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Artful Menagerie

Artist/taxidermist Jeremy Johnson meddles with nature at Prairie

By Tamera Lenz Muentz

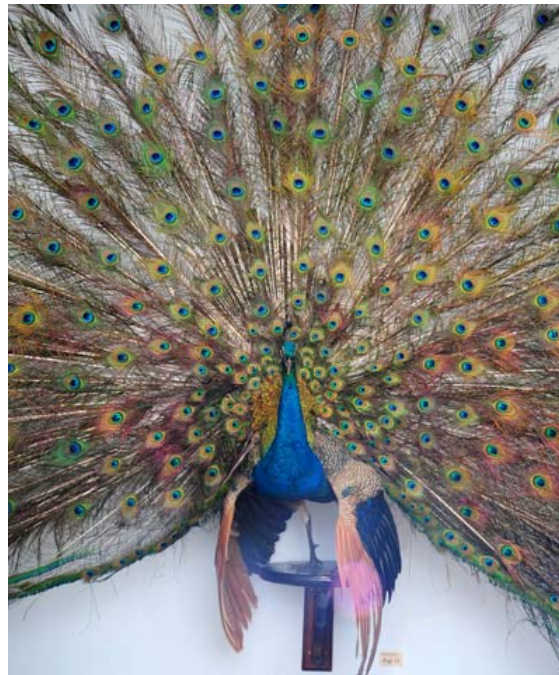


Critic's Pick

Never before have I seen such a menagerie in an art gallery.

An iridescent blue peacock, its feathers spreading at least 8 feet, stands in full glory near the entrance to Prairie gallery in Northside. Two other peacocks — one leucistic (white), the other a rare bronze variety — perch on columns, their tails cascading behind them.

A golden pheasant vibrates with colors so pure they could be an artist's pigments. A bird called a Lady Amherst sports a magnificent red-orange crest and cerulean eye ring. Goliath and atlas beetles, among the largest beetle species, sprawl on red velvet cushions. A coyote sits meekly in a corner, looking eager as a family dog. Above, a spectacular lion skeleton appears ready to pounce.



Artists have long looked to nature for inspiration, but with his exhibition *Meddling with Nature*, Jeremy Johnson takes this tradition to another level. He observes, preserves and presents animals that once flew, ran and roamed about our natural environment. Johnson moves taxidermy out of the natural history museum and into the art gallery by creating an installation that evokes the awe-inspiring world of the Victorian naturalist.

"The Victorian age allowed for unprecedented exploration and discovery at a fever pace," Johnson says. "The discovery of fantastic birds from distant lands, for instance, was teaching the Victorians as much about themselves as it was about nature."

While modern natural history and wildlife museums present taxidermy surrounded by painted backdrops, faux boulders and trees in an attempt to re-create a natural environment, Johnson's exhibition isolates each creature like a sculpture, drawing focus on the animals themselves as well as the artistry and skill required to preserve them to such a level.



Although he studied at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, Johnson, remarkably, is self-taught taxidermist.

"I have been working in animal preservation since I can remember and a lot of this has been trial and error," he says. "I grew up in Kansas a good distance from the nearest town. Having a lot of time to myself in the fields and forests influenced me a lot, I am sure."

His first understanding of taxidermy ironically came from a Victorian-era guide to natural history museum preparation. He has since progressed to a point where he has an impeccable grasp of modern techniques.

Johnson's work brings to mind do-it-yourself naturalists like John James Audubon, who, in the mid-19th century, observed bird species in their natural habitat, mounted them and recorded nearly 500 North American species in watercolors that were published as lithographs. Like Audubon, Johnson sometimes presents birds in action, as in a pair of starlings sharing a thorny branch representing the male and female colorations. In this dramatic mount, we see this non-native bird, considered a pest, in a new light. Unlike Audubon, who hunted and collected most of his specimens, Johnson acquires animals that have been victims of circumstance — the lion died in a zoo, the coyote was hit by a vehicle, the white peacock drowned in a water tank.

Johnson resurrects a 19th-century sensibility with occasional artifices. For instance, he has gilded the feet, beak and crest of the white peacock to emphasize the bird's sacred associations. Golden fabric drapes the column upon which the bird perches, conjuring classical sculpture.

While most of the exhibition represents birds, mammals prowl the gallery as well. The most impressive is the aforementioned African lion suspended from the ceiling. Johnson spent more than 1,000 hours preparing the skeleton, which, according to the artist, began as a "pile of disarticulated bones, ruddy in color and connective tissues present." He allowed flesh-eating beetles to clean the bones, then sanitized them, a process that took more than a month. This skeleton illustrates that Johnson's work also has an educational goal — he assembled the lion for full anatomical motion, which means it can be placed in any natural position. In keeping with 19th-century style, he used brass hardware that, except for the springs, was completely handmade.



Johnson stresses that much information can be gleaned from the skeletal structure, as it is a body's foundation. He also sees it as the key to making people understand their similarities to animals.

"It is here, stripped of fur and hair, stripped of muscle and skin that we see our relationship," he writes in the exhibition guide. "We are expressions of the same voice."

We get a chance to contemplate the skeletal connections between people and animals with what could be the most controversial object in the show. An intricately decorated glass case displays a human skull (a medical specimen, obtained legally on eBay). Like a Victorian research vitrine, a crank turns the skull slowly so the viewer can examine it from all sides. Elevated above a red-velvet cushion inside the burl wood-inlaid case, the skull seems more prized than the animal specimens in the gallery, perhaps a comment upon the human race's history of being "masters" of nature.



The Victorians believed nature was a resource to be reaped, a frontier to be conquered but also to be discovered. Combined with their belief that humankind should control nature was a passionate sense of wonder and awe. Our world is much different. We've learned through history that animals can quickly go extinct, that natural resources disappear. I think Johnson's hope is that, by paying attention to that same history, we can also relearn our wonder and amazement at the natural world.

MEDDLING WITH NATURE runs through Nov. 27 at **Prairie Gallery** (4035 Hamilton Ave., Northside), which is open Tuesday-Saturday. Get show and gallery details [here](#).

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Awesome Show!!! You have to check it out!!! This artist has a website if interested!
www.meddlingwithnature.com



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