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Eleanor Morgan's Bestiary

I take this strange affirmation from Baxandall: “We do not explain pictures.” Words are generally unimpressed by the artwork, so that the sum of all words will never amount to a single image. This cannot be attributed to their incapacity to represent the visible world, but to their lack of sympathy for the image. And yet they can convey the impression that the artwork has made on the writer, on this writer who, upon visiting the gallery, finds that art viewing has become an extraordinarily self-governing activity, so that I may walk away with any idea whatsoever while I look without pondering, gaze around without examining, glance at what hangs on the walls, what lies on the floor or on a pedestal, treating it all with an indifference that I have perhaps learned from words themselves, or which overtakes me as I realise that I must take it all in only in order to put down in writing what I felt upon encountering the artwork. The first image I remember from Eleanor Morgan's installation is that of the *Dreamer Fish* itself: a black, mucilaginous body, cut open at the abdomen from which unfurled a long strip of yellow tape, arranged on a wooden surface in a way reminiscent of Piero Manzoni's *Artists Breath*. What a tragic sight!

Unlike the more or less quotidian creatures that appear in her former works, the dreamer fish appears to be an alien being in our world. And this is not only because the dreamer fish inhabits the deep ocean, but also because, as we soon realise, its mating patterns disagree with what we, as humans, believe to be the norm: the female is usually much larger than the male, which undergo a long and exhausting search, aided only by his sense of smell and the female's bioluminescent antler. Once he has found her, he will bite into the female's body and latch on, like a parasite, *for the rest of their lives*. Sometimes more than one male will find the same female, in which case she will have to deal with more than one parasite. Eventually, they all become a single assemblage, sharing blood vessels, their capacity to produce semen and eggs, and I presume their *joie de vivre*.

And as if this was not enough to make us feel estranged from this species, its physiognomy resembles such familiar representations of extraterrestrial life as Ridley Scott's *Alien*. Indeed, this similarity seems to turn on the commonplace idea that we know as little about the deep ocean as we do about outer space, an idea that threatens to confuse these two very different realms. For example, in the webpage of the Royal BC Museum where the dreamer fish is described we are told: "It is not a far stretch to think of the ocean as [an] 'innerspace' full of alien life forms."<sup>1</sup> It is as if, by way of bringing things close to our hearts, the general idea saves us from our ignorance. With ease we slip from our own world, *this world*, which is the one we "know," towards another space, unfamiliar, that only words can grasp: *alien life forms*, and *innerspace*: an infinite identity and an infinite context for the object. How can we make the object descend from this rarefied state if not through naturalistic analogies to human attributes? This, I suspect, is the point that Morgan's work wants to make: that we are unable to relate to "outside" forms other than through *empathy*, and that this empathetic relationship is full of anthropomorphisms.

A wax replica of a dead dreamer fish set on a pedestal welcomed us to Eleanor Morgan's installation. Although it appeared to be an absurd ensemble, it was modelled in the likeness of a specimen held in Victoria at the Royal BC Museum<sup>2</sup>. Like the latter, Morgan's fish showed an incision at the abdomen from which emerged a ball of wrapping tape ... "probably perceived as food and swallowed whole"<sup>3</sup>. Hence the exchange between organic life and plastic has penetrated even the deep ocean. Yet, unlike the "model" which is set in a laboratory environment, Morgan's copy had been arranged over a square wooden plaque, the lifeless body pushed towards the top right corner, and the wrapping tape stretched across the frame, folding over the lower left border. Laid out in this way, this fish brings up a series of references: its arrangement – as well as the tragic *mise en scène* – reminds us of Piero Manzoni's *Artist's*

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Sendall, "Natural History, Dreamer's Family: Oneirodidae," [http://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/nh\\_papers/dreamer/dreamer.html](http://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/nh_papers/dreamer/dreamer.html) (accessed December 8, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Sendall, Royal BC Museum

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Sendall, Royal BC Museum

*Breath*; we may then suspect that for a while this fish used to embrace life in much the same way that the red balloon used to contain air from Manzoni's lungs. And beyond the pop-cultural reference to *Alien* (a reference that is highlighted by the wrapping tape coming out of the stomach), it also has the gruesome, radioactive aspect of a figure from an Enrico Baj "nuclear period" painting.

Upon entering the gallery, I find myself perplexed before an image of a dead *dreamer fish*. I believe that it is not the animal that finds itself estranged from human beings – although it may find itself estranged upon encountering its representation – but that we, as humans, find ourselves estranged from these creatures and from what they represent. For example, the dreamer fish lives in the deep Ocean, and the reason we don't know much about it is that, on one hand, as it emerges into warmer, brighter waters, its heart explodes and it dies, so that any understanding (scientific or otherwise) of this fish is necessarily *post-mortem*. On the other hand, human beings would also suffer greatly were they to attempt to swim at great depths, and being there little reason for us to travel into this "innerspace" that the deep ocean is, it is hardly worth the economic and physical expense. Our worlds are thus *separate*. But more importantly, the dreamer fish is not as concerned about this fact as humans are.

I must remember, and remind the reader, that Eleanor Morgan's installation has other elements besides the dreamer fish that, as I enter the gallery, lies dead on a wooden plaque. For instance, a series of black-and-white drawings were displayed on a wall, representing the abstract-looking designs of the females' bioluminescent antlers, which are supposed to express their identity (mostly, it is assumed, so that the male will recognise the female of his own kind). The "didactic" value of these representations (as well as the "functional" role the designs would have in the deep ocean) was highlighted by the fact that these drawings looked like chalk-on-blackboard, although rather than "painting over" Morgan had scratched the black surface to reveal a white layer underneath. At the centre of the space, a hanging helmet with an "antler" and a blue LED light at the tip invited the viewer to "become" a female dreamer fish, bringing up the common science museum strategy to have the visitor "encounter" the natural habitat. This should

have offered the *ultimate* empathetic experience. Perhaps motivated by a desire to participate in the animal's life, visitors would try on this absurd helmet (which Morgan describes as being at the same time a figuration of the "dickhead") only to find themselves in a ridiculous (even embarrassing) situation in which it would be impossible to experience the dreamer fish, if not because of the inadequacy of the "technological" gadget, then because of the self-awareness upon finding one's body attempting to "represent" an alien form. In the end, the didactic function of this gadget is at once its own failure (as a scientific prop) and its success, as it demonstrates that our willingness to empathise is limited by a desire to evaluate other beings vis-à-vis our humanness, and that it can be foreclosed in a moment of self-consciousness.

While the work of Eleanor Morgan is not invested in scientific knowledge, nor is it concerned with the anthropomorphic qualities of animals (be these moralistic, or sentimental, or otherwise), it certainly presupposes both. Science cannot understand "alien" forms without resorting to anthropomorphisms (this much can be discerned from the videotaped interview of Dr. Ted Pietsch included in the exhibition), while our relationship to animals appears to remain hopelessly "empathetic". Such is the genius of animal rights advocacy, where the affective qualities of humans are transferred over to animals, allegedly in the name of the law and in the name of ethics. Nonetheless, the ethical implications of such a travesty are revealed as soon as we are asked to "recognise that animals should be thought of as *persons* under the law"<sup>4</sup>. Our attitudes towards the "abstract law" – and hence the "abstract" or "universal" laws themselves – must change as soon as we are asked to believe that humans are exchangeable for animals, as if it were the same to say "humans are not animals" or "animals are not humans". Besides, more than raising questions about the confusion of disguises (animals as humans, or humans as animals), the inability to produce an effective law for the protection of animals *in their own right* seems to confirm that we are incapable of relating to them other than through empathy.

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<sup>4</sup> Gary L. Francione and Anna E. Charlton, "Animal Rights Law Project," Rutgers University School of Law, <http://www.animal-law.org/center/mission.htm> (accessed December 8, 2005)

So art is strange to nature. Morgan is right in claiming this, but we are not. It is there, in her playful and ironic (ironic and almost dry, quasi-scientific) display of situations, that we confirm her suspicions, and weave the world of “nature” through references to our own. Already in its name we see that the *dreamer fish* is asked to carry out functions that do not correspond with its nature. Is this fish more out of place inside a contemporary art gallery than inside a scientific lab? Or, what’s worse, a provincial museum dedicated to the presentation of “the natural and human history of British Columbia ...”?