

For Charles Waterton (Promethean boldness) was a scientific as well as an artistic virtue. His *Wanderings in South America*, 1825, «contained instructions on how to become an ornithology, what Michelangelo was in sculpture». In order to attain a Michelangelesque fusion of anatomical accuracy and classic beauty, the taxidermist must «pay close attention to the form and attitude of the bird... the proportion each curve... or expansion of any particular part bears to the rest of the body... you must possess Promethean boldness, and bring down fire, and animation as it were, into your preserved specimen.» This act of revivification paradoxically involved discarding the bird's perishable body, retaining only the skin and a few bones.»¹

The taxidermist's art is a key technique of the Natural History collection. The specimens are very artificial constructs. In order to make one bird it is often necessary to use the feathers and body parts of several different birds. So even if they look startlingly «natural» they are highly sophisticated artefacts. The storeroom of the Natural History Museum Berlin houses an amazing collection of birds, witness to the collection mania of the 19th century. To be confronted with this plethora of specimens—dead animals, eerily life-like—is quite an unsettling experience.

In the pursuit of knowledge, scientists in the 19th century were driven to amass specimens in a search for new species and for new ways of classifying them. So a vast number of animals were hunted, killed, shipped to Europe, prepared as specimens and assembled in the collections. The animals' individual bodies were of interest primarily as representatives of their species. The process of preparation («stuffing» or «pickling») turned the animal into a specimen and

as such it carried meaning only in the context of a sequence or a system of taxonomy, homology etc.

Man's relationship to animals manifests itself in these collections as dominated by an attempt at controlling and taming the abundance of nature by systems of classification, ordering and collecting.

But the viewer today can have quite a different experience when seeing the exhibits. This is what the paintings and drawings try to show. Fully aware of the intended meanings and history of the collections, the paintings are yet an attempt to tell a different story: that looking at the specimens in the storeroom can be an uncanny encounter. When lit up, the birds' bodies come to life and it is possible to look at them as the remains of something that was once alive, that had a life history and character. In the medium of painting I am mediating this divide by the fact that I am looking at something highly artificially constructed, which exerts a strange fascination and invites my engagement. The irony here is of course heightened by the fact that a painter could never dream of painting something as elusive as birds unless they were dead.

The paintings and drawings pursue a poetic potential of natural history that is inherent in the practice of collecting and scientific research—the accompanying desire to revivify the mass of dead animals which were categorized and to create a self-delusional communion with the animals.

Annotation

¹ Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain*, New Haven u. London, 2007, p. 59.

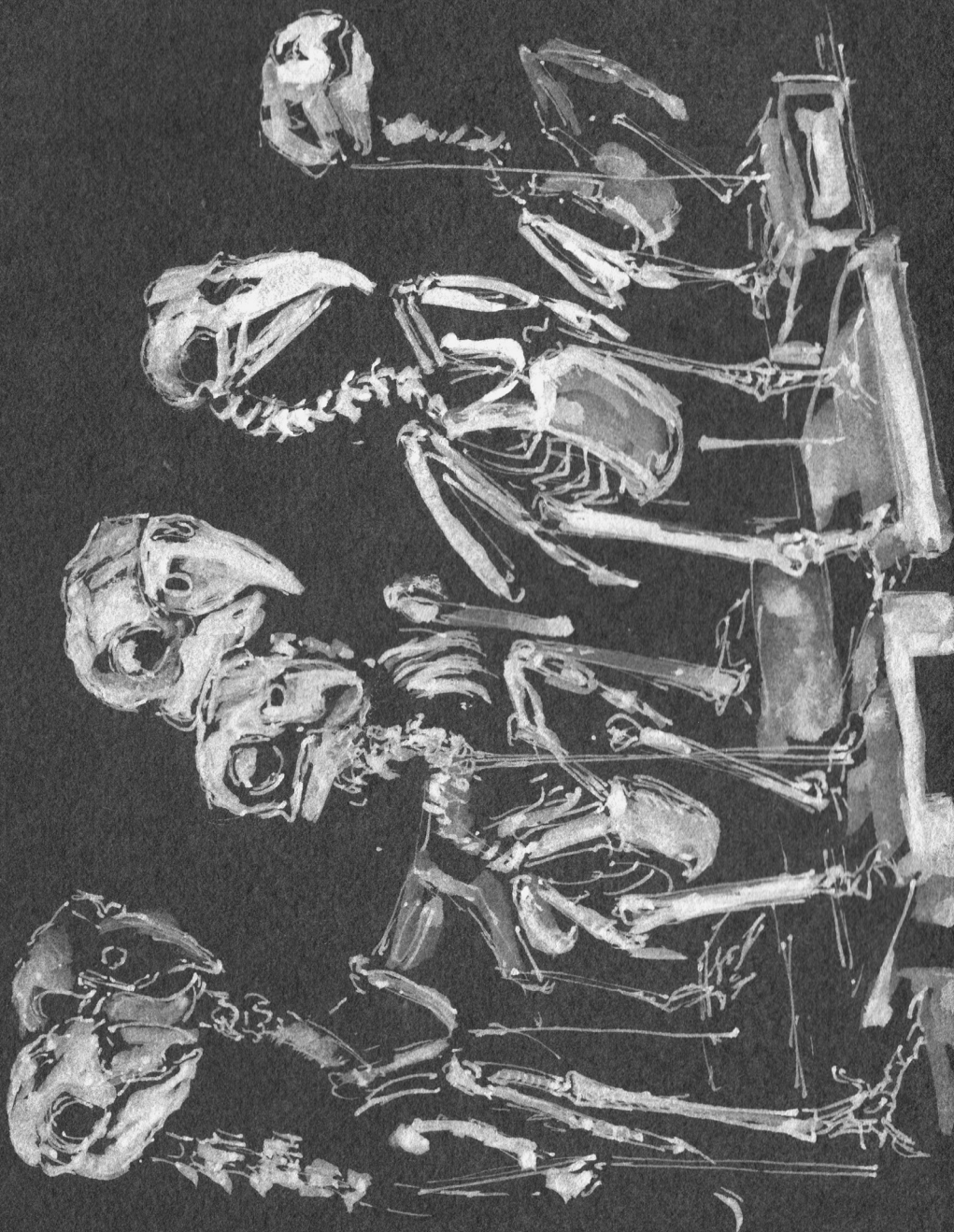






black
rusty brown
throat
grey
cold white



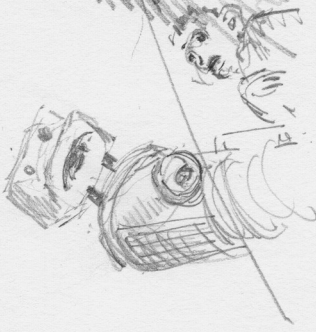




Gitany
sur l'education
du crocodile



Golden-billed
Lion Tamarin
- east coast of
Brazil



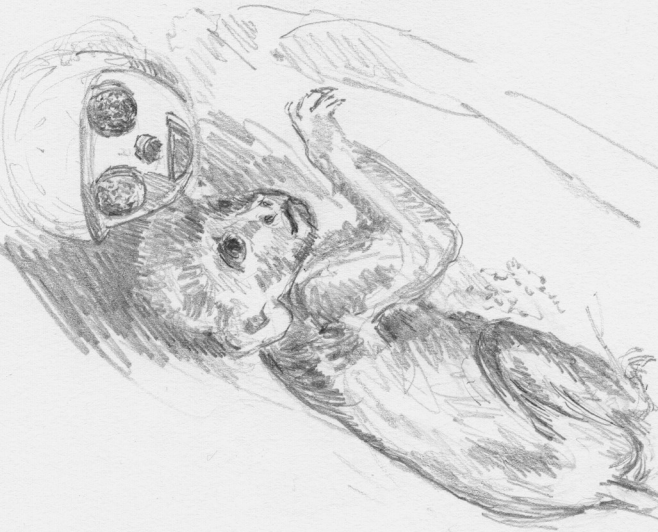
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Amper
Tamarin
west. Brazil, east. Peru

Moses's Immigration
1667 - 1741

The Force of
factus in
upon London 1730



Infant monkey
with soft surrogate
mother
Dr. Harry Harlow
'primate'
affection -



Éléments du manéger de Madame du Condoy
pour enseigner l'art des accouchements, vers 1759

Rouen, chez Flanquet d'histoire de la médecine



