a snake, an adorable boy with the black rhino skull) and teased the nonce world into magic. There was a bubble in each picture too, sometimes large and hovering, sometimes in danger of being struck and broken by a sharp edge. "I make them out of a pipe cleaner taped to a pen – it works much better than those bubble wands you can buy."



More highly fictionalized than the pictures downstairs, these portraits seemed all to tell fantastic stories – that woman with the shell is the queen of the sea, the ghoulishly grinning sci-fi villain with the enormous rattle egg holds a sinister secret. Two-dimensional as they are, there's something extra-solid, almost Copley-like about the figures. Each is a joke about an older piece of art (a baby instead of a Venus on the half-shell) but each also seems to hold a universe of its own. The subjects stare straight at the viewer, holding you in place. You feel as though you could blink and be right in their world.

"I think of it as layering illusion," Bonath said later, over sushi on Colfax, our heads still swimming from the show. "In

the renaissance they'd fabricate these windows around paintings; so people feel like the closer it is to reality the better it is. So this is the history of visual language."

He told a story about having coffee with a friend, not so long ago, when his friend's young son hurried into the room, shouting, "Help! He's killing all the birds!" It turned out the boy had been reading a newspaper comic strip that featured a swimmer in a wave-speckled sea. The boy had misread the double sweep of the waves and the inverted double-sweep of birds in the sky. "So of course it looks to the boy as though all these waves are birds on their backs, and they're being trampled." He ate a bit of sea urchin, smiled. "Art is a language just like words. You have to learn to read the words."

The waiter came by with a platter of wineglasses. It's some sort of happy hour, two-for-one deal and the three of us busted ourselves with dividing them up. Bonath talked about Saul Steinberg, and how much he loves the "inspector" character Steinberg draws, a busy official in a misproportioned landscape, checking to see the rules of perspective are being followed.

"The more you learn about the visual language of art, the more you appreciate it," he said. "And then, where you go with it, what you see with it, is only limited to your own imagination."

A Strange Beauty is on display at the Denver Museum of Science and Nature until February 19th, 2012, 7 days a week.



Born in 1951, **John Bonath's** career as a fine-artist spans over four decades. Bonath attended the Cleveland Institute of Art for five years of undergraduate work with honors and finished his Masters Degree in Fine Arts at Western Michigan University with honors. Upon graduation, he moved to Colorado to develop the fine arts photography program at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. After a ten-year, tenured professorship there, he moved to Japan to do independent photo work for four years. For the past 20 years, Bonath has been living and working out of Denver, Colorado. Throughout his career he has received numerous awards and professional recognitions. <http://www.johnbonath.com/>

John Cotter's novel *Under the Small Lights* was published by Miami University Press in 2010 and his short fiction is forthcoming from Redivider and New Genre. He's a founding editor at Open Letters Monthly and lives in Denver, Colorado.



John Cotter and John Bonath, October 2011

2 Comments »

Trishia said:



I have the opportunity to see these paintings in the Museum every day, at all times of day, and that creates a very different experience. If I could I would photograph them in time lapse to try and capture the extraordinary changes that occur as the light changes, and ask the artist to post that on his website as well! If you are able to attend this show – do – and you might want to bring along a magnifying glass.

For me, this work is exceptionally moving, as it literally returns light to these natural objects now in the science Museum, and bridges the science, art, emotion, and other human-made categories in a way I had not experienced before. It is tangible and ethereal at once, and includes all of us. It is accessible. And now that I have permission to touch it I'm going back to experience it again. Thank you!

- 6 November 2011 at 1:13 pm

Mary said: