

Rosamond Purcell: *Nature Stands Aside*

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts
September – December 2022



Rosamond Purcell: Hematite "Bird Wing" from Cumberland, England, 2009-10

Why do people collect things?

What drives the need to acquire, to preserve, to label and classify?

Why are some objects locked up and hidden away, while others get left out in the rain?

And what is the relationship between objects themselves and photographs made of them?

These questions arose while viewing *Rosamond Purcell: Nature Stands Aside*, the recent, fifty-year retrospective of Purcell's work at the Addison Gallery of American Art. This remarkable and challenging exhibition was curated by Gordon Wilkins, Curator of American Art at the Addison Gallery, and is accompanied by a catalog of the same title, edited by Wilkins and featuring essays by Errol Morris, Belinda Rathbone, Christopher Imscher and Wilkins himself. An interview with Purcell by Mark Dion rounds out the introductory texts, and notes by the photographer, along with a chronology and bibliography, can be found at the end of the book. The Addison's excellent documentation and a virtual tour of the entire project are available on the Gallery website (<https://addison.andover.edu>), as are links to additional reviews, articles, and clips from broadcast media.

Comprehensive and elegantly installed, the exhibition completely fills the second floor of the museum. It covers all aspects of Purcell's creative career in chronological order, starting with the early black and white images—sometimes of objects but mostly of places and people—that she made between 1969 and 1974 using Polaroid cameras and films. With the advent of Polaroid color materials, from the late 1970s onward her approach began to shift, and her work increasingly stressed the subjective and metaphorical possibilities of the medium. Use of color, image layering and image transfer became more significant aspects of her process, and during these same years she made her first photographs of zoological specimens in museum collections, the subject for which she is now best known.

Purcell's major projects from the past four decades—made at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, the Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden, Netherlands, the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology in Camarillo, California and the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University in Philadelphia—are all featured prominently as the exhibition progresses, and photographs from other collections (in St. Petersburg, Utrecht, Bologna, Palermo, Oxford, London, Honolulu, Massachusetts, and Maine) are included as well.

Two of the exhibition's nine gallery spaces highlight Purcell's own collecting activities. One room features her massive 10x22 foot *Wall*, made from weathered, seemingly ancient materials salvaged from a 13-acre junkyard in Owl's Head, Maine. Another includes her astonishing 2003 recreation of the famous natural history museum created by Danish physician Ole Worm, primarily known via a 1655 engraving which Purcell first saw in *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe*. (The book was a gift from her mother nearly two decades earlier: "To indulge my obsession with Worm's museum," Purcell wrote, "I had to see it built.") On view nearby are shelves upon shelves of miscellaneous materials, drawers full of specimens, display cases, images assembled in broken window frames, worm-eaten books, rusty tools, and old mercury bottles. It's a lot: over time, Purcell became a collector herself.



Rosamond Purcell: Booknest, 1980s: Found Object

Much of the writing in the exhibition catalog stresses the dualities and even the contradictions inherent in Purcell's work. As Allison Kemmerer, the Addison's Director, points out,

"...Purcell explores the liminal spaces between the unsettling and the sublime, the beautiful and the bizarre, the natural and the manufactured. ...Revealing something new in the old, something strange in the familiar, her pioneering [work] opens our eyes to an expansive universe...." (1)

This is of course true, but the show's lasting impact also reflects other aspects of Purcell's practice: a singularity of purpose, an obsession with subject, and a relentless pursuit of access. In combination with her impeccable camera technique and deep affinity for natural light, these elements work to channel the expressive energies which gave rise to this exhibition in the first place, and to support both its conceptual logic and its rigorous design.

Purcell's images can and do show affliction, deformity, death, environmental decay and even extinction. Not all visitors will be comfortable. But these photographs are in every respect honest, and Purcell herself has always grappled with mixed feelings about some of her subjects.

She first went to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at a young age and her impressions of these visits remain undiminished. In a sense, her entire creative life has involved a processing of these experiences:

As children we were taken to the museums in Cambridge, especially to the Museum of Comparative Zoology. It was a good way to get us out of the house.... I found myself looking at the things that were not easy to look at. I had an atavistic terror of taxidermy. I stood, not speaking, in front of these grimacing sewed-up pelts. After I began taking photographs, I thought: I have to look at something that is not easy to look at; it's too easy to look at interesting people. Some museum specimens were more gestural than others, like the primates. I gravitated towards them. They were not boring.



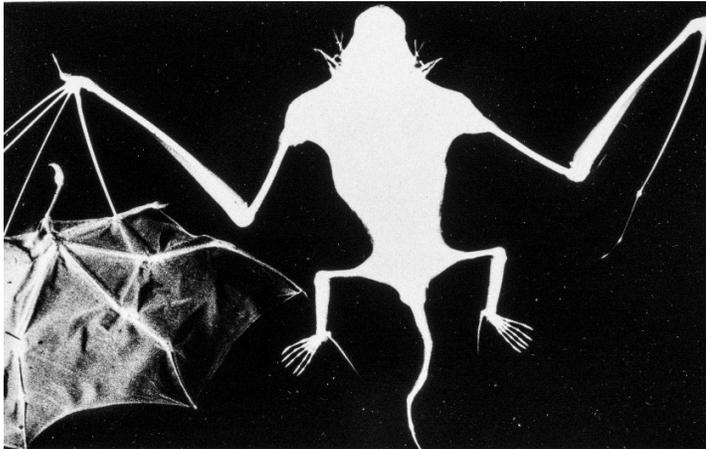
Rosamond Purcell: Saki and Golden Lion Tamarin, 1990s

“Not boring” is an understatement. All these photographs are charged with an inner energy which gives rise to both psychic and visual force fields. The first of these seems to reach into the image and draw each specimen forward, out of its own past and into present time; the second pulls the viewer physically closer to the print itself, and thus closer to the very past from which the object, through its image, has been temporarily freed.

Purcell's clear and direct way of expressing herself greatly enlivens the exhibition wall texts, which are outstanding by any measure. Her first-person narratives are wonderfully written. Spare, expressive, and utterly lucid, these texts were compelling enough that many viewers photographed them, holding them up to read on their phone screens while walking through the gallery.

Three examples might give a sense of this. The first accompanies her 1984 photographs of bats in the Harvard zoological collection:

Bats look like pigs, horses, foxes, mice. They are reminiscent of Chinese dragons, of figures by Hieronymus Bosch, of medieval carvings of souls in hell. The wings of these bats were as translucent as parchment and sometimes more fragile.... Selective production of negative rather than positive photographic prints reinforces the perception that, for many of us, bats are poorly visible—elusive, nocturnal, mostly inaudible, flickering rather than fixed.



Rosamond Purcell: Bats, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, 1984

Further on in the exhibit, and speaking more generally, Purcell talks of the relationships between the scientist and the artist, and between photographer and viewer:

In the domains of the scientist and the curator, the death of an organism is the beginning: it strips away the layer of life. Other layers of information may then vanish with each stage of dissection—the skin from the bone; the bones from the skin; color or opacity from the tissue; or fluids from the vital organs, arteries and veins. Irrelevant layers are discarded as the scientist seeks a proper vantage point for his work.... What the viewer...sees then is always partial, sometimes vestigial, and to the nonscientist, often mysterious.



Rosamond Purcell: Piranha, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, 1991

Later still, while thinking about endangerment and extinction, Purcell wrote these paragraphs to accompany images she made in Leiden in the late 1990s:

The museum has its methods, but with all due respect, the system often has a way of closing out the cosmos from which each creature came. The urgent need, as ecosystems collapse, for scientists to gather statistics on each animal—natural history, geographical range, and conservation status—tends to make the ode, the painting, the prayer, seem extraneous. Scientific data are attached to bull and butterfly alike, but there is not enough room on the card or in the catalogue to report how the philosopher, the villager, the forest dweller, or the poet saw the animal walk, crawl, zigzag or soar....



Rosamond Purcell: Norfolk Island Kereru, Leiden, late 1990s

Although life passes, patterns and forms remain, and there is nothing like bringing beautiful feathers, bones and fur to the light of day. In the grassland of New Zealand, the quail flew up in seconds. In the museum, the same quail are motionless, but the light is always moving—and daylight, changing minute by minute and hour by hour as it falls across the feathers, reanimates the birds. The effect of feathers, bones, scales, or horn bathed in light, and the study of seasonal changes in the quality of light are crucial to this, my style of photography.

Lastly, Purcell's work and writing, this exhibition, and the book are all driven by a deep engagement with questions about life, existence, expression, and the parallel worlds of art and science. Collections and collecting are a means to an end: some objects are treasured, and some discarded, but all are fascinating to someone, somewhere, and at some specific time. The photographs bring these objects out from storage, into the light and into our view, offering us both a proximity to them as real, material things and a new understanding of what they once were. Every object is chosen—and photographed—for us to engage with it, each in our own way.

January, 2023



Rosamond Purcell: Great Egret, Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Camarillo, California, 2007=2008

Notes

(1): From *Nature Stands Aside*, p. 7. All other quotations from exhibition wall texts.

All photographs are by Rosamond Purcell, downloaded from the Addison Gallery website:

<https://addison.andover.edu/exhibition/rosamond-purcell-nature-stands-aside>

Links provided by the Addison Gallery (see *In The News* in the link above) include an on-camera interview with Boston arts reporter Jared Bowen, an interview in **photograph** magazine by Lyle Rexer, and several exhibition reviews.

Lucy Sante's review of *Nature Stands Aside* (Rizzoli/Electa, 2022) appeared in *The Women Behind the Camera*, published in the New York Times on December 2, 2022.

More information about Ole Worm's museum and its influence on Purcell can be found below:

<https://collections.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/2020/05/12/a-cabinet-of-curiosities-ole-worms-museum-wormianum-1655/>

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/ole-worm-cabinet>