

Saidhbhín Gibson's *Natura natura* exhibition takes place across two locations in Dublin's city centre: The Natural History Museum on Merrion Street and The LAB Gallery on Foley Street. Developed during a recent residency at The Natural History Museum, the exhibition explores our understanding and experience of nature, and plays with how we expect to make sense of the questions this throws up depending upon where they are posed.

Four drawings, portraits of common Irish birds - a Robin, a Mistle Thrush, a Blackbird and Song Thrush - are being exhibited in the Irish Birds Cabinet on the ground floor of the Natural History Museum. At the same time, a total of six 'objects' – sculptural works that include materials such as Beech nut cases, Oak leaves and Badger hair - are being exhibited in two stages (changing mid-way through the exhibition) in the Cube Space at The LAB Gallery. *Natura natura* thus involves a swapping of 'kinds' between the two sites; mixed-media drawings are inserted into the museum, and a presentation of materials in a preserved state is made in the gallery.

This swapping is intended as a playful disruption, one that might 'spark something in the viewer's mind'. For Gibson, it invites consideration of differences between how we perceive and approach objects in a museum and how we perceive and approach objects in a gallery; 'in one things are unquestioned, in the other they are open to question'. For me, this apparent difference in knowledge-kind, social value and appropriate response, in turn, invites reflection upon a curious coincidence of ambition for public well-being in relation to both natural history and art – an implicit (and occasionally explicit) belief that both are good for you, that they each have the capacity to serve as an anti-dote to disorder in society.

In a more straightforward way, the juxtaposition of the exhibits and public sites of natural history and fine art encourages further comparisons, and suggests certain coincidences of practice. Amongst the competing definitions of natural history, some are reminiscent of Gibson's work. One deliberately expansive definition (T. Fleischner) suggests that natural history is 'A practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy'. This definition is wholly apt in relation to Gibson's art practice; to her sustained attention to minutiae within the natural world – leaves, twigs, lichen, wood, avian and mammal matter – whereby she collects these materials on a continuous basis, carefully noting the location and time of year for each item. Even a more prosaic definition (from Wikipedia) whereby natural history is described as 'the research and study of organisms including plants or animals in their environment, leaning more towards observational than experimental methods of study', is suggestive of Gibson's practice – of the subtlety of her interventions, whether in museum or gallery, as well as her process of making drawings, gathering material and note-taking.

Gibson's intervention in The Natural History Museum, the placement of fine art objects (the four bird portraits) in the Irish Birds Cabinet, can be argued to be Janus-faced: looking back to the origins of many renowned natural history collections as cabinets of curiosities (encyclopedic collections of objects,

signifying their patron's knowledge of and authority in the world); and toward possible reconfigurations of the taxonomy underpinning our understanding of the relationships between organisms, living and extinct. The juxtapositions within the original 'cabinets of curiosity' invited comparison and analysis, transforming natural history in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and contemporary scientific developments, in genetics for example, may effect such transformation again. Gibson's portraits do not claim a place in such transformation but they do disrupt a comfortable assumption that 'the natural order' of things is something already known, albeit hard to remember in detail.

In a similar vein, the portraits themselves touch upon the anxieties of anthropomorphism. These are not simply drawings of a type of bird, or even of a particular bird. These are portraits. Each of the birds portrayed is given a name, the Mistle Thrush is called Holly, and thus we are invited to relate to it as an individual, a character. And each character is framed by a loosely described landscape, a collection of lines and marks, accumulated and configured for him or her alone. Such anthropomorphism plays a vital but contested role in the stories we tell to make sense of the world. In science in particular, anthropomorphism has traditionally been condemned as indicating a lack of objectivity. And yet, more recently there has been increased acceptance that anthropomorphism or empathy has a role to play in research, that in fact there is an equal risk to objectivity through assuming that only humans possess certain traits, a kind of anthropocentrism. And so, through Gibson's portraits, we are invited to attend to the individual, everyday creatures – Ireland's very many small brown birds - as our neighbours.

Gibson's intervention in *The LAB*, sculptural works that present foraged organic matter in a preserved state, explicitly invites consideration of the natural world and its place in our lives. As with Ireland's small brown birds, the preserved specimens encountered in the gallery are ordinary, everyday materials; and yet, in the context of artmaking they are extraordinary. Their extraordinary challenge lies not only in their fragility, but also in the peculiarity of this particular category of material – the material itself, or nature, dictates how she can access it. As a result, Gibson is constantly careful about what she collects (ensuring that she has enough medium-sized oak leaves, for example), as a given material may not be available at a later date, and about documenting what she collects so that each sculpture is a pocket-guide, a distillation of facts in relation to an environment.

And yet the artworks, far from being didactic, are playful in their response to the foraged materials: from the alliance of Beech nut cases and folded paper in *Quads* (the folds of which remind me of a puzzle we made as children), to the visual and linguistic puns of *Mettlesomeness and Stroke* (a likeness is proposed between a fork and a badger or fox, the one being made of silver and the other hardy and brave, for example); or through straightforwardly descriptive titles being disrupted by their namesakes (Oak leaves that are pierced and pinned in an elegant swirl and thus ...*We're all in this together*, or left-over chicken bones enfolded in knots of silver coloured thread in *Wrap*).

In each case a feature of the material is amplified, inviting us to think about the smaller things that come together to make something bigger.

The title of the exhibition, *Natura natura*, also emerges from a playful response to its material. It names its object of enquiry, nature, in a language attractive to natural scientists for purposes of nomenclature and to Gibson for how it sounds, Latin, in a pattern (the same word twice) reminiscent of the Latin name for Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), and after Roald Dahl's *The Fantastic Mr Fox*, who runs rings around humans. It might also call to mind a disjunction between 'natura naturata' and 'natura naturans', phrases coined in the Middle Ages that might prompt us to question the relationship we assume between ourselves and 'the natural world'. Not along lines pursued by Spinoza (pantheist and determinist) but, more simply: do we assume *natura naturata* – nature as passive, already created and out there somewhere, or do we assume *natura naturans* – nature as active, created by and creating humanity, inextricable from our everyday lives and open to chance encounters.

Gibson's juxtaposition of fine art and natural history and the renewal of attention provoked by this subtle disruption, invite the viewer to attend to and question the more-than-human world, as presented at both exhibition sites and in traversing the space between, the City itself.

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