Canadian Review of Art Education
Research and Issues
Revue canadienne d'éducation artistique
Recherche et questions d'actualité artistique

Animal Bodies in the Museum: Acts of Artmaking, Collective Knowledge, and Complex Conversation Around Museum Taxidermy

Corps d'animaux au musée : gestes de création artistique, savoir collectif et conversation complexe sur la taxidermie muséale

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Volume 49, numéro 1, 2022

Art Education- Virtual Material

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095228ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.26443/crae.v49i1.160

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Education through Art

ISSN

2290-3747 (imprimé)
2563-6383 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Le Gallais, J. (2022). Animal Bodies in the Museum: Acts of Artmaking, Collective Knowledge, and Complex Conversation Around Museum Taxidermy. *Canadian Review of Art Education / Revue canadienne d'éducation artistique*, *49*(1), 2–20. https://doi.org/10.26443/crae.v49i1.160

Résumé de l'article

Cet article décrit en quoi les gestes critiques de création dans le cadre d'un atelier muséal participatif et la création subséquente en studio, fondée sur la recherche, nourrissent les discours plurivoques sur la taxidermie muséale en tant que référentiels de récits complexes.Articulé autour de quatre animaux exposés au Musée Redpath, ce programme de recherche entendait redonner vie à ces animaux et à les remettre dans leur contexte, à la fois dans le cadre de l'espace muséal et dans l'univers en général. Les éducatrices et éducateurs d'art peuvent, par le biais d'une exploration collaborative et des gestes de création, initier et façonner le discours entourant les corps d'animaux empaillés et leur redonner une nouvelle vie en tant qu'outil d'enseignement et d'apprentissage au sein de l'espace muséal.

Animal Bodies in the Museum: Acts of Artmaking, Collective Knowledge, and Complex Conversation Around Museum Taxidermy

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Abstract: This paper explores how critical acts of making during a participatory museum workshop and subsequent studio-based research-creation can inspire poly-vocal discourses around museum taxidermy as repositories of complex histories. Centred on four animals on display at the Redpath Museum, this research program sought to reanimate these animals and reposition their context within the museum space and the wider world. Through collaborative exploration and creative acts of making, art educators can engage and shape the discourse around taxidermied animal bodies, giving them new life as tools for teaching and learning in museum spaces.

Keywords: Research-Creation; Arts-Based Research; Animal Studies, Museum Education

As a child, my parents would take me to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. Somewhere in its jumble of exhibits of Egyptian mummies, dinosaurs and crystals were the spots I was drawn to again and again: a long and dimly lit gallery of wildlife dioramas. Behind squares of backlit glass lived all manner of creatures frozen in time. Graceful white-tailed deer picked their way through an autumn forest; lions, zebras and antelope drank from a watering hole on a sunbaked African plane; monkeys and apes lounged in leafy rainforest treetops. Eyes wide, hands pressed against the glass, I remember moving from window to window, staring into the new worlds. This was my personal ark, a silent menagerie of animal friends staring back at me through the glass as if their worlds were on pause just for me; perfect moments of perfect animals suspended in perfect natural landscapes.

The experience was not without tension. There was one diorama I was always careful to move past quickly. Here, a gigantic snake's muscular, patterned body draped around the branches of a jungle canopy, its head wholly obstructed by green leaves. As a child, the *snake window* terrified me, though I failed to see the obvious: the hierarchies of value in *good* and *bad* animals; the promise of knowledge aligned to seeing (dead) animals in an (idealized) natural world; and the limits of lessons taught by snakes that dwell in trees. I have little idea if the *snake window* is a real memory. Yet the complexity of my childhood responses foretells the complexity of the histories and narratives accompanying all museum taxidermy. In this article, I provide a narrative account of my research in Art Education that returned me to taxidermy and its educational potential many years later. What role, I wondered, could art-making play in staging complex conversations around taxidermied animals? How can art-making acts build and distribute collective knowledge about the cultural display of animal bodies and broader discourses surrounding animal issues? Years later, these questions led me, as an artist-researcher, back into

the museum context—in this case, the Redpath Museum at McGill University—to once again confront the power of these objects.

To consider the taxidermied animal body is, within the museum context, to consider the legacies of colonial worldviews, fabricated notions of species hierarchy, the fetishization of nature, and contemporary anxieties about the environment and climate (Poliquin, 2008; Poliquin, 2012; Sutton, 2020; Sandager & Pors, 2021; Wade, 2022). In an age before the development of wildlife photography and documentary filmmaking, the display of physical animal bodies and mounted skins was the primary technology by which animal life was made visible, and the museum institution was the primary venue for the public to learn about the animal world. In the twenty-first century, changes in our collective cultural consciousness and increased awareness of animals' lives have led taxidermy to be interpreted as relics or trophies of a bygone age; the tools of an outmoded educational context framed by Eurocentric colonial enterprise (Patchett, 2006). Especially in museums, this view places animal bodies at the centre of a historical past and its museological practices with which many are now uncomfortable, resulting in little contemplative time willingly spent in their company. Given their tendency to have been framed by colonial or socio-political ideals that inherently placed man as the superior being within nature, the galleries of natural history museums have come to be seen as the trophy rooms of rich, white, western men (Haraway, 1984). The taxidermied animal as a museum teaching tool has become outmoded, replaced by advances of the digital age that stream nature education right into our homes through the internet, social media and popular documentaries like *Planet Earth* (Fothergill, 2006).

And yet, despite its fall from grace, taxidermy of all kinds continues to work its silent, evocative spell. It can stop you in your tracks, repel, draw you in, and inspire fear, horror, wonder, awe, sadness, shame and humour. These reactions to taxidermy often say more about us than they do about the animals themselves, motivated or at least influenced by the context of the display as much as the ideologies they depict. A snarling tiger or a rearing polar bear in a stately home parlour will evoke a very different response than a faded zebra or dusty pigeon behind museum glass. Wherever it is encountered, whatever animal it represents, taxidermy resists easy definition and ready dismissal. It is death put on display, yet its core function is the representation of life, thus prolonging human interaction with the beautiful forms of nature (Poliquin, 2012). Is it nature or artifice, animal or object? These possibly unanswerable questions ensure taxidermy's position as arresting, disturbing, and endlessly enchanting.

Framing the research: Background and influences

My goal as an arts educator was to resituate devalued taxidermic objects within a dynamic public pedagogy program. I aimed to see how critical acts of making could inspire poly-vocal discourse around animal taxidermy as a repository of complex histories. Accordingly, my project developed in two distinct phases: a participatory/collaborative art-making event at the Redpath Museum at McGill University; and individualized research-creation, namely my own, that sought to embody the findings of the museum intervention and surrounding scholarship. Both phases centred on four creatures on display at the Redpath; a polar bear, a gorilla, a whooping crane, and a beaver diorama (see Figure 1). Beautiful, strange and challenging in their history and presence, my goal was to reanimate these animals and reposition their context within the museum space and the wider world beyond. Through collaborative exploration and creative

acts of making, art educators can engage and shape the discourse around taxidermied animal bodies in museum spaces, giving them new life as tools for teaching and learning.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) defines research-creation as an approach to scholarly research that combines creative and academic research practices and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation and experimentation (SSHRC, 2021). While discussed in a myriad of contexts by various scholars, including Manning (2015) and Springgay & Zaliwska (2015), the discussion most relevant to this study is that of Chapman & Sawchuk (2012). Their discourse highlights the various institutional definitions of research-creation, positioning it as contradictory to the established hierarchy of research significance in which the scientific method is considered the pinnacle model for knowledge production and dissemination. In this way, research creation is a helpful method for qualitative research, allowing the researcher to move beyond the constraints of scientifically gathered data and written analysis. In contrast to established pseudoscientific practices, research-creation generates *personally situated knowledge* (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 11), proposing new models to materialize and disseminate research outcomes while grounding these outcomes in critical social, philosophical or cultural discourses. As pointed out by Loveless (2015), research-creation "marshals new methods that allow us to tell new stories, or to tell new stories in new/old ways" (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2015, p. 50). From these models, my research took its structure while keeping in mind the relational qualities instigated through acts of making, as highlighted by scholars such as Manning & Massumi (2014). They point to how unexpected and unknowable its outcomes can be. Research-creation has continued to be discussed at length in contemporary studies, such as by Truman (2021), Georgis & Matthews (2021), and Lupton & Watson (2021).

Considering that research-creation-making results can be both unexpected and unknowable, it is essential to note that this research program did not aim to imitate a conventional analytic study. Nor did it involve the same goals that such research practices attempt to achieve. Instead, collective discourse/knowledge sharing was combined with acts of making (by both the participants' collaboration and through my solo *making-as-response* as a principal researcher) to highlight and expand discourses around the cultural display of animal bodies in museum spaces. In this context, the *research data* was re-termed for this study as *source material*. Additionally, it is essential to note that the source material was not analyzed through coding methods to support a set of narrowly defined research hypotheses. Instead, after gathering the source material during the intervention event, the written responses and recorded participant interviews were studied to cross-identify correlating themes. Once identified, these themes became the initial inspiration for creating a series of artworks embodying and disseminating both the collaborative learning experience within the museum and the broader themes identified during an extensive process of individual research conducted on my own. Ultimately this research aimed at moving the act of research beyond the confines of the traditional research study format. Expanding the conversation around the collection of mounted taxidermy displayed at the Redpath Museum and hopefully creating a wider ripple that might expand outwards from the initial event to inspire collective discourse, knowledge sharing and further acts of making and investigation.

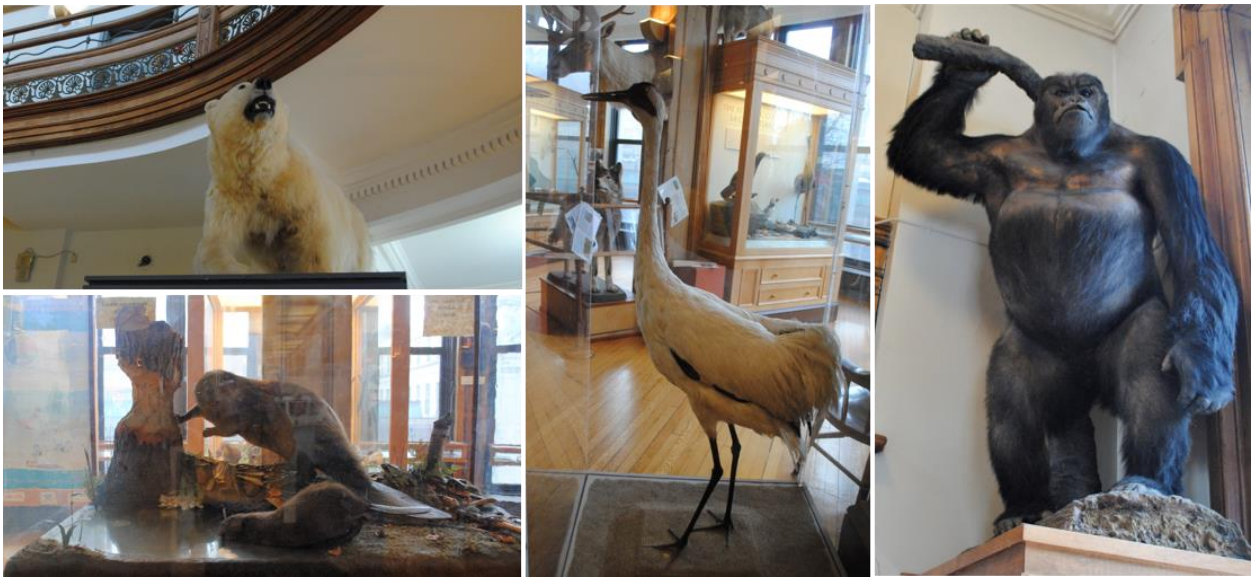
Wrestling the bear: Considering the taxidermic artefact

The taxidermic artefact as a museum object occupies a strange netherworld between animal and object, artifice and reality, and life and death. The diorama format presents the viewer with a problematic series of potentially unanswerable questions regarding how nature, culture and the animal image/object become complexly entangled within museum spaces. Such discourses further complicate the highly complex and layered history of museum taxidermy.

In nineteenth-century Europe, museum animal displays were frequently framed by national socio-political issues of the time (Shaffer & Young, 2015). Regardless of accuracy, taxidermic collections in this period became highly overwritten with imperial narratives of savage beasts, exotic otherness and big game hunting, actively forming the potent identities of colonial regions to a public mainly unable to experience them first-hand (Poliquin, 2012). In this way, museum taxidermy is to further the concept of man as the unquestioned superior being within the natural world's order. This has been discussed at length by various scholars and theorists; both specifically about the history and display of museum taxidermy (Landes &

Figure 1

Taxidermied animals used for intervention: Polar Bear, Beaver, Crane, and Gorilla.



Youngquist, 2012; Poliquin, 2012; Patchett & Lorimer, 2011; Patchett, 2008; Poliquin, 2008; Haraway, 1984), and in more recent relation to notions of post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism (Miah, 2008; Braidotti, 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Pepperell, 1995). While the work and discussions of these theorists were central to the framework of this research, the purpose of this article is to examine the collaborative museum event and its resulting research-creation artworks. As such, an in-depth discussion of these theoretical frameworks can be consulted in my original thesis (Le Gallais, 2018).

In America, the colonial impulse in public education about animals developed somewhat differently (Shaffer & Young, 2015). The leading national collections established reputations for

displaying animal mounts within highly realistic fabricated environments called dioramas (MacGregor, 2007). Pioneered by taxidermist and gorilla conservationist Carl Akeley (1864-1926), these displays placed animal mounts within meticulously created scenes based on actual locations that had been documented through extensive field studies (Madden, 2011; Jones, 2001). This "habitat diorama" format achieved popularity for its use of realistic foreground props and painted panoramic backgrounds that gave the illusion of a *window on nature*. Functioning as an early form of virtual reality, dioramas present the viewer with an illusion that what they are witnessing is the living animal in its natural environment, prompting engagement with an understanding of the social meaning of nature (Shaffer & Young, 2015). To achieve this, museum taxidermy in the early twentieth century became increasingly focused on reducing the animal body to an ideal vision of its species, capable of representing an entire species through just one animal body. This illusion of hyper-reality created powerful connections between the once-living animal and the viewer. It was seen as an effective education tool for civic biology. This concept aimed at drawing attention to the plight of living animals in the wild and contributing to the fight against species loss (Quinn, 2007). This political commitment towards wildlife conservation remained central to the political function of museum taxidermy from the turn of the century until the popularity of animal dioramas waned in the 1970s (Kutner, 2015).

It would be fair to say that by the time I had my early encounters with dioramas at the ROM in the 1990s, the *window on nature* illusion had already been broken in a wider sense. Once replaced by the advances of the digital age, social media and animal documentaries, the diorama and taxidermy as teaching tool necessarily begin to appear at best as being out of step with our political time, at worst, horribly reminiscent of nineteenth-century colonial modes of exploitation. Nevertheless, the experience of viewing up close what is an essentially natural, if not entirely whole, animal body is frequently powerful enough to transcend political conscience. As Poliquin elaborates, nothing can ever compare to the physical presence of the animal (Poliquin, 2012), a sentiment I find follows my own continuing interaction with animal bodies in museums wherever I go. I have never lost the sense of wonder, amazement and fear inspired by my early diorama/taxidermy encounters. I am continually drawn in and enchanted by the experience of encountering taxidermy in museums. Viewing the animal up close still sends a shiver up my spine; an adventure without the danger of attack, nevertheless laced with the delightful expectation that the animal might suddenly move. These objects, in a sense, are performing things—compelling in their staging and aesthetics yet problematic in their histories and political implications. Unsurprisingly, enchantment conflicts with narratives of colonial history and environmental devastation. However, this tension can generate discussion and teach new concepts around the taxidermic artefact within the museum context, allowing it to be seen not as an outmoded relic but as a powerful tool to express and disseminate a myriad of contemporary and prescient issues.

The Redpath Museum Event: Making towards discourse

The oldest purpose-built museum in Canada, the Redpath houses an extensive collection spanning several disciplines within the natural sciences, including a substantial collection of mounted zoological taxidermy displayed throughout its multi-level gallery spaces. Conceived as a teaching and learning tool for McGill University, the museum did not expand its mandate to include public education until the 1950s (Redpath, 2021). Today, despite shifting spatial needs and modern updates to its galleries, the museum maintains much of the formal curatorial style

that was the norm at the time it was founded, and taxidermied animal bodies appear in the museum galleries within multiple contexts. Specimens in its zoological collection are framed by both nineteenth century European colonialist perspectives, as well as by notions of "civic biology" developed in the early twentieth century, where animal bodies in museums were used to connect questions regarding biology and ecology (Kutner, 2015; Quinn, 2007; Shaffer & Young, 2015). While some attempts have been made over the years to re-contextualize certain specimens within the collection through a more contemporary perspective of the natural world, there is a persistent nineteenth century aura that is difficult to ignore. It is worth stressing, however, that such contrasting views are not necessarily negative. In creating a visitor experience that is frequently as complicated, confounding and deeply enchanting as taxidermy itself, the collection resists easy definition (Poliquin, 2008), and creates within the museum the opportunity to extend critical discussions around the preservation and cultural display of animal bodies, as well as on the status of animals in relation to humans more broadly.

With this in mind, I organized an event that consisted of a mediated tour and collaborative art-making activity. This event addressed the following questions: (1) what roles can art making (in the form of participatory in-museum practice and subsequent studio-based research-creation) play in conversations around taxidermied animals?; (2) How can such acts of art-making deepen collective knowledge and distribute greater understanding about the cultural display of animal bodies in museum settings and broader discourses surrounding animal issues generally? The intervention itself centred on four specimens of zoological taxidermy on display at the Redpath; a polar bear, a gorilla, a whooping crane, and a beaver diorama (see Figure 1). I selected these creatures for their variety of species, location within the museum, differing contexts of display, and high visibility and popularity within the museum itself.

The event happened in April 2017. Twelve research participants were drawn from members of the general public to participate, during which all participants were treated as "non-expert" viewers, i.e. individuals who are not qualified scientists with specific academic knowledge of the research subject. Participation was, however, not limited to those studying outside the natural sciences. On the day of the workshop, the participants arrived at the museum, where they were given a short oral presentation introducing them to the study and explaining the procedure of the event. They were then sorted into four groups and provided with a quote and image specific to each specimen. Each group was assigned one of the animals (beaver, gorilla, crane or bear) and asked to discuss the animal as a group using the provided quote and image as a jumping-off point. Participants noted their collective thoughts and responses during the group discussion and answered a provided follow-up question relating to the specimen individually. Participants remained with each animal for approximately 15 minutes after the groups rotated until all participants had the chance to experience each animal. During these animal visits, I circulated amongst the groups, observing the group discussions, listening to how they engaged with the animals and providing my observations and further explanation of the questions/procedure (see Figure 2).

Following these specimen visits, the participants returned to the teaching laboratory and spent 45 minutes contributing to an artwork stemming from their observations and discussions in the gallery. This artwork took the form of a large fabric banner made from two panels of muslin fabric. Before the intervention, I hand-stitched the banner with the names of each animal in large block letters using embroidery thread in the same plain muslin tone as the banner itself. This piece was done to inspire the participants and prevent them from being creatively daunted by a

large blank surface. This activity was an important consideration given that the project engaged with members of the general public who may not have had any experience with creating visual art. This lettering also gave the participants an additional framework to situate their contributions.

During the second half of the intervention event, the participants worked on this art creation collaboratively. They finished the artwork with the materials provided: graphite sticks, charcoal, ink, felt-tipped pens, and water-based paint (see Figure 3). The participants were restricted to black, grey and white tones to prevent the palette from becoming linked to the animals in the intervention. Contributing to the banner allowed participants

Figure 2

Participants during the workshop.

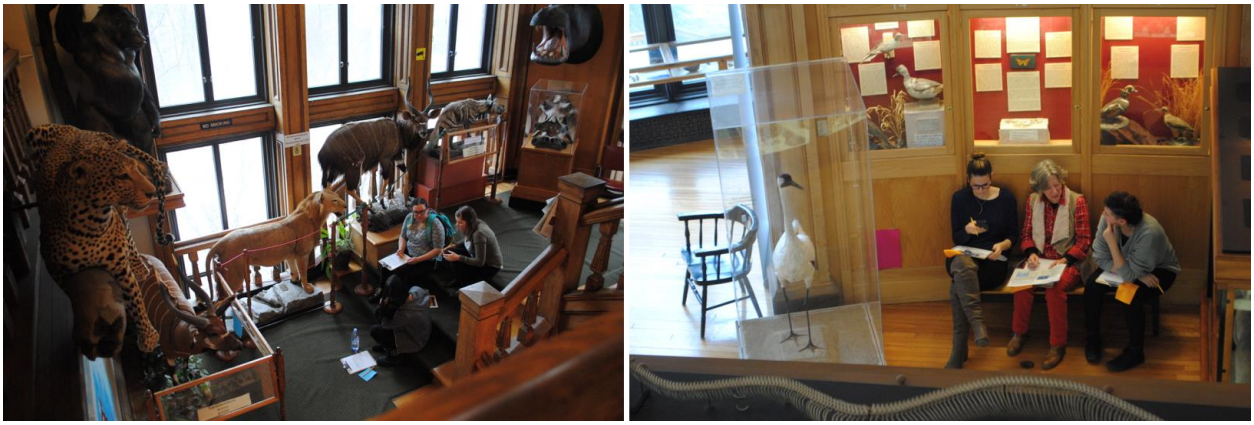


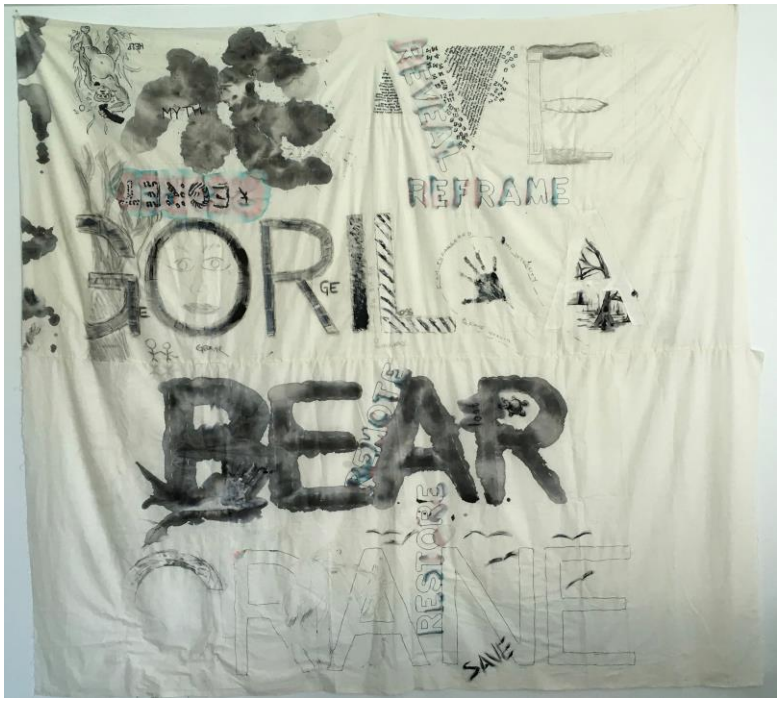
Figure 3

Participants working on the collaborative banner

to actualize their discourse and exchange of thoughts, providing a blank surface on which they could make manifest their collective knowledge (see Figure 4). The opportunity to contribute to a piece of participatory artwork allowed the participants to not just withdraw the information in a one-way dialogue with the taxidermy animals in the gallery but to give physical form to their experience (Leadbeater, 2009). The participatory banner allowed their contributions, movements, actions, interactions, and reactions within the gallery to take visual form, becoming physically part of the project and allowing them to join in collective authorship. It also allowed me as the

Figure 4

Collaborative banner artwork.



researcher/visual artist to re-conceptualize the participants as creative agents within the project, whose answers constituted a decisive contribution to the formation of the final research-creation artworks (Koh, 2015).

Following the intervention, I set about re-constructing and re-imagining the participant responses into a series of research-creation artworks that would embody the overall project. For these artworks, I chose a combination of watercolour painting and collage/assemblage (cutting and re-assembling) as the best medium to execute the work. Watercolour is a long-standing western painting technique with links to histories of colonialism (Breen, 2012), rationalist knowledge acquisition, and botanical/natural illustrations (Natural History Museum, 2017). Although similar methods of water-based painting have developed worldwide throughout history, the medium is most associated with Britain from between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, which saw the blossoming of what is known as watercolour's golden age (Barker, 2017). In this period, watercolour painting was used in the emerging field of

professional natural science, used to depict the exotic flora and fauna of newly discovered parts of the globe (Reveal, 1991; Natural History Museum, 2017). In this way, watercolour as a medium aligns with taxidermy's history of use in display and education. For those living in western, Anglo-European and North American societies, these watercolour illustrations were one of the few means by which these exotic florae and fauna were made visible.

The series of eight collages made in response to the workshop, were created as the capstone project for this research, and should be viewed as a single body of work belonging to a larger discourse that must be read as a whole in order to be fully understood. The first four works in the series imagine a view of the animals as they might appear when unobserved in their natural habitats. These collages were intended to function as *windows on nature*, incorporating the ideas and traditions behind the habitat diorama format (Alvey, 2007; DeLue, 2009; Jones, 2009; Kamcke & Hutterer, 2015; Madden, 2011, Milgrom, 2010; Rothfels, 2012; Sorenson, 2009). Creating these collages in the image of habitat dioramas allowed me to research the habitats of each animal in greater depth (Johns, Woodsworth & Driver, 1997; Miranda, 2017; Nicklen, 2013; Rosing, 2006). However, it is essential to note that the collages were not scientifically accurate representations of the natural environments but artistic responses aimed at evoking the essence of each animal within a gestural reflection of its natural setting.

Each collage was conceived and executed within a square, white picture frame (50 cm x 50 cm) and white card mat. The animals depicted in the first four collages occur inside and outside the framework of the interior mat, simultaneously drawing attention to and subverting the idea of a wildlife dioramic display. The elements of each collage were painted separately in watercolour, cut out, and then re-assembled to create each scene. For each collage, I started with a rough concept of format and placement based on my habitat research on each animal but would alter, change and adapt the placement and colours as I worked. The second group of four collages imagined a situation in which it would be possible to view each animal through a different window of the museum. In reality, no such views exist, however, the concept of viewing the animals from outside the building intrigued me. By resituating the animals just inside the museum windows, the Redpath's architecture provides a literal reference to the cultural framework that separates the animals from both viewers and their natural origins/past lives as living animals. Additionally, a reference is made to the museum diorama format (previously discussed), and creates visual tension between the animals and the natural world that exists just beyond their reach outside the museum; essentially reversing the "window on nature" concept.

Findings: Re-making animals

To create the research artwork, I needed to extract relevant aspects of the participant's written responses and identify themes across the participants' discussions and responses. Identifying these themes was an important step. It allowed me to ascertain if the quotes/images provided as jumping-off points for the talks were found useful or relevant by the participants. Analyzing the responses in this way made it apparent that regardless of which group a participant had been part of, similar reactions to the specimens occurred across all the groups, and several key themes of discussion emerged. In particular, participants were preoccupied with the idea that although the specimens were now objects housed in a museum setting, they had once been living animals in possession of their individuality and non-human context. This engagement brings to mind

comments by Baker (2006), asserting that taxidermy specimens are necessarily provocative objects in that they are *trace-bearing objects*, and those traces are the remnants of a prior/real life. Such observations are likely to go a long way to explaining the fascination taxidermic creatures continues to exert on the public despite shifting political conscience.

In addition, the group discussions centred significantly on ideas around the human impact on animal habitat; and notions of "otherness" vis-à-vis animal life and species hierarchy. As an educator and an artist, these are essential ideas to engage and disrupt, and I was incredibly excited to see museumgoers troubling the discourse. In the following paragraphs, I highlight participant responses, underscore the significance of their acts of making, and, finally, connect the richness of their thinking to my subsequent process as an artist responding to the animals, the workshop and the conversations. For further information regarding participant responses and artworks, consult the entire thesis (Le Gallis, 2018).

Beaver

Participant responses to the beaver diorama primarily centred on discussions around its supposed naturalism, the animal's nationalistic position as a symbol of Canada, and how others might view it from both historical and post-modern viewpoints. Participants commented primarily on the phenomenon of realism embedded in the diorama. Some felt it reflected a realistic portrayal of the natural environment and ecosystem in which real beavers exist in the Canadian wild and commented on its positive reflection of partnership and the animal industry. Some, however, reported an unease with this ideological form of display.

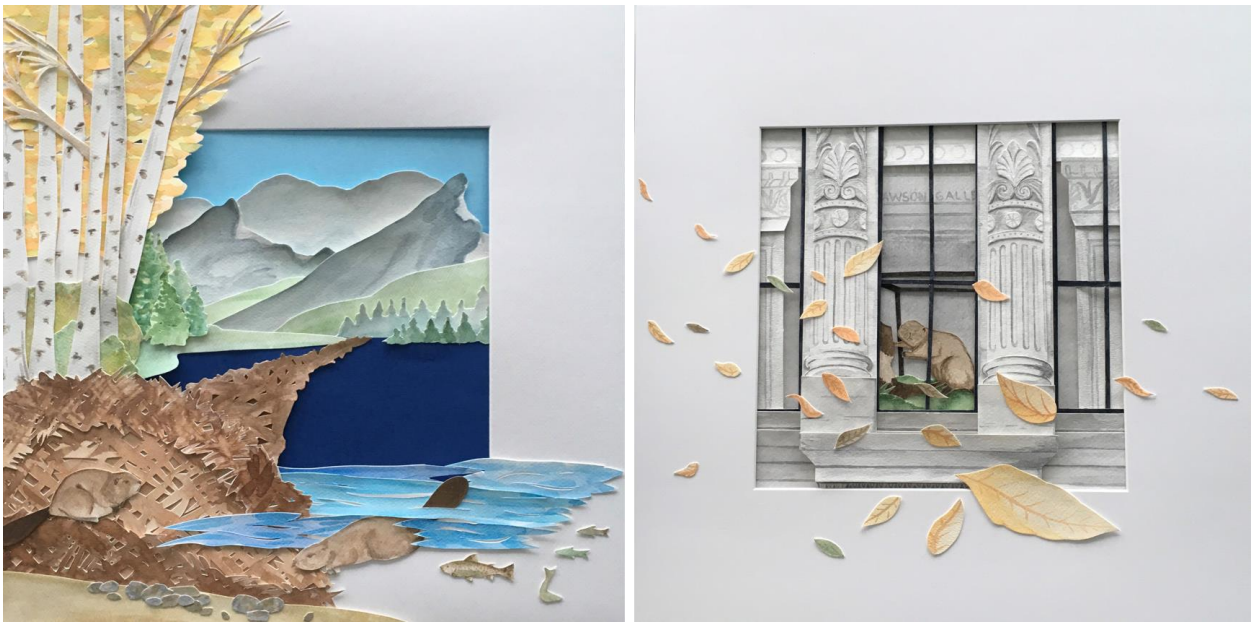
> I feel uncomfortable with this exploitation. It is a bit like nature pornography, the imposition of the fantasizing gaze in a way I didn't get from the other installations. (Participant response)

Key concepts I took from the participant discussions/responses to the beaver included the duality of the diorama as both representing an uncomplicated natural environment and the imposition of the fantasizing gaze on nature; and also the beaver's position as a symbol of quintessential *Canadiana*. My first beaver collage depicts the beavers in a *typical* Canadian landscape (see Figure 5). The scene shows a bright autumn day, with a lake and woods set at the foot of a pair of mountains. A beaver dam crosses the water, meeting a large beaver lodge in the left-hand foreground. The club is set on the bank of the lake, at the foot of a copse of birch trees. The birch tree leaves have turned the orange and gold tones of autumn. The beaver dam has been depicted in cross-section to reveal the beaver sitting inside. A second beaver dives down from the lake's surface, across the white picture frame mat and into the underwater entrance of the lodge. The collage draws attention to comments made by the research participants regarding Redpath's beaver diorama representing the partnership and industry of beavers. The second beaver collage situates the beaver diorama in the second-story window of the museum, flanked by the intricate columns of the main façade (see Figure 5). These columns, with their carved stone in organic/natural shapes, could be seen as visually similar to trees. As observed by

the participants during the intervention, the beaver looks happy to see the viewer, looking out the window to welcome visitors to the museum. Birch leaves in autumn colours blow through the air past the window in a visual connection to the beaver habitat collage and are the only element of the collage outside the frame's interior mat. In this case, the museum display intersected with participant responses, directing me towards imagery that sought to break the structure and suggest beaver life beyond forms of capture.

Figure 5

Beaver Collage 1 [left panel] and Beaver Collage 2 [right panel]



Gorilla

I observed particularly enthusiastic group engagement occurring around the gorilla. Here, discussions were centred primarily on notions of historical and contemporary views of human beings and the problem of species hierarchy.

> I think the significant change when we observe this gorilla from a more "contemporary viewpoint" is resistance to prejudices about Africa as a "wild continent". The hindsight, to understand the human rights abuses generated by this concept, we're fascinated by great apes because they look into a kind of animal side within humans. But that means that we want to show our superiority and also can't help but feel empathy. (Participant response).

This understanding is linked to the discussion around historical perceptions of great apes by Sorenson (2009), elaborating on how these perspectives are influenced by the dominant socio-

political and religious viewpoints. Historically, many African societies condemned the killing and eating of great apes in recognition of their similarities to humans. By contrast, western culture has always tended to be influenced by an anthropocentric separation of humans from other animals, shored up by religious doctrine asserting man's superiority over non-human beings. It is through this context that the image of apes becomes complicated; distinctly "other," they nevertheless share so much of the qualities we most prize in ourselves as being uniquely human. The participants discussed this idea around the similarity between humans and apes concerning the pose in which the Redpath's gorilla had been mounted. The gorilla stands upright, holding onto a tree branch for support. Here we could connect to Classical, and Renaissance statuary poses such as Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* or Michelangelo's *David* (Schneider Adams, 2007). Such a reading serves to take the viewer in two divergent directions. The pseudo-classical pose reminiscent of western art history could be taken to place the specimen into a broader timeline of western, Eurocentric discourse. It projects humanistic characteristics onto non-human animals—in contrast, keeping man in "his" long-supposed position as a superior being within the natural world. However, the status of the gorilla blurs the boundaries between humans and more-than-humans, between the supposedly "civilized" behaviour of humans and the "wild" behaviour of our non-human animal counterparts.

Popular culture has long been fascinated by this seemingly blurred border between human and animal/ape behaviour, giving rise to fictional ape beings that exist as simultaneously savage monsters and gentle victims (Sorenson, 2009). In many cases, these fictional narratives were used to prop up racist western dialogues in the nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial adventure literature, such as *King Solomon's Mines* and *Tarzan*, or else used to play into public anxieties around race and sexuality through Hollywood films such as *King Kong*. In creating the gorilla research-creation collages, I took from the participant discussions/responses several key concepts as inspiration. Among these concepts were the tendency to humanize the great apes (both historically and from a contemporary viewpoint), issues surrounding species hierarchy, and the historical and cultural characterizations of the great apes. My first gorilla collage depicts a small group of gorillas amongst the dense vegetation of a central African tropical forest (see Figure 6). A male silverback gorilla stands to one side below a stand of tall trees. A second gorilla figure and a baby sit amongst the thick vegetation. At the scene's centre, a sweeping landscape spreads out below the forest; green plains and a mountain volcano topped with billowing clouds in the distance. I chose to depict the gorillas in a group, as wild gorillas are highly social animals, typically living in groups of less than fifteen individuals, referred to as troops (Sorenson, 2009). The gorilla collage draws from participant discussions regarding the peaceful, group-dwelling nature of gorillas versus the pseudo-violent/threatening pose of the gorilla in the Redpath. The collage was also created with a direct visual reference to the landscape depicted in Carl Akeley's famous gorilla diorama for the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Jones, 2001; Madden, 2011; Milgrom, 2010); the making of which turned the *father of modern taxidermy* into one of the first gorilla conservationists.

In the second gorilla collage, the gorilla is seen with his back to the window (see Figure 6). At the museum, the gorilla is displayed with his back partially to the window, though the window is far too high to see the gorilla from the ground outside. However, in my rendering, I chose to keep the creature facing away from the viewer after I was anecdotally told a story by one of the research participants who had previously worked at the Redpath Museum. In the 1930s, the Redpath's gorilla, informally known as George, was collected in central Africa, what

is today the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The story goes that he was shot in the back while trying to defend his troop. After hearing this story, I chose to depict the gorilla with its back to the viewer, especially given the participants' repeated comments regarding the gorilla's aggressive pose. Here, the individual life histories of an animal/trace-bearer conjoined with participant discourse to shape the imagery in my work.

Figure 6

Gorilla Collage 1 [left panel] and Gorilla Collage 2 [right panel]

Polar Bear

Participant discussions about the Redpath's polar bear were greatly focused on the context of display, linking their comments to a critique of how the specimen was placed within the museum and its effect on the viewer. As has been mentioned earlier, the Redpath presents its taxidermy specimens in a variety of curatorial contexts. In the case of the polar bear, participants commented on the lack of context for the animal to its surroundings in the "Far North Exhibit" versus the original context of its wild habitat.

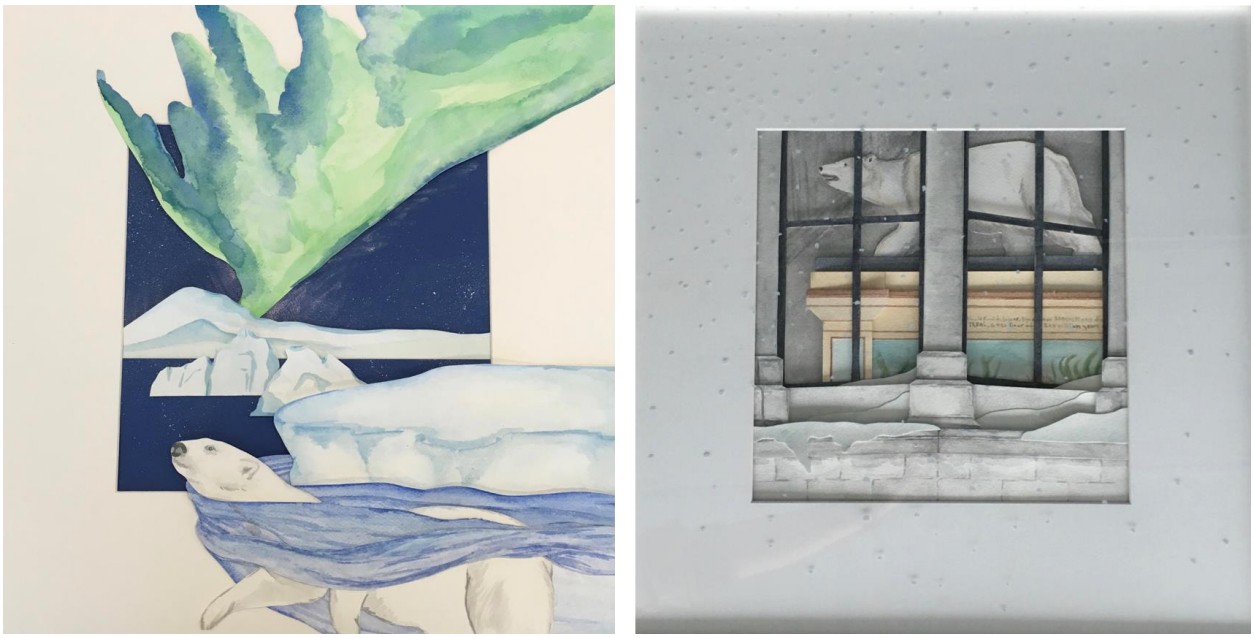
> As climate change occurs, polar bears are forced out of their habitats and into new environments. Curators should consider this shift in creating a museum display of taxidermied animals. Still, the display in which this bear rests provides no consideration (apart from lumping the bear into the *Far North* display) to his original habitat or his newly transformed one. There is no consideration of the dangerous or exciting northern habitat. The bear sat atop a glass cabinet of Montreal as a seafloor 500 million years ago. (Participant response)

In planning my research-creation work, the key concepts I took from the participant discussions/responses to the polar bear were the context in which it is placed in the museum and its effect on the viewer experience. Additionally, participants spoke passionately about climate change and its impact on the landscape/ecosystem of the far north. Finally, participants discussed or gestured in their responses aspects of species extinction. Thus, my first polar bear collage depicts a bear in an arctic landscape at night (see Figure 7). The bear appears to have just swum into sight from the right-hand side of the frame, the blue polar sea swirling around its white body. The bear is swimming through an ice flow, and two icebergs can be seen across the dark blue sea in the distance. There is a far shore of snow-covered hills, and the greenish-blue northern lights light up the night sky. Polar bears are generally solitary creatures (Rosing, 2006; Nicklen, 2013), so I chose to depict the bear alone in a relatively barren arctic landscape.

The second polar bear collage situates the polar bear across two rear windows of the museum's main gallery hall (see Figure 7). As in life, the bear is removed from the context of its natural habitat. Inside the museum, it can be seen displayed atop the diorama of Montreal's old sea floor. Yet outside of the museum, it is winter, with snow drifting against the windows. During the intervention, participants responses repeatedly focused on the apparent lack of an attempt made to link the bear to its natural context/habitat. Although this context has been given back in my work by depicting winter outside the museum, the environment is kept firmly just outside the bear's reach.

Figure 7

Polar Bear Collage 1 [left panel] and Polar Bear Collage 2 [right panel]



Whooping crane

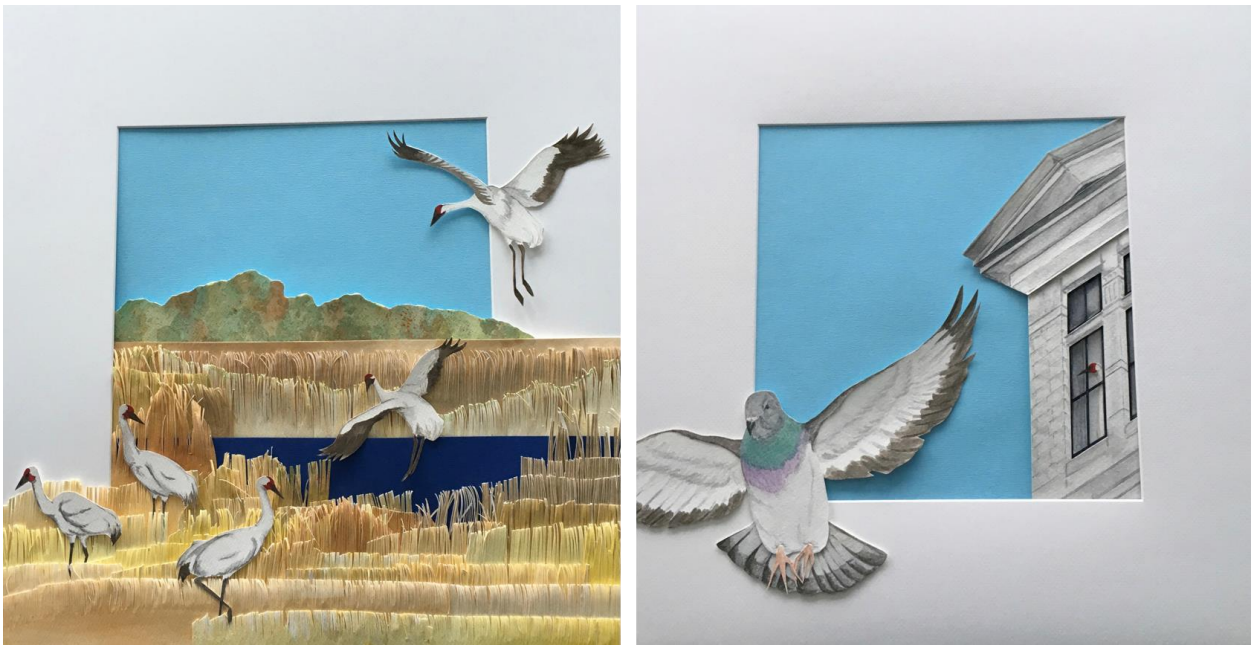
The visual and spoken responses to the whooping crane were concerned primarily with the display context; participants disliked how the bird was housed within a relatively small plexiglass case and posed standing on the ground rather than in flight. Directing them to consider the crane's placement next to another case containing iconic extinct birds (the Labrador duck and Passenger pigeon), I found participants had much to say about extinction and human impact on animal environments:

> We spent time speculating on the habits of the crane, using clues from its appearance. Deciding that they were hunted so their feathers could be used for fashion. It seems so wrong, but here I am in my leather boots, sure that I am on the wrong side of history. (Participant response)

Once again, I was struck by the participants' willingness to head into rugged terrain within the museum space. The critical concepts generated by participants and influencing my work were dire: the impact of humans on animal habitats, the looming scale of species loss and extinction as death. That said, part of the group discourse sought to imagine change. In response, I aimed to rethink the context and return the cranes to their habitat within the collage works I created in response.

Figure 8

Crane Collage 1 [left panel] and Crane Collage 2 [right panel]



My first whooping crane collage depicts a flock of cranes situated in a prairie/wetland landscape (see Figure 8). Tall grasses in tones of yellows, gold and browns predominate the

scene. A forest or thicket of trees can be seen in the distance, with a vast sky overhead. Three of the cranes are wading amongst the grasses, through which water is visible, while two others are in the process of landing. The scene is meant to depict the cranes in northern Alberta's boreal wetlands, which are the whooping crane's summer habitat (Johns, Woodsworth & Driver, 1997). Also, as opposed to the Redpath's lone specimen, the collage returns the crane to the company of its species, just as it would be in the wild. The second whooping crane collage depicts a rear west-facing window of the museum (see Figure 8). The buildings of the McGill University campus surrounding the Redpath have been removed from the scene to allow an unobstructed view of a bright blue sky. A pigeon is flying across the mat on the frame's left-hand side. The Redpath's whooping crane can be seen in the museum window in the background, looking out at the pigeon. The collage attempts to create tension between the idea of the preserved crane specimen housed inside versus a living bird flying freely outside the museum. As discussed by participants during the intervention, the crane at the museum was posed standing on the ground rather than in flight, and housed within a relatively small plexiglass case. Situating the crane in the window, looking out at a large and empty sky, draws attention to the notion that the Redpath's crane represents a critically endangered species, very few of whom are to be found in the wild. Depicting the crane looking outwards from the museum window, longingly towards its more fortunate counterpart, the rock pigeon (Rose, Nagel & Haag-Wackernagel, 2006), creates a tension between life and death, freedom and capture, and the vast blue sky in which it will never again spread its wings.

Conclusion

My project could be seen to stage a series of ricochets: from taxidermic object to animal/trace-bearer; from collective acts of thinking and making to individual acts of research-creation, and from teaching to learning and back again. I found that public art pedagogy at the Redpath Museum could engage a myriad of discourses around animal bodies activated as social objects; in doing so, I worked to reanimate these animals/trace-bearers in complex, constructive ways. These discourses were then re-constructed and further disseminated through a research-creation process in the form of eight mixed-method watercolour collages. The museum workshop sought to challenge stale or biased hierarchies of knowledge while embracing the animals as trace-bearers. However, my creative practice expanded due to collaborative and collective thinking processes. Finally, my watercolour collages re-conceptualized the Redpath Museum as a kind of diorama to highlight the different contexts involved in the cultural display of animal bodies in the museum space versus the lives of animals in the wild. I hope these paintings will instil in others a desire to learn more about these animals in all their forms (as living animals in the wild and culturally displayed animal objects). From this, perhaps others will be as enamoured, confounded, inspired and seduced as I have become with museum taxidermy's strange and complicated world.

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