

the shaman and the squid

RAY FORRESTER

Madison Bycroft has been developing a consistent body of work that investigates philosophical ideologies through sculpture, video and performance. By challenging modes of being and rethinking linguistic ontologies – how we might understand, communicate and inevitably limit representation – Bycroft’s work uniformly and optimistically presents empathetic and mystical ways of becoming ‘other’. Animism, sympathetic magic and language are ongoing points of reference and research. Her experiments in sculpture and film fall into several categories of concern playfully yet critically engaging with notions of the self and the Deleuzian idea of “becoming-animal”.

Throughout the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari the concept of “becoming-animal” is prevalent. In its basic form we can understand it as a movement, in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability, but is rather wrapped in an almost nomadic mode of existence, in which one is an anomaly, inaccessible through any form of definition or distinction. Opposed to a kind of animal metamorphosis one can potentially achieve non-identity; a freedom from cultural, historical representation as well as categorical and colonial thinking. It is in this division between unity and strength and an interminable state of disarticulation or disfigurement that Bycroft’s research lies. By dismantling hierarchal relationships between animals, non-living things and humans (as well as their associated languages and societal structures) Bycroft seeks to look beyond these predisposed boundaries by engaging with unified relational ways of understanding the world.



Madison Bycroft has been living her own form of a nomadic existence for roughly two years since completing a Bachelor of Visual Arts with first class honours at the University of South Australia in 2012. From residencies in Beijing to New York she has been creating and exhibiting a body of work that is very much focused on habitat as well as her interests in animistic philosophy. She is a 2014 recipient of the Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship and will next research this relationship between place and the other at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.

Her exhibitions from artist-run initiatives to ISCP (International Studio & Curatorial Program) in New York have provided a platform to experiment with traditional and non-traditional sites as well encouraging her own personal investigations in sculptural, material making, multimedia, film and performance. Nature and our surroundings are key elements in visualising this process of transformation and unity in her work. The artist and writer, Oxana Timofeeva proposes a comparable belief in her article *The Negative Animal*:

In the case of nature, with its variety and multiplicity, one becomes 'other' in itself, and spirit externalises itself only through individualisation of beings in their singularity, not their mixing. Nature, the distorted mirror of spirit's unity, is the domain of difference. This is how it manifests itself as substance becoming subject, given that subject is not only what transforms itself but also what always remains the same within this transformation. The inner dialectic of becoming expresses itself in a given shape that of a flower, mineral, tree, horse or woman. All this can exist only in totality, the one being a truth for the other and coming to relate to it.¹

For Bycroft we see the incarnation of spirit through her sculpture, both relating to herself as a human and their surroundings where her performances take place. This variety and multiplicity of components is widely spread amongst her installations, giving viewers the opportunity to engage with it in its totality. Her sculptures take various shapes, either boulder-like; archaic forms echoing a kind of pre-history, or geometrical structures that sit in relation to, or rest on, the other. In 2013 Bycroft's solo exhibition *It Division* at the CACSA's Project Space was a defining presentation marrying her sculpture, film and research into a consolidated series of works that could be read individually or almost entirely as one. *Becoming Still* (2012), a video work, sees the artist attempt to sit on the ocean floor cradling a large stone. A sense of unity can be seen between the object, the artist and their surroundings, as the stone's weight acts as an anchor assisting in the artist's futile act of becoming one.² For a moment we see the artist's eyes open and stare back at us; a moment of calm clarity during this enduring task. However, this encounter is broken and challenged when their unavoidable differences are brought to light – the artist's need for air. This exchange between the stone and the artist, although knowingly vain, is still important in its practice. The act of 'relatedness' and testing



of multiple meanings is vital in interpreting our psychological and spiritual connections with each other, and beyond the other.³ By posing the question of animating or reanimating the inanimate we catch a glimpse of our position within this assumed hierarchy and are offered ways of challenging these predetermined ideals. Her first major solo exhibition *Synonyms for savages* at the Australian Experiment Art Foundation, highlighted the artist's ability to bring together ancient and historic ideologies, which concern present day mores through contemporary mediums and techniques. Investigating the prehistoric and mythological nature of being a human and that, which distinguishes itself from the animal, the work traverses a number of anthropological and etiological theories. The exhibition's motivations focus on language, its inseparability from knowledge and its formation as an archive, and humanity, a catalyst for utopian and apocalyptic action unified with, or acting against, man or animal.⁴

The "confusion of tongues" has been described as the initial fragmentation of human language in the Book of Genesis as a result of the construction of the Tower of Babel. It is implied that prior to the Tower's demise, humanity spoke one unified language derived from the Adamic language spoken by Adam and Eve in Paradise. After the destruction of the Tower, language was confounded and man was scattered across the planet. This tale resonates strongly with the artist and informs her cultural and linguistic theories on history, authorship and the idea of an archive. For Bycroft:

This formula of the archive can be applied to how we understand and categorise the world. Everything exists within a name, and the name has a genealogical significance and universal meaning written by the few.⁵

This offers a paradoxical and enigmatic enquiry into Bycroft's practice. How can one communicate and better our understanding of the world without direct representation and appropriation of our (limited) existing linguistic archive? This impasse is at the centre of her work; by holding one's gaze between existing modes of reference and our own phenomenological confinement, Madison exposes these overlapping philosophical states.

First alphabet of... (2014) is an enormous series of ceramic, plaster and found objects that commanded the main exhibition space of the AEAF. Here, Bycroft imagined rearticulating language as one coalesced alphabet for the animal, made by a human. Twenty-six forms sat in a row, each handcrafted and devised from materials both known and unknown to the artist. This alphabet challenged our cultural heritage and past discourses in the hope of emulating a future archive that is void of authority or entitlement. The artist suggested the existence of a primitive language; one that is magical and an assemblage of conglomerated histories questioning the formation of words through intangible matter.

Humanity is dealt with carefully and wisely by the artist. While appearing confrontational and sometimes brash, Bycroft's experiments exhibit the truest form of sympathy and appreciation for her subjects, objects and surroundings. *Entitled/Untitled* (2014) is one such work where the object and artist humbly make contact in one scene; the corpse of an octopus is (literally) unpacked (a symbol of man's ruinous effect on the ocean and its inhabitants) and is laid to rest on the lap of the artist while she, in an act of humanity and connectedness, attempts to offer a part of her physical being (in this case shaving her hair)

Page 54:
Madison Bycroft
Rag of Cloth: Ode to the Vampire Squid
(production still, detail), 2014
Photo courtesy the artist

Page 55:
Madison Bycroft
Nupta Contagioso/Primordial Sound
(production still, detail), 2014
Photo courtesy the artist

with that of the corpse. The artist's attempt at a conscious experience through this interaction is careful and enveloping. For a moment we see their physicality intertwined; the octopus resting on the artist's face, while she strokes its tentacles, as though they were her missing strands of hair. This action reaps no reward or recognition—our civilisation has adversely affected that of the octopus and no equality could ever be reached; however, during this film there are moments of empathy, which express the possibility of some sort of union. Again, we can sense a kind of futility in the performance—although an experience can be staged, we can never know how it truly feels to be an octopus. Our subjective experience is limited and contemporary analysis is almost robotic so we are left with a schematic conception of what it is like.⁶

Entitled/Untitled references a number of important elements in Bycroft's oeuvre. While contemplating contemporary approaches of "becoming-animal", the artist exposes the catastrophic environmental effect humans have had on our shared habitat. This work is exposing for both the artist and the viewer; we are a shared projection of our accumulated history, but how do we make an individual difference to society and our environment in this technological and industrial age?

Selected for this year's PRIMAVERA at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia by artist (and now) curator, Mikala Dwyer, *Rag of Cloth: Ode to the Vampire Squid* (2014) is a highly stylised video work matched with DIY aesthetics. Here we see the cephalopod (an animal of great significance and importance to the artist) as a "champion of the unknowable"; a being without community and the antithesis of human experience existing in the dark abyss.⁷ The environment of the vampire squid remains untouched and unknown by man. In opposition to *Entitled/Untitled*, the vampire squid (the last known surviving member of its own order) is heroic and empowered, unscathed from human infliction. Mimicking the representation of squids in sci-fi films and popular culture (think Jules Verne), the King Squid challenges mankind utilising our language, over-naming, and archive. The squid and his/her minions call out to man and question whether a union could be forged between our worlds. In this work we can see the hierarchy of animal-man shift, our archive is used against us (as opposed to legitimising us) and the squid

remains unassailable. Here, Bycroft references weird and speculative fiction, this champion feeds of the words of humans, yet nothing can gratify it. *Rag of Cloth* is an impressive element within her *Synonyms for Savages* exhibition; it is a fine example of her pursuit for new and contemporary forms of conscious experience. The film collage (which has been edited to an almost psychedelic state) is an ode that empowers not only the 'savage monster' of the deep, but asserts Bycroft's unwavering commitment to furthering her practice through new formats in video and sound.

Synonyms for Savages is an important example of Bycroft's practice and the sophisticated way that she explores animating inanimate matter. Through extensive research and experimentation she consistently tests the idea of contemporary animism beyond its primitive classification. Bycroft makes purposeful choices in her artistic output, subtly swapping the changing connections between cultural, social and temporal contexts. The dualistic divide between subject and object (or habitat and culture) has been a resonating investigation for the artist. Through her historical and cultural assemblages she succeeds in creating new perspectives within a field that is heavily influenced by colonial perspectives. Utilising a myriad of materials and contemporary technologies, Bycroft harmoniously reflects upon critical phenomenological theory while posing future paradigms. Bycroft's work is a deeply thoughtful and realistic view of everything that surrounds the human experience.

Notes

¹ Oxana Timofeeva, *History of Animals: An Essay of Negativity, Immanence and Freedom*, Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012: 274

² Katrina Simmons, *In the heart of a stone* (exhibition catalogue), Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide, 2013

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Cooper Francis, *Synonyms for Savages* (exhibition catalogue), Australian Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 2014

⁵ Madison Bycroft email to the author, 22 July, 2014

⁶ Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', 1974, <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1000/Nagel.pdf>

⁷ Madison Bycroft email op cit.