

-----ANTENNAE REVIEW-----

Nanoq

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson

Marion Endt

Spring 2010

Polar bears are cute. Take Knut, the fluffy cub born at Berlin Zoo in 2006: rejected by his mother and raised by his keeper, he became an international media star and tourist magnet – until he grew too big, his fur looked too grubby and he, inevitably, turned into a ‘publicity-addicted psycho’ (if one believes the Daily Mail). Generally, polar bears are fantastic marketing tools. Think of Peppy the Fox’s Glacier Mints bear and of Coca Cola’s holiday campaign, or, on a less cheerful note, of the forlorn polar bear stranded on a melting ice sheet, dramatically showcasing the impact of climate change. Polar bears can be cool and breezy or fierce and majestic; playful and cuddly or imposing and dangerous. Endangered and vulnerable, too. They are, in fact, whatever we project onto the screen of their white fur.

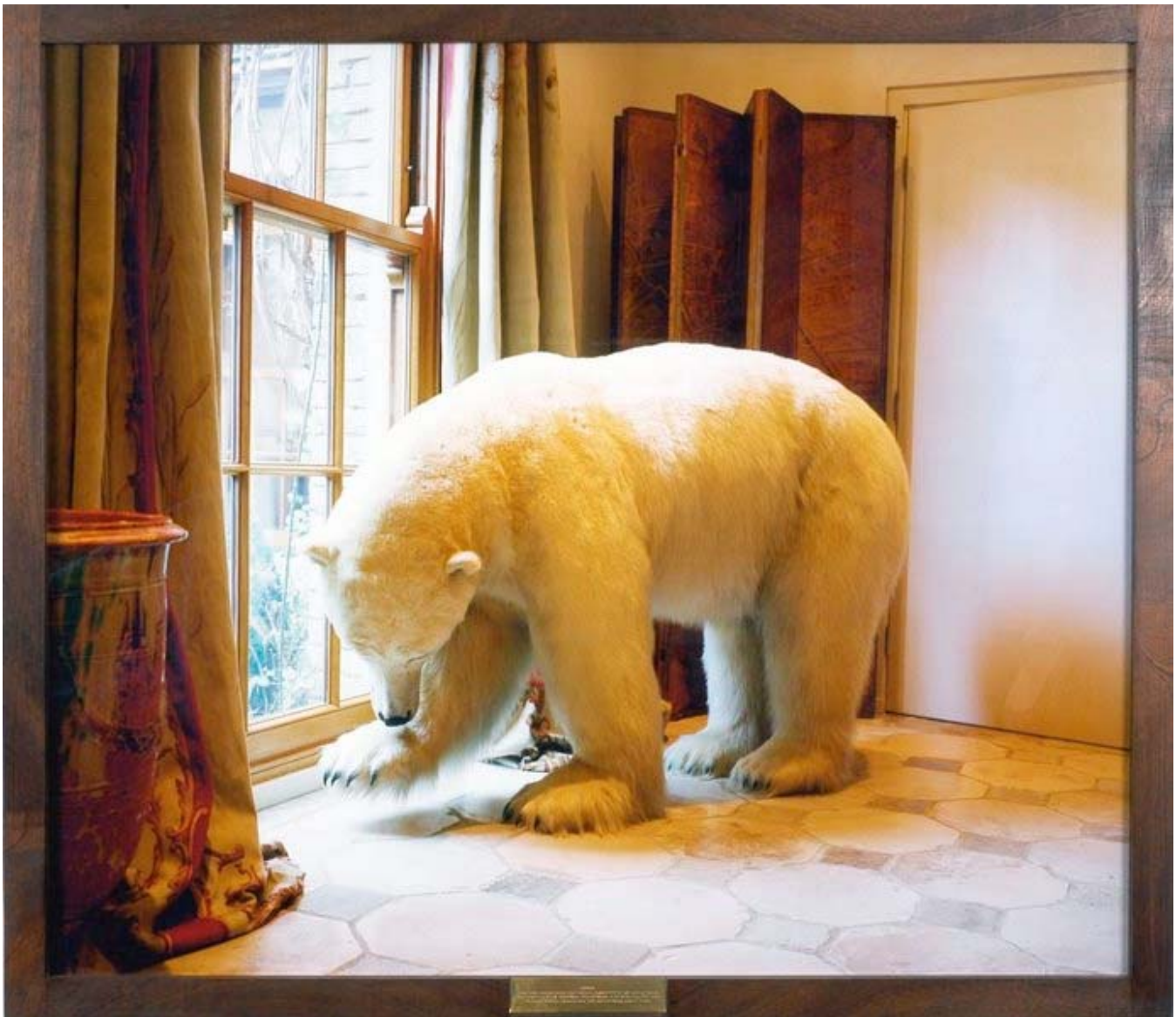
The series of 33 polar bear photographs by artists Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, currently on display at the Manchester Museum, appears as the two-dimensional residue of a long-term, multi-media project that began in 2001 and involved (1) ferreting out every single mounted polar bear in the UK (plus researching the history of its acquisition, taxidermy, presentation and preservation); (2) photographing the specimens in their original location (various museums, zoos and stately homes and even a pub); and (3) gathering ten examples for an exhibition in a contemporary art space (which took place at Spike Island, Bristol, in 2004 and was accompanied by an audience-engaging programme of screenings, talks and performances as well as a symposium and a publication). Snæbjörnsdóttir’s name means, in her native Icelandic, ‘snow bear’s daughter’, which would provide a perfectly reasonable (if droll) justification for the project in itself. But the photographs address a set of more pertinent issues reaching from anthropomorphism to hunting, colonialism and, more generally, the ideological underpinnings of museum collecting, classification and display.

Finding the third-floor exhibition space without signposts on a quiet Tuesday afternoon after the school classes have gone, requires a bit of determination, but once you've made your way past the 'real' stuffed polar bear on the first floor and the deserted Picnic and Play & Learn Areas on the third floor, a tucked-away garret seems apt for an exhibition reflecting on the museum's own practice: the garret and the attic are well-established psychoanalytic tropes denoting conscience and conscious after all. The Manchester Museum has, in fact, a successful track record of artist collaborations and interventions: the Arts Council-funded Alchemy Project, running for five years between 2003 and 2008, encouraged artists such as Spring Hurlbut, Mark Dion, Jordan Baseman, Ilana Halperin, Jamie Shovlin, and Jacob Cartwright and Nick Jordan to work with and exhibit within the Museum's collections. Presently, both Dion's Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy, an alternative, idiosyncratic collection assembled from discarded furniture, objects and specimens situated on the ground floor, and Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's nanoq: flat out and bluesome on the third floor, hold up a mirror to the 'regular' collections, underlining the Museum's readiness for self-scrutiny. Mark Dion might have influenced nanoq in yet another respect: his book *Ursus Maritimus*, which was published in 2003, consists of 32 black and white photographs of mounted polar bears in institutions reaching from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago to the Museo Zoologico La Specola in Florence.

Although presenting Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's photographs isolated from the original project might strip away some layers of meaning – the lengthy, difficult research process mirrored the act of hunting, for instance, and displaying the actual specimens in a gallery space enabled a higher level of re-contextualisation and audience-involvement – browsing this complete photographic record of taxidermied polar bears on the British Isles still holds its own rewards. Some bears are endowed with human names and gestures: 'Queenie' at Sheffield City Museum, for example, (who was also known as 'Janie' and renamed 'Snowy' at a recent museum overhaul) greets the viewer with a good-natured smile and wave, and 'Nina' and 'Misha' at Bristol Zoo Gardens look so harmless that children frequently pet them, we learn from the short blue blurb complementing the photograph. Then, of course, the timeworn specimen at Blair Castle, with its shabby fur and grotesque grimace, could be the stuff of nightmares. And while two more recent specimens at private residences in London and Somerset appear playful and slightly absurd (especially the Somerset one, kitted out as it is with a red fez on its head and a basket filled with plastic tulip lights between its paws), Manchester's very own specimen in the Animal Life section of the Museum is,

due to its no-frills presentation, one of the few that doesn't offer any invitation for us to anthropomorphise.

Quirky and entertaining on one level, this photographic archive also reminds us of some darker strands undercutting the museum's scientific and educational rationale: colonialism; the lust for trophies and heroism in hunting and arctic exploration; the futility of providing a full account of any species; the arbitrariness of human-imposed classification systems; and the museum's inclination to favour death over life. The mounted bears' 'out-of-placeness' emerges strongly where they are grouped with animals belonging to extraneous habitats (Hancock Museum, Newcastle; Leeds Museum and Art Galleries) and fitted with token arctic references such as fake ice and the odd seal pup to tackle (Fyvie Castle; Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery). Furthermore, their (similarly unfortunate) presentation in front of contrasting mahogany wood or within reflecting vitrines completely revokes the camouflage function of their white fur. Indeed, the fact that the bears are triply frozen – in their taxidermied pose, on the celluloid of the photograph (Barthes's *Camera Lucida* comes to mind), and behind the picture frame that mimics the museum display case – further highlights their uneasy position between life and death. No photograph in the series conveys this more strikingly than one showing a small specimen in storage at Worcester City Art Gallery. Crammed into a wooden box together with a heap of packaging material, the bear comes across as sad and defeated. A discarded sign on the shelf above, whose bold capital letters signal 'DANGER! KEEP OUT', draws even more attention to the fact that he won't do anybody any harm anymore: the roles of hunter and hunted are irrevocably reversed.



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Lady and Lord Putnam Polar Bear © Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson

Nanoq: flat out and bluesome

Manchester Museum

13 February–11 July 2010