What does the natural world mean?

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In the first decade of the new millennium concepts of environmentalism have been propelled by a formidable scientific consensus about the grim realities of global warming and a related attempt to use 'good science' to allay its worst effects. But this approach risks ignoring or even embedding the broader set of cultural practices that inform our current predicament. After all, the scientific method explicitly abstains from any vision of the good life: it may tell us what a thing *is* but it can never tell us what it *means* or what to *do*. That judgement is political and arises out of particular cultural and historical circumstances, which is just to say that who we are is implicit in the kind of world we encounter, the way we relate to our environment, and the sorts of actions we find justifiable. What is sorely lacking in the environmental debates of the last few years is a sensitivity to the cultural origins of the crisis, and an acknowledgement that how we got here cannot be neatly separated from where we are going.

It is precisely this concern which animates Camille Serisier's practice. How do we understand the natural environment? What are the origins of this understanding? What are the consequences? These questions are at the heart of Serisier's work. Sometimes this manifests in playful reflections on the timeworn tales of childhood or mythical gods from distant lands. On other occasions she deals with the more confronting themes of Christianity and rationalism. But in each case her work is firmly focused on the way particular cultural practices infuse us with a specific set of priorities and assumptions about the world around us and our place in it. Serisier does this, primarily, through a close reading of environmental narratives, an apt entry point since the stories we tell to ourselves, about ourselves, provide the sense-making frameworks with which we interpret the natural world, and everything else besides.

Serisier investigates one such narrative in *Disenchanted World* (Bus Gallery, 2008), a nostalgic meditation on how the modern drive to uncover nature, to rationalise it solely in terms of cause and effect, to derive first principles and bend them to our human ends, has distanced us from the environment and undermined it as a source of cultural meaning. Snapshot dioramas of classic pirate stories – the hunt for buried treasure, secret coves and caverns, a shipwrecked survivor on the raging seas – seem to ask 'how can we respect nature if it is merely an object?' Skilfully carved foam sculptures, a ragged galleon, a skull shaped outcrop, a racing night sky, are back-lit to create a mystic luminosity, throwing deep shadows and evoking the mystery and wonder of a buccaneer's world lost forever to our instrumental modern mindset. Or, in the words of that neo-Weberian Jack Sparrow, 'the worlds the same size, there's just less in it'. Emptied of cultural significance, nature now commonly hails as a utility, a resource, or, more broadly, as a combination of properties, processes, and effects.

Yet, the shadows of God still haunt the halls of men, and it is this cultural heritage that Serisier interrogates in *Tremendous Zoomorphic Power*, a photographic series shown at First Draft in 2009. In this work the artist dons a variety of handcrafted costumes to draw out the stark contrast between pagan gods of yesteryear and the Abrahamic traditions that have come to dominate world religion. Replete with beard and halo, Jesus is the sole deity without an animalistic element, a clear reference to the repression of the natural and the pagan in Christianity, and monotheism more generally. The suggestion here is that one dimension of our contemporary environmental detachment is the product of a religious morality embedded and normalised over several millennia. Indeed, the very creation story at the heart of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, where man and woman, created in God's image, find themselves innocent in a land of plenty, also associates the loss of that innocence with a highly naturalised version of sin, inextricably wedded to animal passion, carnal knowledge, and impure impulses. This genesis sets out perhaps the central dynamic of the monotheistic religions, a dynamic implicit in their views of the environment: imperfect humans, caught between the purity of God and the temptations of a fallen world.

While Serisier directly questions this legacy, she also confronts the strange disconnection between our sense of identity and this deep cultural heritage from which it emerged. By setting almost cartoonish outfits, made of flat cardboard surfaces, against her own flesh and curves, the artist produces a dimensional contrast that alludes to a disparity between our unconscious present

and the full-bodied past so immanent in everything we do. But it also taps into a broader theme that runs through much of Serisier's work. It points to the fact that regardless of which representation of nature we accept – subtle or not – the way we see ourselves will always be invested in the visions we have of nature. Behind every godly visage, be it a curious Indian Elephant God, a winged Russian Siren, or an African moon deity, Serisier places herself – the artist.

This issue is taken up more explicitly in *First in Best Dressed* (Runway Magazine, 2008) and *Hunter to Hunted* (Sydney Laneways Festival, 2008), both photographic series exploring representations of the natural world in children's stories. In these works Serisier references carnival face painting and dress-up games to investigate the contexts in which a child learns about animals and their habitat. In the first show, the artist appears as a Lion with a crepe paper mane, a Panda with black sunglass eyes, and a Crocodile with sharp cardboard jaws, calling to mind playtime fantasy and improvised fun. Yet the images also ask questions about the effect of our early environmental conceptualisations. What are the consequences of personifying animals? Which cultural resources do children draw from to fill out their characters and plot lines?

Disney? The Discovery Channel? Children's books? *Hunter to Hunted* takes this idea further by looking at the way adventure narratives situate the environment as a wilderness to be subdued or overcome by a ruggedly brave protagonist. In this work Serisier presents in makeshift safari garbs, a paper hat standing in for canvas helmet and a section of vacuum cleaner piping replacing an Elephant gun. Over the course of an eight image story-board a hunter tracks, confronts, and conquers a fearsome Grizzly Bear. In the final shot the triumphant hunter stands proudly over her prey, one foot on its shoulder in Napoleonic pose, while crepe paper blood oozes from a gaping wound in its chest. But this death and destruction only register in the adventurer's imaginary as a challenge bested or a dangerous thrill.

This pioneering spirit brings us back to where we began, with post-Enlightenment 'man' – with the conquest of the natural world and its eventual disenchantment. Such modes of thinking, as we have already seen, have led to a disconnection between humans and their surroundings, and to a depoliticisation of the environment. Yet it should be clear by now that the modern scientific enterprise is itself a meaning making framework caught up with and constituted by distinct cultural and historical circumstances. Indeed, who *we* are in early 21st century Australia is entwined with this scientific mindset and with a broader Enlightenment narrative centred on sovereign individuals, endowed with reason and agency, and inspired by the impulse to uncover, overcome, and control. *For the Birds*, shown at Mop Gallery in 2008, deals directly with this

theme by engaging and deconstructing realist representations of the natural world. In this work Serisier makes pastel drawings from secondary images of animals – a Lion, a Polar Bear, Gazelles and monkeys – and their accompanying landscapes, then manipulates the picture plane by breaking it up into distinct layers with physical depth. This draws attention to the narrative function of space – the way foreground, middle ground and background situate the subject and make sense of the real. By unsettling these conventions Serisier suggests that attempts to represent nature in precise scientific detail rely on a particular set of culturally specific assumptions; that realism is as illusory and selective as more embellished or abstract forms of representation; and that the knowledge produced here is far from impartial. Idyllic beauty, power, innocence, even our most precise descriptions cannot escape such connotations. Neither can they escape the underlying cultural impulse to make the natural world a fact among facts, to uncover its true nature and situate it in a total account of reality.

The breadth of Serisier's practice is testament to the multiple dimensions that help constitute our attitudes to the environment. In this sense her practice can be viewed as an attempt to reconnect the contemporary environmental debate with the deep social origins of the crisis it confronts. In all her work Serisier asks the audience to consider the way cultural history – be it religious morality, childhood stories, or Enlightenment heritage – has shaped their relationship with the natural world. She asks the audience to 'know thy self'. Without this kind of self-awareness the root causes of environmental degradation will remain entrenched, unchallenged, and recurrent.