

Liz Bruchet

*Lit from behind, Lit from below:
Eleanor Morgan's "The Dreamer Fish"*

It is then that consciousness of alienation – that strange awareness of the strange – liberates us, or begins to liberate us, from alienation. ...To look at things from an *alien* standpoint – externally and from a reasonable distance – is to look at things *truly*.

Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*¹

Good metaphors are compulsive, circular experiences; they speak to those dizzying ironies that continuously offset our literal understanding. We turn to analogies to stretch our thought only to have them get the better of us, to snap us back to ourselves and to the tenuous nature of our interpretation. Like chasing one's tail, metaphors tempt us with meaning, only to evade us, leaving us instead with a fleeting glimpse of our own back end. To that end I would propose an addendum to Lefebvre's statement. To look at things *truly* is above all to acknowledge the absurdity that arises from our attempts to overcome our estrangement; to experience the consciousness of alienation, we must also embrace its humour. Only then can we catch a glimpse of true awareness.

It is in this vein that Eleanor Morgan's installation proposes its allegory. Despite its modest size and fanciful name, the dreamer fish is a hellish looking creature. Residing in the dark depths of the ocean, it is in essence naked, without skin or scales—a thing of nightmares. Biologically doctored over the course of time, the fish's dorsal fin emanates light through a mass of bacteria which dangles above its head like a perverted fishing pole, luring its prey. This cantankerous character presents an intriguing, almost Faustian, paradox: the light of one's imagination is its trick; we become its prey, sucked into the romance it offers, only to be caught in its trap.

Morgan's carefully rendered wax replica of a dreamer fish appears to have been victim of its own trick, having hooked what presumably killed it—a strip of packing tape. Her specimen presents a benign, defeated little creature, its razor teeth no longer suited to its limp frame. A grid of drawings, reminiscent of biological illustrations or chalkboard sketches, offers a microscopic study of the variety of dreamer fish lures. Though finely detailed, the depictions remain unrecognizable. They could be dancing figures, lewd depictions of body parts, or creatures from a shelved horror film. Should this curious narrative be read as biological fact or invented fiction? Perhaps a symbolic portrait of our persistent presence?

As if attempting to corroborate the evidence before us, Morgan extends her pseudo-scientific presentation with the introduction of the expert, Professor and Curator of Fish, Ted Pietsch. A short video work shows him seated in his university office discussing the ins and outs of the fish's parasitic mating pattern. As his explanation unfolds, so too does the viewer's tendency to hear his words as somehow analogous to human behaviour. The computer's screensaver, caught in the video frame, runs through a comparable cycle: a lone dreamer fish swims across the screen, then blurs into a second image in which a school of fish attempts to consume a single fish half its size. The scene mimics the slippery slope from the referential to the parasitic, tracing our compulsion to gleam from the creatures around us in order to secure our own vague sense of place.

Anticipating this impulse, the sculptural headpiece suspended from the ceiling of the centre gallery invites the viewer to literally don the perspective of dreamer fish. Part torture device, part investigatory tool, part protective helmet, the sculpture teases our expectations of identification. A small LED hanging from the helmet mimics the dreamer fish's lure, its blue light pulsing like a wanna-be siren. Despite its technological edge, this sanitized version of the real thing renders the trick pathetic. We remain fixed to our spot, bound by a rope and nowhere near an underwater destination. Above all, we look the fool.

Morgan's concern with the engagement between animals and humans pivots on the long-standing trope of nature as truth-teller. Her work toys with our penchant to personify the natural world so it may allude to the state of human existence. One need only think of museums with their myriad of classification systems, nomenclatures, display cases and formaldehyde suspensions. These methods confirm an innate desire to know, to preserve, to contain and more implicitly, to compare against ourselves. Of course, it is no longer a novel idea to suggest the ways in which we attempt to understand the natural world reveals more about ourselves than our subject of study. The required reflexivity of contemporary cultural investigation—in particular the recent move towards a kind of museological self-analysis—has shed a bright light on our methodological shortcomings.

“The Dreamer Fish” illustrates the futility of trying to close the gap between documentation, observation and experience. After all, few will ever see the creature in its natural habitat. The sparseness and quiet of the gallery lends a pervasive aura of loneliness that stretches beyond the evocation of the natural history museum as a kind of mausoleum. It speaks of our confused attempts to locate meaning through identification of another. Rather than provide self-assurance, our imagination seems to inadvertently capture and highlight our own alienation.

Herein lies the slip of any metaphor: an idea drawn to a point of analogy must ultimately be reduced again to its original form. After all, a fish is just a fish...isn't it? With the trick of the *trompe l'oeil* revealed, we become witnesses to our own illusions. It is at that moment of illumination that Morgan's dreamer fish becomes funny—funny looking with a funny name, subject to genuine, but often-laughable investigations by sincere, but alien investigators. Yet Morgan buries these revelations beneath a reverence for her subjects. Hers is a comment without condescension, imbued with equal parts fascination and teasing. Knowledge, awareness and perspective are tricky things, and the view of one's ass, an awkward, unfamiliar pose. Yet the paths of investigations bring with them a necessity for humour, which if poised just right, heralds its own unlikely liberation.

ⁱ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore, vol. 1. (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 20.