Writing Award 2013 Best Review: Sara Angelucci “Provenance Unknown”

by Natasha Chaykowski

Taking for its setting a richly saturated Victorian-era parlour, adorned with a quintessential vibrant blue settee, deep burgundy walls, silhouette portraits, and vintage photo-album atop a small wooden table, Sara Angelucci’s exhibition Provenance Unknown, at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), invokes an uncomfortable kind of nostalgia within its constructed domestic space. A floating wall confronts visitors upon entering; with all of the expected pomp, situated opposite the Victorian parlour in situ, the wall holds a wood and glass cabinet of taxidermy birds, positioned in chaotic flight, and anchored by a small villainous mammal in the act of stealing an egg. Adorned with wallpaper serially depicting extinct passenger pigeons framed by decorative laurels, the wall serves as an entryway into the main exhibition space where all throughout the lively sound of birds chirping with echoes of a choral composition, The Venetian Forest (2013), can be heard.

Leaving the entryway, a bird’s nest hanging from a twig juts out from the floating wall: a symbol of the transition to take place from the seeming normalcy of the Victorian parlour to the gallery space proper wherein the grandiose portraits of Angelucci’s fictive creatures, a series aptly entitled Aviary (2013), are hung with ceremony on the burgundy walls. These beings are the stuff of mythology: uncanny ghost-like figures from Victorian photographs and cartes-de-visite are fused with various species of extinct, endangered, and threatened birds. Lush tones from orange to red and purple colour the feathers and beaks that embellish the enlarged photographs. The resulting portraits create an aura that mingles nostalgia with surprise and curiosity.

Angelucci’s whimsical hybrids are at once uncanny and wondrous – an experience of dissonance that speaks to the potential criticality possessed by the hybrid body [1]. A site of transgression, Angelucci’s hybrids are particularly poignant in their composition. They represent two distinct, yet related tropes of loss: the extinction of a species of animal, and specters of a time passed, immortalized in photographs. The distinction between bird and human is blurred within these hybrids and the various states of engulfment by one or the other throughout the portraits suggest an active transfiguration rather than static discrete hybridity. Within this fictional realm, animals that have presumably become extinct at the hands of humankind are afforded the opportunity to re-claim existence in the parlours of those who betrayed them. Are these creatures anthropomorphized birds or
rather humans subjected to a reclaiming by another species? Regardless of their ontological state, Angelucci’s hybrids intentionally collapse the physiological boundaries between humans and animals, and at the site of this collapse a new critical taxonomy emerges.

From the haunting hybrids, the exhibition eloquently culminates with the preternatural sounds of leaves rustling, trains passing and a harmonious chorus that accompany a projection of a black and white family portrait in *The Anonymous Chorus* (2013). This immersive installation begins with soft harmonies and what appears to be water washing over the projected portrait. The gentle waves of water, reminiscent of dark room processes, give way to the gradual development of the photograph, which reveals a large family comprised of several generations thus linking this final work in the exhibition to the Victorian parlour that it commenced with. A spotlight travels over the projection, bringing attention particular individuals in the photograph – individuals that might otherwise have been lost in the cacophonous arrangement of the photo or forgotten by the passing of time. While the travelling light illuminates singular personages, subtle movements animate the entire photograph: the leaves on the tree in the background flutter in the wind, the little girl in the first row wears a bow that bounces slowly up and down, and the ladies skirts sway softly. The consequent effect, the nearly palpable breeze and rustling atmosphere, is both surprising and beautiful in that such time-stained photographs are typically static, but here their subjects are poignantly ushered back into the realm of the living.

*Provenance Unknown* enchants with its mythology and intrigues with its mystery while using visual languages of a time past as a means to query taxonomical systems and the plight of birdkind. Extinction and loss are momentarily remedied, if only within Angelucci’s fictive portraits and the poetic, unknown origins of the spectral figures that inhabit the exhibition expose the limits of taxonomy. Within the ruins of these classificatory systems the betrayed birds engulf the perpetrators, those human magicians that both created such categories and subsequently extinguished the life that thrived within them, to reign once more in an imaginary trope wherein provenance is irrelevant and past injustices are cured in time.

[1] Regarding ideas of the hybrid body, I am indebted to Alison Cooley’s research regarding hybridity in the work of Allyson Mitchell.