



JUSTINE COOPER AND
BARTON LIDICÉ BENES
WASHINGTON

In the book *Eccentric Spaces* Robert Harbison states that the museum's function encompasses two extremes: the graveyard and the department store. The museum-cemetery acts as a resting place for objects that have lost their purpose whereas an assortment of merchandise with little historical or cultural significance fills the museum-as-store. This duality underpins *Museum Muses* [National Academy of Sciences, February 12—May 1, 2006], a fascinating exhibition that explores the culture of collections and collecting through the recent work of Justine Cooper and Barton Lidicé Benes.

Cooper sets her sights on the back hallways and attic storage spaces of New York's American Museum of Natural History, and elucidates the museum's tomb-like character. Her photographs reveal windowless corridors lined with heavy metal doors or locked storage cabinets and various natural specimens, conveying a foreboding sense of mystery. Elephant skulls lining an attic, a cupboard filled with leopard pelts, and dozens of blood red butterflies pin-mounted on a stained, tattered panel connote the austerity and finality of a mortuary. Cooper's selective renditions of life beyond the exhibition halls illustrate the undeniable fact that this is the fate of most of the museum's holdings. Patiently awaiting rediscovery, these documented yet forgotten collections will, in all likelihood, never be put on display.

In her meditative video *S.O.S. Sounds of Science*, 2005, Cooper adds sound to image as a means of urging the viewer to consider the specimens' fate. Sounds of nature accompany the camera's tracking through hallway after hallway. The soundtrack's structure builds up from gurgling water to human noises before its tumultuous end. When the camera finally comes upon a window, the image whites out to the sound of thunder. Suggesting an irreversible journey, the video leaves it to the viewer to conclude whether the museum has behaved as predator or guardian in the process of amassing its holdings.

Whereas Cooper's contribution to the exhibition focuses on the evolution of a large public institution and its focus on scientific and cultural research, Barton Lidicé Benes offers his personal collection for contemplation. Taking what seems to be an obsession with celebrity, Benes packages his collection as a curiosity cabinet, a type of museum that predates Cooper's muse. He eschews scientific methods of classification and organizes his holdings thematically, under catchy titles such as *Snip Collection*, 2005, *Foul Play*, 2005, and *Leftovers*, 2005. He sets refuse into kitschy, embossed

borders and frames it within loud, poster-like graphics depicting tangled thread, barbed wire, and fruits and vegetables, respectively. *Par Avion*, 2004, for example, features all things related to the atmosphere. A bird's wing, a meteorite that landed in Texas, and debris from the collapsed World Trade Center cohabitate with a 1979 photo of a nitrous oxide party in New York City. The juxtapositions are even more bizarre in the triptych *Sticks and Stones*, 2005, where cholesterol stones join fused sand from the first atomic blast in New Mexico as a wood splinter alleged to be from the site of the Manson murders—Sharon Tate's home—is next to Art Buchwald's toothpick.

Once one starts looking at Benes' work it becomes difficult to stop. Like a good carnival sideshow, these oddities are confounding. These works play off the fact that in our society any aspect of the private lives of public personalities is newsworthy. It does not matter that nothing but the artist's own handwritten descriptions assures us of the objects' authenticity. While Benes' work takes the collection of mementos to a virtually absurd level, it perceptively underscores the evolution of celebrity worship from the once sensational desire to own a snippet of a pop star's hair. Like the cult of relics in the Middle Ages, a market exists and demand is strong. To his credit, Benes neither takes himself seriously, nor offers a harsh critique. This presentation of overly embellished trash oozes with a tongue-in-cheek attitude that also enables one to marvel at the ironies of our world and to have a good laugh.

The success of *Museum Muses* derives from the museum's double life echoed in Harbison's words, and from the complementarity of the artists' works. Cooper's investigation of a large public institution's private spaces offsets Benes' public display of a small, private collection. In the former, natural specimens are reduced to shadows of their former selves. Excised from their contexts, they have been subjected to the indignities of analysis and classification before being locked away. In the latter, ingenious packaging turns measly bric-à-brac into potent cultural signifiers because of the way it connects and comments on the contemporary world. Collecting for posterity starkly contrasts with acquisitions that hold a sensational or gossipy appeal. The keen observations of these artists unite such seemingly opposite pursuits. As a result, their reflection on collecting also conveys the intense passion and sense of adventure that fuel the process.

—John Gayer

montage cinema (Pudovkin's *The Mother*), early talkies (Sternberg's *Morocco*), the experimental cinema of Kenneth Anger, and the 1970 Chinese musical *The Red Detachment of Women* congeal into a 25 minute, 8000 edits long primer on the formal principles of cinematic narration. While the research may be impressive, the rapid sequencing of individual images ultimately disables the recognition of compositional principles, of specific takes, and of the degree of stylization.

Liberated of the cinematic apparatus, *Cinema like never before* illustrates patterns of representation, but fails to properly analyze their construction and symbolism. For the most part, the exhibited image constructions don't yield a higher order. Subliminal decodings, hidden sentiments, and ambiguities—which may have helped to channel the reflective force back onto the viewer—are sadly missing.

—Manisha Jothady

Translated from the German by Christian Rattemeyer

ABOVE: Justine Cooper, *Elephants in the Attic*, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 2003, digital chromogenic print, 39 x 30 inches [courtesy of the artist]