



Incarnation

The Photographs of Susan Bozic

by Wendy Welch

“When photography takes as its subject an animal which has come under the hand of the taxidermist, it is almost as if it were photographing itself in a kind of *mise en abîme*. While purporting to restore intact a fragment of life, it simulates a simulacrum — a serial metaphor, the illusion of an illusion. And we do not realize that straight away, as not only are we deceived by the double artifice of the naturalist and the photographer, we are also stuck in a third trap: the “portraitized” animal seems terribly human, the very immobility of its pose can mystify, we start to think that the attitude and the expression are not unfamiliar to us, and we look for similarities. The animal with its accentuated gaze is less of a totem than a kind of mirror.”

Serge Bramly¹

Susan Bozic’s photographs contain metaphors that range from everyday objects in (seemingly) ordinary still lifes, to surrealistic replications of natural history museum dioramas, to the nostalgia of Victorian kitsch overlaid with *film noir* atmospherics. The taxidermied birds featured in her dramatically-staged worlds allude to death and immortality. These winged creatures represent the incarnation of spirit to flesh, of death to life. The skillful work of the taxidermist endows a lifeless being with an authentic sense of aliveness. The taxidermist not only makes his animals look lifelike, he goes one step further than the embalmer; his creations become *lively* as they are constructed to hold a variety of mid-action poses. The bird’s power as metaphor is further amplified in Bozic’s documented worlds by the camera’s ability to freeze a

moment for eternity. These fabricated illusions of life become a poignant and somewhat eerie reminder of death’s imminence, causing the viewer to ponder not only what is known but what is unknown.

The photograph is associated with truth. Despite our collective knowledge that photographs can readily be manipulated — from the actual set-up of the pose(s) to various darkroom contrivances — we still believe what we see with our own eyes. The black and white photograph, in particular, contains an innate aura of truth. It is associated with the documentary, the passport photo, and the FBI wanted poster; in these cases colour is avoided so as not to confuse or interfere with what is real. But as we look at Bozic’s images, disbelief is only momentarily suspended. Things are not right in these



Snowy Owl, silver gelatin print, 16 x 20 inches, Susan Bozic, 2002

worlds where nothing has been left to chance. We engage with these photographs, attempting to unravel the intertwined strands of fact and fiction that lie beneath the surfaces of what we see.

Taxidermied birds don't belong in these settings; they are usually viewed in the hallowed halls of a natural history museum or wood-paneled recreation rooms. Two hundred years ago European naturalists captured, killed, and removed creatures from their natural habitat, returning home with exotic specimens from far off lands. Even after the invention of photography, the closest most people would get to a natural habitat was the *faux* reality of a natural history diorama. Bozic's photographs, with birds displayed in Victorian rooms, offer reminders of this imperialistic approach to taxonomy. This altered

context provides a somewhat historically accurate view of the tradition of collecting in the name of science. These birds are presented as they really are, not as what we expect them to be. They are no longer wild and free creatures but rather beasts taken from their natural world, remade and recontextualized into a cultural trope.

Despite the familiar furniture and draperies in the photographs, these are not casual domestic scenarios. The cinematographically-staged scenes are imbued with the characteristics of *film noir* with its exaggerated lighting and presentiment. These well-lit scenes of darkness and impending doom are seemingly empty except for their soulless occupants. The birds are trapped in a situation they did not choose or create. As in cinema, these are closed worlds (emphasized with frames within



Snow Goose, silver gelatin print, 20 x 16 inches, Susan Bozic, 2002

frames); there is no outside here. Paradoxically, these photographs are also a narrative of what lies beyond, a narrative of the unseen. They are as much about the “behind-the-scenes” killing, collecting, and remaking of the birds as about the photographer as arbiter of metaphors. This is a sombre tale of transformation from life to death back to a simulacrum of life.

The hunter who gets his prey taxidermied both admires and disdains the natural. He values the look but not the actual life of the animal. The taxidermied bird is a wild living creature transformed into an inanimate trophy. Here the unmanageable has become managed. Although we recognize taxidermy as a highly skilled craft, we associate the “maker” of these creations with a sense of discomfort; an unease akin to our trepidation about the role of the mortician (or potential murderer). Those who make the dead come alive fill us with dread and fear. Their incarnations are reminders of our own mortality.

And yet there is no room for us in these scenes; in fact, we cannot even really look at Bozic’s birds. Their glass eyes are empty. We are reminded of John Berger’s description of looking at animals in captivity: “Nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal.

At the most, the animals’ gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a central place in their attention.”² We look at these birds and see only the trace of their former being; we are alone here.

The hand of the artist manipulates these scenes where culture overrides nature. The agency of the birds is exaggerated by their varied positions — both static and active. In these artistically arranged photographs with their real and artificial plants, actual furniture, and painted backdrops, a blurred line is created between the real, the made, the alive, and the dead. In *Lady Amherst Pheasant*, the bird becomes an almost insignificant part of a contrived Victorian scene, relegated to a place similar to that of decorator item. In *Snow Goose*, the doubly-framed bird becomes a commemorative statue on a pedestal. In *Snowy Owl*, the bird is startlingly activated, appearing to have imminent power as its claws grab the cloth on which it is perched. In *Magpie*, the bird is arranged as a cruciform composition. Whether through the casual placement of a scarf over an armchair or a curtain drawn back, the human hand remains strangely present and absent in all these theatrical scenes.

These constructed set-ups bring to mind the Victorian obsession with “the cover.” Everything had to be covered: books, lamps, tables, windows, floors, and, of course, the body. The cover acts as a way to hide or disguise the content. The skin-like covering of these artificially real birds hides the armatures of their reconstruction. “In concealing nature, the cover, of course, makes nature all the more titillating. The cover invites exposure...,” Susan Stewart notes.³ The taxidermied covers are as duplicitous as the fake luxury of the elaborately draped velvets and satins; the empty birds are staged in thrift store aesthetic. Here is a nostalgic pining for a time when everything from flesh to furniture was covered with layers of cloth; desire is disguised and death is hidden by exterior lustre.

The photographs also convey a sense of wealth and luxury similar to the meticulously crafted still life paintings in sixteenth-century Dutch art. Unlike historic still lifes, Bozic’s birds dominate as main object and subject in the work. In traditional paintings dead birds were strewn across the table as just another symbol of

Top: *Northern Harrier*, silver gelatin print, 16 x 20 inches, Susan Bozic, 2002

Bottom: *Lady Amherst Pheasant*, silver gelatin print, 20 x 16 inches, Susan Bozic, 2002

ownership. Although alluding to acquisition, Bozic's birds are much more ambiguous. Who is the "acquirer" in this situation? Is it the bird that triumphantly reigns over its staged environment or is it the person who placed the bird in these circumstances? The birds in painted still lifes were often associated with consumption — one object among many, representing a need to satisfy an appetite. In their abject state, they represented the potential of fulfilled desire. In contrast, Bozic's birds are no longer the submissive creatures of their still life counterparts. As the only element of life in the scene, they attain a curious position of power.

In his essay "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life," Hal Foster describes a fetish "as an object endowed with a special force or independent life...Freud argued that in the experiences of the uncanny which he specially related to castration anxiety and its fetishistic deference, animate and inanimate states are confused, things are subsumed by representations, once homey images turns as *unheimlich*, and a whiff or whisper of death hangs over the scene."⁴

The longer one lingers with Bozic's work, the more questions are generated. An uncannily odd view is presented; once-living creatures stand out in the impossibility of their unnatural settings. The power of Bozic's images is that they can simultaneously amuse, delight, sadden, and discomfit as they confront us with our attitudes toward the natural world and death itself.♦

Notes

1. Serge Bramly, *Animal Bettina Rheims*, Gina Kehaoff Verloag KG, 1994, p. xxii.
2. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking*, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 26.
3. Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 114.
4. Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz, Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 253-254.

