



Flight of fancy? Michael McMillen's exhibit *The Flying Dutchman* playfully combines suspended porpoise skeletons with schooner sails.

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Conceits and provocations

Artists reveal a variety of responses to the contents of a natural-history museum.

Philip Campbell

As you walk through the grounds of Leiden's Naturalis — the national natural-history museum of the Netherlands — you pass compact seventeenth-century buildings, neat plant borders and lawns. You have no idea that under the grass is buried a sculpture by the Los Angeles-based artist Paul McCarthy, valued at around US\$250,000. Or that he himself buried it. Only if you happen to visit the exhibition 'Conversations: Nature and the City', which can be seen at Naturalis until the end of December, will you be told about it and see a video of the event.

The exhibition is the result of an invitation to four visual artists and a composer to respond to the content of Naturalis. This they have done, with installations intended to extend and provoke the visitor's responses to what the museum is collecting and displaying.

McCarthy intends his piece, *Burial*, to reverse the normal process of palaeontologists digging up natural specimens. *Burial*, he explains, "raises a number of questions for natural history museums. While specimens and objects are still buried, do they really exist? Before they're dug up, do they have any value?" To my no-doubt blinkered eye, at least, that question of invisible value is the sort of pseudo-profundity that gives such exercises a bad name.

The exhibition is an experiment inspired by a similar exercise at the Natural History

Museum of Los Angeles County. But the question remains whether it proves its point — that artists' responses and provocations are worth the effort to a museum audience.

Other visual exhibits are conceptually more substantive. Those of Michael McMillen combine a sense of visual play that adds to the cultural value of the specimens. In *The Flying Dutchman*, he places porpoise skeletons in a shoal flying above the visitor's head, with schooner sails attached as a reference to Dutch sea-going. And his amalgamation of an elephant skeleton with a crocodile head surrounded by toy ladders in *Crocodilephant* also provokes the eye. According to the artist: "These natural creations still carry meaning: how we, as a species, reveal our needs, activities, and fears through nature... a carnival for the curious." As the Naturalis organizers suggest, "McMillen's creativity is closer to the way our brains work than we might want to admit."

In *Shank*, Ed Moses displays a large set of stuffed specimens presented on shelves as they would be stored in the museum's vaults, but surrounded by chicken wire. In so doing, he seeks to question the very act of collecting. The piece makes a visual impact and it is good that artists seek to provoke debate among visitors to museum displays. But I found myself wishing that Moses had absorbed his reflections into the subtleties and ambiguities of his art, instead of reducing them to a rather trivial visual concept.

Much more successful for me was John Outterbridge, whose *Sankafa* is a pastel garden of stuffed specimens, bones, plants, crops and artefacts. It has an aesthetic, intriguing appeal. Children demonstrably enjoy it for this reason. And one can readily recognize Outterbridge's description: "Nature in the city, the city in nature... It is a microcosm of our environment, a fertile garden from which we can harvest ideas and reflect on our history and present existence... All of this together signals a living future."

According to Dirk Houtgraaf, the exhibition's curator, attendance of 'Conversations' has been significantly lower than other areas of Naturalis. But I agree with Vanda Vitali, who originated the exhibition in Los Angeles, that such an experiment is destined to be a minority interest. More telling is the behaviour of those visitors who choose to attend. To judge by the attention showed by the visitors I witnessed, the exhibition provides another dimension to the collection's appeal.

What conclusion can be drawn about artists in a museum context? I would suggest that, on this evidence, cumbersome attempts by artists to pose philosophical questions in a visual form tend to smack of conceit, rather than stimulate. But the closer visual artists get to artfulness — to sheer visual creativity — in their response to exhibits, the more likely they are to resonate with the visitors.

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