

THE UNFORTUNATE REPERCUSSIONS OF DISCOVERY AND SURVIVAL

“Can you reanimate an extinct and forgotten bird?” As an artist and not a purveyor of black arts, I’m generally not asked to do this; but here was the opening challenge from Ceri Levy, one of the curators of the Ghosts of Gone Birds, a recent London exhibition concerned with bringing back the avian dead. Along with his founding ‘Ghosts’ partner, Chris Aldous, they managed to raise a creative army of over 120 artists from all disciplines who were intent on breathing artistic life back into a worryingly long list of extinct species to raise awareness and, hopefully, funds for the Birdlife International’s Preventing Extinctions programme.

I had a choice of metaphorical corpses to resurrect, and elected on a marine whim to revive the Spectacled Cormorant, a species which once occupied the Kommander and Aleutian Islands in the chilly Bering Straits. When I first Googled this cormorant, it was variously described as a clumsy, stupid and ludicrous bird so, being English, I guess that cemented my decision to support the underdog. What I didn’t expect however was how involved I would become with this bird and its history, what journeys it would take me on in my research and what ideas for new ways of working this would propel me towards.

I have both a scientific and artistic background and a rather obsessional approach to research, which perhaps strategically arises from the former and emotionally from the latter. Phalacrocorax perspicillatus (Spectacled or Pallas’ Cormorant to you and I) introduced me to an intriguing array of characters, a gripping plot line and I became more delighted with my choice as time progressed, and strangely possessive of its memory also.

The more extreme pursuits of the research needed for this piece developed into ongoing overseas conversations with Alaskan antiquarian map sellers, infantile and impulsive biographical book-buying, days crawling along cliff ledges imagining how these large cormorants might differ behaviourally from their relatives in front of me and thinking on cunning methods of trapping them; propagating unwilling scurvy grass from seed, searching the north of England for a chunky oak table which I hacked to pieces with the assistance of a reluctant joiner (nice table apparently), taking impromptu lessons from an established and patient ceramicist, and finally trying futile methods for masking the odoriferous emanations of setting plastic resins in what was a respectable public space beforehand... Slowly the cormorant’s story unravelled.

There are only six specimens of the Spectacled Cormorant existing in some sort of state worldwide, and so as a culmination of this journey, I ended up coming face to beak at last with bird ‘1858-2-3-1’ and his companion in the drawer ‘1842-12-21-4’ at Tring Museum which were very aloof-looking, very dry, and very stiff stuffed skins - the result of a Burke and Hare-esque series of corpse tradings and acquisitions between naval officers, governors and naturalists over the years.

Rather than a basic portrayal of the Spectacled Cormorant, I wanted to convey some of the wider issues around its unfortunate demise – a hint at the sequence of events leading up to the fateful last sighting in 1850, and the characters involved in the repercussions of its discovery. It took a mere 100 years from the first written description by naturalist Georg Steller for humans to hunt this bird to extinction.

In 1741, the Russian-commissioned voyage of the Sviatoi Piotr, captained by Vitus Bering, saw their first discovery of American shores. Steller was the naturalist and doctor on board, writing copious journals throughout from which the full story can be gleaned. It was a result of bad navigation, a chance shipwreck on Bering Island and the ingenuity of Steller in saving some of the crew’s lives that eventually lead to the bird’s downfall at Russian hunters’ hands. Ironically the consumption of some cormorants (rather tasty by all accounts) played an important part in this survival of the naturalist and



Full Table 8

the scurvy-ridden crew, and so they were an unwitting party to their own future demise. Bering, however, died on his eponymous island. Naturalist and scientist, Peter Simon Pallas translated Steller’s journals of that fateful 1741 voyage, studied and classified the cormorant, hence giving it, through this one written account and a handful of specimens, its final place in avian taxonomical history.

The piece is an in memoriam, perhaps also a practical sacrificial altar, for this clumsy, tasty, easily-caught cormorant that “satisfied the appetites of three hungry men”. It is a testament to the last supper of the last cormorant played out through the gathering and place settings of the three men who were the key to the bird’s discovery, description and destruction.

The inscriptions and objects pertain to details and hardships of the voyage, key dates, writings and the wider story concerning my personal entanglement with this bird. The piece hints at the physicality of the bird through the plumage colours of the varnished finish and box interiors. The weight box contains a lost navigational sounding lead (bad luck) and the related weight of the cormorant, 13lbs. On one table leg is a gentle reminder of the species currently endangered on Bering Island.

Ghosts has been a conservational tour de force. The diversity of people involved, their varied disciplines, approaches and backgrounds contributed to produce a unique, multi-faceted exhibition, an array of information of often unexplored subjects. Too often close working disciplines are islands in a potential sea of creativity. It is through this type of collaboration – this synergy – that the whole effect is far greater than the sum of its individual artistic parts.

This has meant two things; firstly, intelligent new experiences for the artists, organisers and conservational bodies involved, via a sharing and enhancement of knowledge potential. Secondly for the audience, an informed range of artwork, opinions and literature that will, in many ways, personally intrigue them, visually delight, intellectually inform and emotionally move... hopefully towards action.

<http://www.birdlife.org/extinction/>; www.ghostsofgonebirds.com
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