

ANNE ZAHALKA WILD LIFE AUSTRALIA

ARC
ONE
GALLERY

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Anne Zahalka, *Sea Bird Colony, Admiralty Rocks looking to Mt Gower with calm seas at, Lord Howe Island, 2019*, Source: Australian Museum

Habitat displays and dioramas have been part of natural history museums since at least the late nineteenth century, optimistic windows on ‘nature’ that can be seen - with the benefit of the sort of rear-view perspective Anne Zahalka is using - to be just as much windows on culture, aesthetics and the changing relationships of people to their environment and the natural world.

At their beginnings, the simplest of them showed ‘real’ animals fixed in death-defying ‘naturalistic’ poses, or in family groups with simple habitat and environmental markers. As the century turned and museums met modernity, these groups grew in size and ambition to be much more elaborate 3D habitat dioramas; carefully staged and artful spectacles using specimens, modelled landscapes and props with painterly and detailed backdrops designed to draw the viewer into an immersive and authentic experience of a particular place and moment from the natural world.

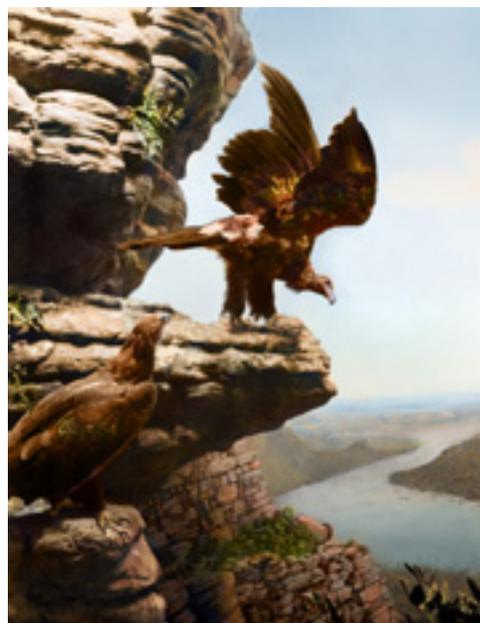
There are three elements to the diorama - the highly-skilled work and artful arrangement of taxidermied animals; the shaped and sculptured foreground with vegetation, moulding and habitat; and the painted background, often curved to create the illusion of space, distance and environment. Each element is a purposeful art in itself, with the final careful arrangements mediated, curated and contained by wide glass front framing to allow viewers to suspend time, look into nature and encounter a complex and ‘real’ moment from the natural world from which, paradoxically, all art has been erased.

The most famous are probably the habitat dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York but it was a worldwide phenomena across natural history museums in Europe, North America and India. Australia had its share of these natural theatrics too - and up until the 1970s dioramas could be seen in all our state natural history museums. Only a few remain today. The first full scale dioramas appeared in the 1920s, blurring carefully-drawn lines between didactics, exhibition, science and entertainment and making museum traditionalists nervous by threatening the dignity and purity of museums’ scientific research with public spectacle and audience participation. But visitors loved them, and the addition of drama, tension and an illusion of the real into natural history animal displays remains a key ingredient in museums’ audience appeal to this day. Encounters with dioramas are one of the most fondly and oft-remembered of museum experiences.

Natural history museums' role as image-makers is perhaps less well understood than their role in knowledge production, display and communication so it is not surprising that visual artists were not just important in the making of the original dioramas, but have also been some of their most potent interpreters. Dioramas, with their unrealisable ambitions to reproduce an oddly static three-dimensional 'nature' bear the heavy weight of authenticity, and require the powerful thrall of scientific truth-telling. Reimagined, dioramas no longer pretend to an authentic experience of looking into nature, but are a way to replicate our anxieties over the status of scientific truth, the human-stained history of our natural environments, and the new reality of human presence in all of nature – the Anthropocene*

Still an important part of the museum's natural history displays, Zahalka's poetic interventions and re-presentations of historic dioramas celebrate their beauty and artistry but also challenge their frozen view of the natural world. Unlike the original dioramas, which as soon as they went on display become other-worldly, frozen and timeless moments that cannot age, cannot change and have no history, Zahalka's work returns the dioramas to the present to reimagine the animals and their habitats in the light of new scientific research and with an acknowledgement of the human-made environmental devastation affecting these habitats today. Zahalka's images turn 3D dioramas into a flat-plane, 2D mirror for audiences, combining a nostalgia for the order, authority and soothing familiarity of museum display with the contemporary reality and our responsibility for the specific, local and species-level degradation of so much of the natural world.

*The term Anthropocene describes an ecological turning point where the impact of human behaviour has significantly and permanently affected our Earth, contributing to drastic changes on climate and the environment.



Anne Zahalka, *Wedge Tail Eagle, Mt Bellfield in Serra Valley, The Grampians, Victoria*, 2019,
Source: Museums Victoria



Anne Zahalka, *Galah, Mt Connor near Uluru, South Australia*, 2019,
Source: South Australia Museum