

AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Natural Histories: A Project by Miguel Ángel Blanco

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The alchemy between art and nature gives food for thought, writes Philip Hoare

Natural Histories: A Project by Miguel Ángel Blanco
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
Until 27 April 2014

For some time now contemporary art has shown a fascination with the cabinet of curiosities, or *Wunderkammer*. This early modern fashion for collecting objects of natural history has inspired a number of artist/curators, not least because of the light it throws on our own conflicted relationship with nature: from Turner Contemporary's *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing*, curated by Brian Dillon (now at the Castle Museum, Norwich), to Nottingham Contemporary's eclectic *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep* (now at Tate St Ives); Angela Cockayne's allusively beautiful *Provenance* at Bath Spa University and Corsham Court; and the gothic wonders of Viktor Wynd's *Little Shop of Horrors* in Hackney. It is a trend reinforced in literature, notably with Caspar Henderson's inspired *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21st Century Bestiary*, and Wynd's forthcoming book on the subject.

But few artists have been given such a sweet shop to play in as Miguel Ángel Blanco. Born in Madrid in 1958, and celebrated for his nature-themed work, he has been let loose on the Prado's collections, inspired by the fact that the museum was originally intended to house the Spanish royal family's natural history specimens. And if the entire building was intended as a vast cabinet of curiosities, then Blanco is merely returning it to that lost function.

The surreal note is set as you enter the museum. Far above the parties of tourists busily being led from one lustrous, world-famous masterpiece to another, a golden eagle soars through a vaulted arch to hover above an oversized bronze statue by the father-and-son sculptors Leone and Pompeo Leoni, *Charles V and the Fury* (1551-64). The bird may be stuffed, but the image is a powerful one – imperial hauteur transcended by natural beauty. It provides the underlying tone for this fabulous show of 32 such set pieces, each more surprising than the last.

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Relying on an excellent site map (in English) and the patient knowledge of the Prado's staff, you wander at will through the three floors of the museum, with no idea what will leap out next. Here, for instance, next to a rather sensual 17th-century oil painting by Alessandro Varotari of Orpheus enchanting the animals of the forest – in which the young musician has, unaccountably, decided to get his kit off in order to commune with a unicorn – stands an upright narwhal tusk. Nearly 3m long, this spiralling ivory beam is the particular attribute of *Monodon monoceros*, an Arctic cetacean, and is in fact an erupted tooth that grows through the animal's upper lip.

Since the medieval period, such tusks have been touted around Europe as true relics of the unicorn. As Blanco's text (tersely written, and to the point) notes, Philip II of Spain's cabinet contained no fewer than 12 such tusks, each worth 20 times its weight in gold. Papal croziers were fashioned from similar specimens. Elizabeth I of England was given a tusk by Martin Frobisher on his return from Baffin Island in 1577; worth the price of a castle, it later became a royal sceptre.

"My intention was not to invade the museum," says Blanco of his project, three years in the making. Rather, he sought to provoke an "alchemical process". His interventions evoke a Spanish gothic – empire, opulence, power and abuse, with a particular obsession with the supernatural. Thus Juan Carreño de Miranda's portrait of Charles II – who believed himself bewitched – is reflected in the dark roundel of an Aztec obsidian mirror next to it. Such a juxtaposition suggests that the monarch is haunted by the mysterious depths of the polished volcanic rock (other fragments of which were worked to razor keenness in order to excise the beating hearts of human sacrifices).

Similarly eldritch are Goya's tarry "black paintings". *Witches' Sabbath* or *The Great He-Goat* (1820-23) now boasts a predella-vitrine containing the ingredients of their potions: the bones of a hartebeest, a bat's skeleton, a preserved cobra, toad and salamander, all with the whiff of sulphur about them. Blanco's interventions do not seek to upstage the paintings (if that were possible). Rather, he extends their meaning, from the past into the present, through shifting cultural contexts; the notion of collection itself becomes a comment on imperialism. Two paintings in particular illustrate this.

One, of a dolorous-looking lute turtle (Pedro Juan Tapia, 1597), portrays the gigantic leathery beast, salvaged from the sea as a tribute to Philip II. As it died and rotted away, its immortal likeness took its place in the king's cabinet – now counterpointed by the fragments of a reassembled skull of a green sea turtle. It is a somewhat mournful, bereft conjunction (as bereft as one imagines Madrid's Museum of Natural History to be, after Blanco raided it for his displays).

The second image is that of a giant anteater, brought back alive from Buenos Aires to Madrid in 1776. Again this is a painting on a gargantuan scale, depicting the life-size creature with its probing snout and bristly black and white striped coat.

It is also saddled with its fate. No one could source the 35,000 ants and termites that constituted its daily diet, and so the poor beast starved to death. Now its ghostly skeleton, articulated and cased, has been reverentially placed in front of its image, much in the way that the bones of saints lie in effigy in echoing Spanish churches and cathedrals. Here, too, the effect is surprisingly emotional. As the sanctity of nature has been abused, science attempts to understand. Only the artist is free to comment. It might almost be a critique of the Enlightenment itself.

In all this eloquent grandeur and mute oppression, one scenario makes a deep impact by the slowness of Blanco's gesture and the ambition of his intent. Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) is the ornament of the Spanish Golden Age; its assembly of the court and children of the royal family of Philip IV foregrounds the artist's restrained voluptuousness. Its enigmatic faces still challenge us over the centuries. Yet so familiar is the painting that one might hurry by, keen to avoid the crowds permanently clustered around it like mussels on a rock.

But then you notice, perched above the upper edge of the 3m high painting, a tiny stuffed bird. It is an albino sparrow – the most ordinary of birds, made spectral by its lack of colour.

Blanco imagines the sparrow flying in through the window of Velázquez's studio, to conduct a conversation with the dog lying on the floor. The connection between these two animals speaks, to Blanco, of the aerial, out-of-body view of the artist himself as he gazes at us out of his own painting. The bird's silvery-grey tones reflect Velázquez's monochrome palette. Its brief life is long over, but so too are the lives of those privileged figures: equally immortalised, equally dead, even as they also live on.

To me, a dark inheritance of kleptocracy – of art bought by stolen South American gold and silver, and other abuses – underlies *Natural Histories*, especially given its setting, in this imperial city of grand, monumental buildings. These animals – whether mythic or real – might stand for other, human, races. Reflecting upon reflection, Blanco's eerie installations seem to suggest an Edenic state, before humanity made its mark. Outside, in the museum courtyard, is the artist's final gesture: the recorded song of tropical birds, piped from speakers, singing in an invisible rainforest. They echo, forlornly, around the Prado's walls.



(URL=http://www.tslshop.co.uk/thedtsi/THEDOA75/?utm_source=THE&utm_medium=Features&utm_content=THEDOA75&utm_campaign=freetrial)

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Readers' comments (1)



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Mark Thurner (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/mark-thurner/2020546.publicprofile>) | 21 Dec 2013 10:58am

A thoughtful and perceptive set of reflections. The only caveat I would add is that MAB does not take us back to an edenic time before humanity made its mark but instead into a post-humanist future that comes after that mark. That is the song that the albino sparrow sings in silence, and which echoes that of the dog in Las Meninas.

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