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### A Natural History (Built to be Seen)

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A Natural History (Built to be Seen)

By

Austin Cullen

A THESIS

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Dana Fritz

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*A Natural History (Built to be Seen)*

Austin Cullen, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2022

Advisor: Dana Fritz

In the exhibition *A Natural History (Built to be Seen)* my photographs reveal the various ways natural history museums construct nature to teach visitors about the larger natural world around them. Exhibits found in today's museums derive from early European curiosity cabinets wherein animals and other natural phenomena were displayed alongside cultural artifacts and mystical objects. These cabinets codified the relationship between god and nature and became the foundation of the idea of the sublime that would inspire painters from the Hudson River School and early western survey photographers. In the early 1900s, the Chicago Field Museum's Carl Akeley developed techniques of animal taxidermy beyond what was originally thought to be possible. Besides being the first person to successfully prepare a taxidermy elephant, his advancements influenced a new wave of display, naturalistic dioramas. Within dioramas, taxidermy animals are placed in painted environments that often consist of plant specimens, plaster geological features, and epic moments of nature. These displays served as semi-immersive experiences that placed viewers within idealized landscapes. In contemporary natural history displays, science and nature intertwine. Unlike dioramas, contemporary displays do not depict full environments, but instead meld scientific information with natural specimens through design and technology.

Museums have historically been guided by cultural biases of what nature is and should be. In American museums in particular, those biases are guided by Eurocentric understandings of nature that are deeply rooted in the colonial idea of the sublime. While museums may be informative and scientific, they are not objective in their depictions of the natural world. Additionally, most of these exhibition structures have typically placed people above and separate from nature. In an age of global climate crisis, we can no longer afford to see ourselves separate from our own environment.

*A Natural History (Built to be Seen)* is a series of photographic observations of the spectacular and absurd ways the western natural world is presented in museums. The subjects of the photographs include displays from both the front-facing, visitor side of the museum, and the back, research-focused side of the museum. As someone who grew up visiting natural history museums, I've always been fascinated by the extravagant ways they framed the American landscape. Dramatic dioramas, interactive virtual experiences, and miniaturized landscapes all act as windows into the natural world. While this framing provides a guide for reading and understanding nature, the same frame can be analyzed to reveal the complex and ever-changing relationship between people and land.

Like natural history museums, photography frames views and viewpoints. Both share the misconception of objectivity. Yet, photography has an intensely narrow view, and it has historically been used to dramatize or change scenes to fit specific agendas. It is often seen as an assertively objective and truthful medium, but in reality it's completely ambiguous. Composition, perspective, lighting, intent, manipulation are all aspects of photography that are used to frame specific narratives. In my images, I play with the perceived truthfulness of photography by creating images that at first seem real or natural, but slowly reveal themselves as constructed scenes. In doing this, my images subvert viewers' expectations of what is natural. I accomplish this by leaning into the believability of dioramas and other displays. In my photographs, landscapes have a perceived depth, but that depth is disrupted by my photographic interventions. I use a monochrome palette with flash, reflections, forced perspective, and cropping to subtly deconstruct and reveal the cultural framework of the natural history displays that I photograph.

While some images are devoid of context that reveals their construction, other images don't hide their artificiality. This can primarily be seen in my photographs of the back end of the museums, in places such as fabrication shops, zoology labs, and museum archives. In these images, elements of natural history displays are removed from the context of dioramas and other immersive exhibits. This view emphasizes the highly constructed and human qualities of "museum nature". These images additionally invite the comparison between scientific and display taxidermy. The research specimens seem utilitarian and compressed in form, whereas the display specimens feel much more expressive and exaggerated. By having photographs from both the front and back end of the museum, a broader history of taxidermy and human

modifications of the natural world can be considered.

Museums present a view of the larger natural world, and in so, shape it as well. The idea of the sublime landscape, a natural space or view that leaves the viewer awestruck by its physical and spiritual grandeur, was disseminated through museums and literature. This concept shifted how Americans thought about and treated the western landscape. For example, Yosemite National Park's founding and protection can be attributed to 19th century photographers' sublime-inspired images of the site's landforms. With this relationship in mind, my images also depict how natural history museums and the American landscape affect one another. By contrasting and connecting the interior spaces of museums with exterior spaces, such as National Parks and scenic viewpoints, the constructed qualities of both become clear. Because of the similar ways nature is distorted and simplified in my photographs, what is artificial or natural, inside or outside, becomes indistinguishable.

In the photographs "Coyote" and "Toadstool Diorama", the same landscape is depicted. One was made outdoors in the original location, while the other is a museum diorama depicting the same space. In "Coyote", the photograph features a taxidermy coyote against the painted backdrop of Toadstool Geological Park. The sense of depth that plants this space in reality is created by the curved walls and forced perspective in the diorama. That illusion is shattered by the use of an external flash. The newly introduced light flattens the space and reveals the disjointed and collaged qualities of the diorama. When viewed together, these two images invite comparison between the original and the imitation, the inside and the outside, perceived artificial and the perceived natural. These two photographs are conceptually and physically at the center of the exhibition.

In the exhibition, framed photographs are evenly spaced to invite one at a time viewing. Because of the layout, my photographs are initially viewed with the framework of traditional landscape photography. However, once the image deteriorates for the viewer, the traditional landscape viewing framework also collapses. Most of the photographs in the show are images of natural history displays in museums. Sequentially these appear first, then images of the back-ends of museums, and finally display-inspired outdoor spaces are woven in near the end. By using museum displays as the main through line with research and outdoor spaces woven in, the show sequence re-enforces the deep ties between the three.

Whereas nature was once associated with mysticism in European curiosity cabinets, it

has now become much more accessible and associated with science. Between those two points there was a substantial shift led by museums. Museums are always changing and adapting to better reflect new and emerging ideas about the world around us. They endeavor to teach people to see and read nature. It is important to recognize their power in an age of global climate crisis, and critical to understand both the positive and negative ways it influences the ways we interact with and shape the world.

## Installation Images











