

ANNE ZAHALKA*Wild Life in the Age of the Anthropocene*

26 July – 18 August 2018

Scientists recently determined that we are now living in the age of the *Anthropocene*, an ecological turning point where humans have significantly and permanently changed the character of our planet. In response, Anne Zahalka has turned a compelling and critical lens onto Nature as it has been staged in natural history museums in lush, contrived dioramas. Recorded first in New York and more recently in Mumbai, she re-imagines these ‘habitats’ to explore the environmental changes that affect them now and the way in which museums construct knowledge around a preserved past.

The taxidermied animals on display at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India) were collected from expeditions in the 1920s and 30s and have been suspended in time ever since. Much like a photograph, dioramas ‘fix’ their subjects in a ‘decisive moment’ to charm and delight onlookers, from spotted deer and blackbucks frozen in the act of listening, to an alert tiger made ready for the approach of predators through the painstakingly crafted undergrowth. Intended to educate museum visitors about Indian wildlife, these dioramas present a pristine and palatable wilderness cleansed of its man-made issues.

Zahalka digitally disrupts to re-write each idyllic narrative, picturing a domestic cat entering the rubble-strewn hyena fight and bullets littering the forest floor as the tigers now cower from jeeps in the distance. Through the constructed reality of the museum diorama, the artist points to the very real human incursions that have rendered most of the wildlife on display as ‘Critically Endangered’.

In *Falling angels*, the few surviving Indian vulture craft their nest from branches and brightly-coloured chip packets. A dead bird alludes to the 99% decrease in their population since the early 1990s, widely attributed to poisoning by the veterinary drug found in the cattle carcasses they feed on.¹ Layered with traces of technology, waste and human indifference, Zahalka’s images show us a version of these dioramas that is closer to life than these animals have been for decades.

¹ Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), ‘Fauna of Indian Subcontinent: White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*)’, curated by Manoj Chaudhari (Assistant Curator, Natural History) and published by Google Arts & Culture

Not simply a solemn critic, Zahalka also parodies the museum as a place of knowledge, breaking down its authority. Even her titles have the same playful ring to them that children's didactic panels would in any museum, claiming that *There will be no more rumble in the jungle* and pointing out that *High on a hill lived some lonely goats*. In another image, Zahalka includes visitors to the re-imagined Dachigam National Park, where tourists gather to take selfies with a now extinct Kashmir stag that sports a benign smirk. This echoes Zahalka's iconic photographs of Australia, where nature is cast as spectacle to be seen from a designated viewpoint or simply as the painted beach backdrop for leisurely pursuits. Even more pointedly in this series, Zahalka lays out the way that humans treat the environment as a carnival-like scenic spot, leaving indexes of their apathy in the form of overflowing bins and cleared land.

Transported through illuminated windows into other worlds, viewers are enticed by these distant fantasies. However, details slowly reveal themselves in Zahalka's doctored images, such as a mountain climber scaling a cliff face behind a herd of dopey goats. This miniscule figure encapsulates the human sentiment to conquer nature and, like the Himalayan Tahr, enjoys the risky business of mountaineering. Taxidermied animals themselves speak to the legacy of Enlightenment conquest that was championed by the British Raj (1858–1947). The irony that this ambition helped wipe out the Nature they so carefully enclosed in glass cases has not escaped Zahalka, who robs the rhinos of their ivory horns, presented elsewhere in the museum collection as part of precious objects. In reality, even these dioramas are not safe from poachers, who have infiltrated museum walls across the United Kingdom in recent years and prompted curators to pre-emptively remove horns from their rhino displays to prevent their theft.

In *Wild Life in the Age of the Anthropocene*, varnished canvas deepens the dewy eyes of the spotted deer to appear almost life-like. Picnickers and motorcyclists inhabit the in-between spaces behind this tableau and original backdrop blurring the line between the painterly and photographic. This melding of opposites extends throughout the scene, where the distinction between the real and the artificial becomes porous bringing us closer to understanding these ecological shifts. By flexing the pictorial plane to incorporate both the staged and the documentary, Anne Zahalka offers us a clear vision of the fraught relationship between humans and the natural world.

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