WILD LIFE IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

ANNE ZAHALKA
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A field guide to Indian dioramas

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Cover: High on a hill lived some lonely goats 2018. Pigment ink on canvas 100cm x 160cm
My first experience of seeing these ‘windows on the world’ was physical and vertiginous. It was like being pulled through an aperture and transported through time to places and countries I’d never seen before, to pristine landscapes untouched by humans, where animals roamed unimpeded and unthreatened. A perfect, albeit artificial world meticulously constructed by artists and scientists to duplicate the wonder of ‘nature’. Time has been stopped – birds soar in suspended animation, creatures are locked in to an instant and everything is frozen.

This ‘fixed’ illusion can be transcribed seamlessly through the camera’s lens, and like Hiroshi Sugimoto before me I wanted to capture these scenes on film, condensing it onto the photographic surface. Having documented these dioramas, I carried my exposed film back to Australia where it sat in negative sleeves for twenty-five years.

In 2006 I embarked on my Wild Life series to consider the impact of humans on these landscapes. Through digital interventions based on current science and the damaging carbon footprint left by tourism, industry and population growth, I began the process of revising and reconstructing these habitats to reflect how they might look today. Harnessing the capabilities of photoshop compositing, I scanned the films and updated these pictorial scenes.

Travelling last year to India for the first time, I sought out the natural history museum in Mumbai. Seeing these early dioramas with their beautiful rendering of landscapes and taxidermied animals, I had the same excitement as I did in New York. While they too capture an idyllic world where animals and birds look benignly happy and content, it is no longer possible to encounter these scenes without the knowledge of what has since taken place.

Like Holden Caulfield, I wished that everything had stayed the same and that nobody would be different. But everything has changed, and Wild Life in the Age of the Anthropocene forces us to bear witness to the damage humans have wreaked on the planet.

Anne Zahalka
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.

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.

At the Bombay Natural History Museum, founded as an observation and scientific research centre in 1883 with a museum added in 1905, the still-intact dioramas Zahalka saw and documented in 2017, were probably built for the new natural history section which opened in 1933, just three years before Howard Akeley’s famous grandly ambitious African Mammal dioramas opened in New York. Although not of the same scale or technical wizardry, the Mumbai dioramas clearly reflect an internationalist diorama aesthetic, modernist reverence for encounters with the natural world and newly developing environmental concerns and conservation ethics.

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 be 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*.

The dioramas are still an important part of the Mumbai museum’s natural history displays. Zahalka’s poetic interventions and re-presentations of these historic displays 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.

Vanessa Finney

*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.
Indian Vulture *Gyps indicus*

Endemic to India. Critically endangered.

View: Mumba Hills, Thane

The Indian vulture, native to India, Nepal and Pakistan, breeds mainly off cliffs and sometimes on high man-made structures. These birds of prey play an essential role in environment conservation and public health. By removing carcasses, vultures reduce pollution and prevent other animals feeding off poisonous remains.

But their own existence is now under threat. Huge numbers of the vulture have died from feeding on carcasses of cattle that have been treated with veterinary painkiller drugs. The Indian vulture is classified as Critically Endangered by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature).
Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*
East Afghanistan, Gujarat to Sri Lanka
View: Breeding colony in the Great Rann of Kutch, Gujarat

The greater flamingo inhabits the lagoons, lakes and mudflats of the Indian subcontinent, where the algae and crustaceans they feed on gives them their distinctive pink colouring. They were once a migratory bird to India but are now considered a resident, with large scale breeding sites found in Gujarat.

While not yet classified as Threatened, modern infrastructure and industry are putting their habitats at risk. New roads, mining effluent, sewage, heavy metals, and collisions with fences and power lines are rising causes of death.
Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*
View: Simla Hills, Kashmir
The bearded vulture is found along the high mountain ranges of the Indian subcontinent. Unlike most vultures, they prefer to feed on the bone and marrow from carcasses rather than the meat. They wait patiently for other scavengers to strip the bones, then drop the bones from a height to shatter and expose the nutrients. These extremely large birds are monogamous and breed once a year, laying just two eggs. But their naturally low numbers are dwindling as a result of habitat loss, human disturbance, and collisions with power lines and wind farms. The bearded vulture is classified as Near Threatened by the IUCN.
1. Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena*

A nocturnal animal, the striped hyena typically only emerges in complete darkness, and is quick to return to its den before sunrise. It is monogamous, with males and females working together to raise their cubs. The striped hyena features prominently in Middle Eastern and Asian folklore. In some areas, its body parts are considered magical, and are used as charms or talismans. IUCN has classified the striped hyena as Near Threatened.

2. Jungle Cat *Felis chaus*

Primarily a carnivore, the jungle cat hunts for small mammals and birds throughout the day. It is solitary in nature, and inhabits places with adequate water and dense vegetation, such as swamps, wetlands and riverine areas. Major threats to its survival include the destruction of wetlands, trapping and poisoning.

3. Indian Fox *Vulpes bengalensis*

The Indian fox is mainly active in twilight, spending most of the day escaping the heat by hiding under vegetation or in the complex subterranean dens they dig. The Indian fox is faced with various threats to its population. It is hunted for its flesh and skin, with some body parts used in traditional medicine. But perhaps the greatest threat to its survival comes from the agriculture and industry taking over its grassland habitat.

4. Fishing Cat *Prionailurus viverrinus*

Fishing cats live mostly near rivers, streams and lakes, and in swamps and mangroves. Most are able to swim well, and some species are actually semi-aquatic and feed mainly on fish and other aquatic animals. In 2008, the IUCN classified the fishing cat as Vulnerable. Wetland destruction is the primary threat facing this species, with more than half of Asian wetlands under threat and disappearing.

5. Indian Grey Mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii*

The Indian grey mongoose is commonly found in open forests, scrublands and cultivated fields, often close to human habitation. It lives in burrows, hedgerows and thickets and among groves of trees, taking shelter under rocks or bushes and even in drains. It is inquisitive but cautious, seldom venturing far from cover. Usually found on its own or in pairs, the Indian grey mongoose preys on snakes, birds’ eggs and hatchlings and lizards.

6. Domestic Cat *Felis catus*

The domestic cat is endemic throughout the world and is the smallest member of the Felidae family. Carnivorous and predatory by nature, cats are a global threat not just to birds but to small mammals, amphibians, insects and reptiles, resulting in a severe disruption of the local food chain and ecology.
A crowd of carnivores 2018 Pigment ink on canvas 100cm x 163cm

High on a hill lived some lonely goats 2018 Pigment ink on canvas 100cm x 160cm
1. Sindh Ibex/Turkman Wild Goat *Capra aegagrus blythi*.
Native to southern Pakistan, the Sindh ibex is considered to be the ancestor of the domesticated goat. Classified as Vulnerable, the major threats to this species are poaching, competition for food with domestic livestock, and disturbance and habitat loss from logging and land clearing.

2. Himalayan Tahr *Hemitragus jemlahicus*.
The Himalayan tahr inhabits steep rocky mountain sides in the Himalayas in southern Tibet, northern India and Nepal. The species is classified as Near Threatened and close to Vulnerable as a result of hunting for meat, habitat destruction and hunting for meat the major threats to survival.

3. Himalayan Goral *Naemorhedus goral*.
The Himalayan goral is found across rocky rugged terrain throughout the Himalayas including Bhutan, northern India, Nepal, southern Tibet and western Myanmar. The species is classified Near Threatened, with severe habitat destruction and hunting for meat the major threats to survival.

4. Bharal/Himalayan Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*.
Found across the high Himalayas of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and Pakistan, the bharal is classified as Least Concern due to its widespread population. It favours open grassy slopes and feeds on grass, alpine herbs and lichen.

5. Himalayan Markhor *Capra falconeri*.
The Himalayan markhor is found in northern India and the Himalayas. The markhor range is considered Near Threatened and close to Vulnerable due to a variety of factors including illegal hunting, forage competition with livestock and loss of habitat.

6. Punjab Urial/Shapo *Ovis orientalis*.
The Punjab urial is native to northern Punjab in Pakistan and is considered the ancestor of the domesticated sheep. Its population is classified as Vulnerable and is expected to decline. Overhunting, livestock overgrazing and habitat degradation are the main threats to the Punjab urial.

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Blackbuck *Antilope cervicapra*

The Blackbuck antelope is native to the Indian subcontinent and inhabits a widespread area. They live in open habitats such as grassy plains and sparse forests which let them see predators at a distance. Their speed also gives them protection against predators like wolves and leopards.

Blackbuck numbers declined rapidly in the early 20th century due to unsustainable hunting, but the population recovered once the species was declared protected. Today, it faces pressure from human population and economic growth, along with attacks by feral dogs.
Indian Bison or Gaur *Bos gaurus*

Indian bison are the heaviest, most powerful and largest living land animal of all wild cattle. Native to Southeast Asia, it lives in small herds of up to 11 individuals, one of which is a male, however herds are led by an old adult female. Adult males may be solitary but during the peak of the breeding season, they wander widely in search of receptive females. It is currently classed as Vulnerable due to loss of habitat, rapid development and competition for grazing land with domestic livestock. Indian bison is also hunted for its meat and decorative horns, and its internal organs are highly desirable in black market medicine.
Chital or Spotted Deer *Axis axis*

The chital or spotted deer is one of the most common deer species in India. It’s found in large numbers in deciduous or semi-evergreen forests and open grasslands. It is classified as Least Concern by IUCN, but this classification is precarious as the species is almost completely dependent on active protection. Within conservation areas competition for grazing poses a serious threat, while outside conservation areas poaching is still an issue. Tourism is also impacting negatively on chital through the disposal of rubbish and picnic litter within its habitats.
Hangul or Kashmir Stag *Cervus elaphus hanglu*

The Kashmir stag, also called the hangul and kashmiri red deer, is native to India and the ‘State Animal’ of Kashmir. Classified as Critically Endangered, it is close to extinction with a population estimated to be less than 200. The species is illegally hunted and in some areas protection is limited due to the occupation by insurgents and armed forces.

The only viable population left in the wild is in Dachigam National Park, but deforestation, tourism, poaching and overgrazing are ongoing threats.
Bengal Tiger *Panthera tigris tigris*

The Bengal tiger is the ‘national animal’ of India and Bangladesh. It’s the largest of the four big cats under the genus Panthera (lion, tiger, jaguars and leopards), and one of the eight varieties of tigers found in India. The IUCN lists the Bengal tiger as Endangered, with fewer than 2500 animals in existence at last estimate. Habitat loss and illegal wildlife trade are the biggest threat to numbers, with parts of the tiger highly prized for folk medicine.
Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros

*Rhinoceros unicornis* (Linnaeus) Locality: Assam

The great Indian one-horned rhinoceros lives primarily in northern India and Nepal, grazing on tall grasses, fruit, leaves and cultivated crops. The species declined to near extinction in the early 1900s due to agricultural development and sport hunting, but is recovering thanks to strict protection.

Classified as Vulnerable, the rhinoceros is still at most risk from poaching for its horn, which is valued in traditional Chinese medicine and as ornamental dagger handles. Poaching is a threat not only in the natural habitat of the rhinoceros, but also in museums where rhino horns are stolen from displays.

There will be no more rumble in the jungle 2018 Pigment ink on canvas 100cm x 150cm
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