

## Interview

Nikola Irmer & Axel Lapp

**For years people were the main subject of your pictures, which partly functioned as portraits, but which were above all a representation of the lifestyles and roles which your protagonists either claimed for themselves or which were imposed on them by their social environment. So what is now special about these taxidermy specimens, these 'dead' birds that makes them so interesting for your painting?**

There are two important aspects. First, the question about the thing itself: what is it? Particularly in a museum's storage spaces, when one can see the animals without the intervening glass, that's quite a confrontation: human–animal. These objects are only simulated remains, but for me they still exert a strong fascination. They were made with a claim to being lifelike – for the observer they are extremely suggestive and give a very direct impression of life. Although particularly in the older collections you can see how some of the specimens have seen better days: occasionally they lack a head, the seams are beginning to show or the stuffing is coming out. Of course that works against the illusion, but this is what fascinates me, because these are traces of the history that these exhibits have lived through as things. However, the longer one spends with them the more difficult it becomes to determine what they really are as objects. They're dead animals, artificial surrogates, charged images and scientific objects. Due to the art of the taxidermists they are astonishingly lively and can conjure up whole movements, aspects of character and short narrations. And in their presence one's self-assurance can feel threatened. Personally, I feel watched. And this confrontation has a pathos of its own. It's this indeterminate area in between that makes these bird specimens so important to me. Painting and drawing in their own different ways allow me to orient myself in this constantly changing space.

The second point is the extraordinary abundance of objects that come together in these collections, but especially in the storage facilities. This makes vividly clear the extraordinary zeal with which in the 19th century these animals were hunted, sorted, skinned and mounted – a scale of production that often exceeds our powers of assimilation. However, I see this as a very productive challenge: to expose myself to the chaos and to attempt to paint my way out.

While studying at Hunter College in New York I read *Looking at the Overlooked* by Norman Bryson. As a description of what still life painting can achieve, I still find it a very good account. And I think that one aspect that I find so moving about these objects in storage is their life in oblivion. To deal with what has been overlooked, forgotten and to give this a new life in my pictures – to draw attention to it – is an important incentive. In painting I give these objects a place in which they can live on.

**So painting is a reordering of existing 'data', of objects of what in the meantime has become an almost completely historical science?**

For me painting and drawing are always a process of getting closer to objects. The subject of natural history collections is such a broad and fascinating field, which as an amateur – just as in the 19th century – I'm trying to come to terms with, and at the same time I'm constantly making new connections and discovering new ideas, which then enter into my work.

'Reordering' is a good description, since to some extent I create a space for myself within this collecting culture and develop a very personal interpretation in relation to its public and hidden spaces. As soon as I begin to work – first while looking at the objects, then in the process of drawing and painting – this leads to entirely new relations and connections. These have nothing to do with scientific criteria or the interests of collecting. Instead, I might see a rhythm that passes through a group, explore a narrative or even psychological potential. These are naturally very subjective things, which I continue to pursue in the course of my work with the exhibits.

**Since 2008, when you first began to work with ornithological collections and you made the first pictures of stuffed birds in glass cabinets, your work has undergone a major change. There's now also this research-like dimension. It's almost as if the works themselves have become an encyclopaedic representation of the historical study of nature. How do you see this aspect of your work?**

My interest in natural history collections actually goes back to the beginning of my studies. At the time I often drew in the museums in San Francisco, Chicago and New York.

The bird collection in Berlin is such an important place for me above all because the history of collecting is so visible there. That includes both earlier systems of ordering as well as the historically late transition to the vitrines, cabinets and dioramas in which we now so often encounter these objects.

One aspect for me that's especially characteristic of old collections is that this accumulation of specimens went hand in hand with the aim of acquiring knowledge about the different species. A driving force here was taxonomy, the great project of ordering the natural world. At the time a not insignificant role was played by observation. And in the old collections like the one in Vienna or La Specola in Florence this approach to nature is still so wonderfully evident.

So these occasionally labyrinthine sites of display have two aspects that are important to me: on the one hand, the paradoxical, lifelike quality of the individual specimens; on the other, the spaces that undertook this huge task of classification. The latter aspect has its own ambivalence, which is particularly visible in the storage areas, the spaces that are usually closed off to the public. This is where the museum as a

public place gives way to a twilight of forgetting. Here in particular, the specimens as things undergo an additional transformation. Certain aspects of their lifelike mise-en-scène break away from their original purpose and setting. Here, one finds unintentional juxtapositions, interactions and relations that we do not control. These hidden spaces contain an afterlife of nature. This is manifested for instance in the jumble of specimens gathered in the ill-lit shelving units and under plastic sheeting, but also when these artificially revived creatures finally degenerate into mere stuff.

### **What role does the medium of painting play here?**

I see a number of points of contact between this type of collection and painting. Like a taxidermist, I also build my pictures out of innumerable tiny elements, join together artificial parts to create something that can give an illusion of life. At the same time, the paradox of this illusion is something that painting has long been familiar with. Painting brings a sensibility and historical experience that is well suited to reflect particularly on the arrangements of the taxidermy specimens.

Painting allows a very subjective approach to what is seen. And here the element of dialogue, which I understand as the key to all painting after life, is essential. The time alone that's needed to paint a picture, the constant weighing up, the innumerable glances, the encounter between artist, material and subject that takes place within the small field of the picture, the back and forth between these three elements, all of this creates ways of approaching the subject that are not offered by any other medium. The way I paint means that the picture always puts up a certain resistance. I never know at the beginning where I'll arrive in the end, and this seems to be an adequate process for such a complex phenomenon.

### **Can you describe this process a little? You spend a fair amount of time in zoological collections, drawing, sketching. I know that this is very important to you, but if it were only a question of a preliminary documentation, you could also make photos or a film. Could you try to explain how the different types of information differ?**

In some ways my pictures are the result of a gradual process of familiarising myself with the motif and simultaneously a building up of the figures. I see a movement that goes through a single specimen or through a whole group, and I can transform what seems to me essential about this movement into brushstrokes. I can feel my way into the object, and at the same time each passage has to be 'built'. This process is made up of innumerable decisions about form, tone, colour, light and line. I scrape off passages, build them up again and create relations between the elements just listed – all that can be done in a very direct way. I simply think with the materials. If I make photos, then as a memory aid or as a record of general impressions, but as a medium photography plays a subordinate role.

In this respect painting and drawing are both very haptic processes, if in different ways. To some extent the substance of the paint operates as an analogy to the materiality of what is seen. With drawing, on the other hand, all the thoughts and decisions involved in making the image remain visible, so it's always partly a 'protocol' of this process.

This relates to another important dimension: the accumulation of time that flows into a drawing or a picture. Most of the large pictures are the result of three to six months continuous work. This compression is important to me. I want to charge the pictures with so much information that they in turn extend the period of observation.

Another point might seem obvious since the advent of modernism: in painting and drawing the innumerable slight shifts of the gaze can turn the picture itself into an incredibly lively field. From Cubism up to living painters such as David Hockney one can see how a single picture can be a synthesis of different spaces. However, I'm not interested in this analytical aspect. I don't want to explicitly define pictorial space as a composite of different sequences. Through the slight shifts of the gaze, the changing focus, the resonances of colour and form, I'm much more interested – as in the Specola pictures for example – in giving the paradoxical life of the exhibits a dynamic quality, one that can be experienced by the viewer in front of my pictures.

**How does that come about? Do you already have a sense with the first drawing that this will lead to a picture or is the process more complicated?**

First of all there's the research. What are the interesting collections? Then the contact to museums – that's a very important part. It's always a gift when one finds curators and researchers who are open and interested. These are often wonderful encounters, and there's a lot to be experienced here alone. Then there's the incredible moment in the place itself – for example when one first enters the storage area. Each place is completely different with its own atmosphere. In Oxford I was initially disappointed because all the birds were covered in plastic. However, in the course of the work this turned out to be an incredibly suggestive motif. In the collections I gather together as much information as I can. When – as now in Florence – I have the chance to work on site the first thing I do is to make a whole series of pencil sketches. These are preliminary studies for smaller works in oil also made on site. This is a very fast and direct process, so that I hope these works have a spontaneous and open character.

More detailed drawings and large canvases are made in the studio, and here I have a different way of working. Here, the individual motifs are assembled from my studies. For both there's an important moment that's difficult to pin down. What I mentioned earlier as a process of getting closer to the motif is a feeling that emerges in the course of the work. It's as if the motif passes through me. That's the moment when the tension between the three different elements mentioned earlier achieves a good

balance – which is not at all inevitable. Therefore, while painting the large canvases, I simultaneously make many accompanying sketches and colour studies, which takes away the pressure.

**Does the place itself then begin to diminish in importance, or can one still speak of a ‘portrait’, a representation of a specific historical collection?**

There’s naturally always a point at which the picture as such takes on a life of its own and begins to make its own specific demands. That’s very important to me. Nevertheless, the character of the particular collection, of the storage area, should not disappear from the pictures. Art, especially painting, had a clear influence on the natural history of the 19th century and its museums. This can be seen in taxonomic images, if perhaps only as an undercurrent, and very clearly in the staging of dioramas. A good example is found in Montague Browne’s *Practical Taxidermy. A Manual of Instructions to the Amateur in Collecting, Preserving, and Setting up Natural History Specimens of All Kinds* from 1884. Browne makes a distinction between the widespread practice of mere hobbyists and ‘artistic taxidermy’, which is largely concerned with giving these objects an emotional charge and arranging them in lively compositions. Here, the taxidermist expressly recommends orienting oneself as a source of inspiration less to nature or scientific illustrations than to the dramatic animal paintings of artists such as Edwin Landseer.

I retrace this history and want to allow it to appear again. To achieve this, my paintings have to be free, which means they have to avoid any kind of documentary connection to the collections themselves.

**Your work with this subject, with these historical objects, has also led you in another direction. A year ago you adapted a book by Charles Waterton by adding drawings and notes. Does this quasi-scientific dialogue with historical material open up other paths in your artistic activity?**

To some extent, yes. One of the very interesting aspects of the whole subject for me is that for a long time in the context of such collections drawing played such a crucial role. There are so many wonderful drawings, watercolours and prints by Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci, by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Jacopo Ligozzi, Lazarus Rötting, Maria Sibylla Merian, Mark Catesby, Thomas Bewick, John James Audubon and many others – also Cassiano dal Pozzo’s Museo Cartaceo (Paper Museum). Personally, I’ve never previously worked and experimented with drawing on so many different levels.

While continuing my research I came across many striking travel reports, such as those by John James Audubon, Charles Darwin and Charles Waterton. Today of course we read these books from a great distance – but in a special way one still feels close to this part of the history of collecting.

So I turned a copy of Waterton's *Essays on Natural History, Chiefly Ornithology* printed in 1844 into a personal copy of a fictional traveller on his trail. Waterton's text – for long passages travel reports, which he wrote as part of his autobiography – already contains an abundance of details and episodes relating to collecting and cultural history. For instance, there's an incredible footnote, the longest I've ever come across, listing everything that the author found for sale at a market in front of the Pantheon in Rome ### – not least songbirds, which can still be bought at Italian markets today.

By adding drawings and notes I turned the printed book into a notebook and sketchbook. So in a direct sense the historical object was adapted to feign the intimate use of a historical publication, thus bridging the distance to us today, but without negating this distance.

**So only the result is different, while the actual treatment of the subject – the reception and interpretation of scientific artefacts – is not much different from your way of working in your pictures?**

Well, that's only partly true. With this book I was also interested in attempting, through the choice of motifs and materials, to suggest a certain historical plausibility. Of course I didn't want to create a total illusion, but I deliberately chose materials and motifs that might have existed in this period. As an approach, this is very different from my usual practice. Of course, it may be that for the viewer this fine difference isn't so clear, but my theoretical engagement with the subject is a very important aspect in thinking about how I approach the motifs. Recently, there have been a number of artists whose work has dealt with collecting and natural history; there have also been quite a few exhibitions on this subject and very good publications. Here, two tendencies stand out: on the one hand, art at times sees itself as a form of research itself and attempts to gain access to the extensive field of scientific knowledge; on the other hand, there is often a very fundamental critique, one whose tone can be rather polemical, even damning. I don't see the history of collecting in such a uniformly negative way. Of course, I understand the reasons for this, and for me too the sheer quantity of specimens in these collections is often oppressive and provokes a sense of unease and critical distance. However, I don't see myself as part of either of these two directions. My approach is to question why these objects and the places in which they are collected still hold such a fascination. And that's why I have also given so much attention to the theoretical background. The fact that ultimately this cannot fully explain the mysterious excess in our confrontation with these objects is what still drives my work.