

"What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?"
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

Heart of the Matter

ROD McRAE
Essay by Court Williams



War & Peace, 2010

In 1822, at the age of twenty-nine, Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned off the Italian coast when his ship was supposedly struck by an unexpected violent summer storm. Several weeks later, what remained of his body was washed upon on the beach of Viareggio.

Quarantine regulations at the time required his corpse to be cremated on the beach after family had been informed of the find. Close family and friends who were in Italy at the time watched on as his body was engulfed by fire. Keeping with tradition, his grieving young wife Mary remained in a carriage nearby. As myth would have it, the only part of Percy Shelley that would not succumb to the flames was his heart. Retrieved from glowing embers, it was eventually passed on to Mary, who, for the remainder of her life, hoarded the heart as if it were a precious family heirloom.

Perhaps Mary simply saw the charred heart as totem of her husband's memory. Or perhaps she saw a more sinister potential for the organ, for Mary was, after all, the woman who had four years earlier created one of the nineteenth century's most curious pieces of literature, in Frankenstein – a tale of knowledge and power, re-creation and destruction, and the consequences of the act of playing God.



This Disney World, 2010

Photograph by Grant Fraser

The work of Sydney-based artist Rod McRae considers, to a certain extent, the same themes as Shelley's tome. His work explores the impact of the advancement of human knowledge on the natural world, the effects of human activity on the destabilisation of natural hierarchies and the precarious notion of 'the future'. The artist's work draws attention to existence and consequence while also considering what it may be that fuels human need and feeds human satisfaction. While the impact of human activity on the natural world is undoubtedly problematic, it is indicative of one natural human compulsion: to maintain a beating heart. At all costs.

Sustaining life – keeping things alive, so to speak – is implicit in Rod McRae's work. His practice is anchored by a playful engagement with taxonomy and taxidermy. For the artist, taxidermy is more than just a creative process – it is a symbol of the holding back of decay, failure and fatigue as well as a human attempt to tame the natural world. Through taxidermy, humans simulate a 'new order' that works against the very process of nature. It allows us to face our fears.

The artist explores that very primal human experience of anxiety and fear of the natural world. In his work, humans are not harmonious with the earth. The artist uses animals to explore the human desire to conquer, defeat and control the natural order, much to our own detriment - for the implications of doing so are far greater than the victories of subjugation.

McRae's work does not allow the human heart to rest – anxiety is unavoidable as he actively positions the viewer face to face with suspended menace – natural and untamed predators, environmental nightmares and the legitimate prospect of uncertain and unnatural futures. A still lion occupies the same space as what is (according to the natural order of things) its prey, in the form of enthusiastic gallery-goers, yet asks us to consider which spe-

cies is more dangerous. A life-sized polar bear seizes position upon a fridge in an act of monumental defiance and intimidation - a threat of comfort in the face of global deterioration and ignorance. Phobia inducing arachnids and other multi-legged beasts take siege around a nest of eggs ready to plunder life before it has started. In all his work, the fragility of life is precarious and the natural human instinct of anxiety is a driving force.

The **Wall of Anxiety** consists of five re-animated and operating cuckoo clocks. Each of the clocks tick away and unpredictably create a cacophony of noise as they individually chime, play music and release mechanical bird song – a medley of discordance and mayhem. These clocks are both alarm bells and warning signals – the tick-tock marking of time is a countdown to uncertainty and a constant reminder of our own mortality – slowly but surely slipping away from us. Each individual clock is carved with different motifs and animals – testimony to the impact we have had on the environment and the disruption this has caused. This idea is explored extensively throughout McRae's broader body of work.

Operation Foxtrot presents the viewer with a mischievous group of foxes who have taken over normal activity from humans. Immediately playful with overtones of anthropomorphism, the piece slowly reveals a far more disquieting undercurrent: a threat to our seemingly civilised existence and an ominous vision of a world where humans suddenly cease to exist. How did we vanish so

quickly and who would inherit the role of dominant species? In the piece the foxes occupy lounge chairs and shopping trolleys seemingly enjoying the luxuries, or going through the same daily routines as humans in Western cultures. They inhabit the work in such a way that they demand to know just who's population it is that is out of control.

McRae explores how human anxiety and the drive to stay alive and dominant have paved the way for our interference with the natural order of the world. His work situates the human species as an out of control parasite and draws attention to the many species that have fallen prey to our global imperialism. Resources have been depleted and have subsequently altered natural food chains; pollution and the mismanagement of waste have impacted on natural habitats and affected how and where species breed; culling, poaching, fishing and population control have modified the collective memory, behaviour and social order of specific species of animals and result in a deterioration of natural instinct; mining and deforestation wipe out some species altogether - permanently. To reiterate Shelley: *What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?*

The artist deposits his silent menagerie into uncanny situations that are simultaneously humorous and menacing – situations that speak of the destabilisation of natural hierarchies and environmental turmoil. In **Happy Father's Day** a family of ducklings meander comfortably around the feet of a sitting fox – a predator that could change their fate with one swift snap of its jaw. Yet the fox remains, in this unsettling frozen moment, a potential parent, protector and nurturer of its natural prey – disrupting the predisposed order of things in this man-made simulacrum.

In **This Disney World**, nature's systems have been reshuffled to disturbing effect. Two fawns are depicted in a frozen tug-o-war over a rabbit, their delicate jaws firmly pinching each end of their frozen prey. Their nimble legs are all they have to brace themselves against the pull of the other. There is nothing to suggest that either of these creatures is prepared to relinquish their claim as they gaze a calm defiance into the other's eyes. Both are quietly desperate in this absurd and futile situation.

This Disney World examines how the impact of human activity comes to the forefront as the battle for scarce resources manifests itself in the most unlikely of scenarios. The fantastical world of Disney has been turned upside down as Bambi and Thumper's natural roles shift: species are pushed to the brink and their instincts mutated as their environments are manipulated and resources depleted. The title itself plays on a wide-spread and chronic case of climate denial – the horrors of a worst case scenario are pushed aside in favour of a Disney point of view where every ending is happy and every shoulder has a chirping bluebird perched upon it.



Operation Foxtrot, 2010

Are You My Mother? examines the systematic disruption of animal sociability and hierarchy through culling and poaching. In this piece a young zebra foal gazes helplessly up to the head of a fully-grown zebra mounted to the wall. The situation is marked by a poignant futility as the foal stands defenseless and vulnerable before its trophy parent.

"McRae's work does not allow the human heart to rest..."

The piece refers to the classic children's book *Are You My Mother?* the story of a newly hatched bird looking for its parent. It asks a cat, a dog, a hen, a cow – all of which reply, of course, 'no'. In desperation the young bird questions a boat and

a plane – having hatched alone it has no idea what other birds are meant to look like or how they behave. Needless to say, in the world of children's storytelling, the hatchling is happily united with its parent. In the case of this ill-fated zebra foal, the species is a definite match, though the situation has a rather more grisly outcome.

Are You My Mother? speaks of how human activity interrupts the lineage of species-specific instinct and how it can rob individual animals of natural sociability, thus generating in animals abnormal behaviour and consequential trauma. We only need to read of the impact of widespread culling and poaching on elephant herds on the African continent to see the social breakdown and erratic behaviour displayed by elephants whose natural social order has been permanently disrupted.

The mayhem of habitat destruction is explored in **War and Peace**. Two Magellanic penguins find themselves in dismal circumstances: the two birds tend to their eggs in a nest made entirely of assorted plastic toy soldiers – a natural

act in an unnatural environment. The piece reacts to the militaristic past and political upheavals of Chile, Argentina and the Falkland Islands (where this particular penguin is native) and the legacy these events have had on the environment. These penguins have made their home amidst the flotsam and jetsam of war, industrial waste and the discard of mass manufactured objects. The fact that humans turn on one another through war is at odds with the collective goal of a species to sustain itself. Yet in McRae's work, the human condition is fraught with paradox.

McRae's work encourages us to consider how humans have come to occupy a curious position in the world – one that sits somewhere between Darwin's theories of evolution and religious Dogma. The Enlightenment and the Age of Reason saw humans liberate themselves from the constraints of religion and develop a more robust faith in science. Our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us developed, and with that knowledge came the desire to control our surroundings and to prolong our lives – to keep our hearts beating for as long as possible. This saw us make incredible advances in regards to sustaining and maintaining our living bodies: penicillin and anesthetic can now hold back and control physical pain, chemotherapy and biotechnologies help the sick stay alive where otherwise they would have died, celebrity endorsed creams and tonics (science experiments of sorts, if the ingredients are to be scrutinized) supposedly keep our skin youthful and, of course, our own form of animated taxidermy: cosmetic surgery holds back the physical appearance of decay and deterioration.

Yet for all of these advances, we cannot dominate or cheat one aspect of nature: death. We can certainly ward it off, but the one, true commonality among all humans is our mortality – each and every single one of us will one day cease to breathe, to move, to feel. Our mortality is our own downfall and renders our efforts to live forever and to control the environment as fundamentally futile. Or does it?

Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein demonstrates the human desire to play God – to wrench control from nature or some unseen deity and control our existence, to control life in all its forms and allow our hearts to beat forever. This is none more evident than in **Pacemakers** – an installation of 25 standing wooden figures each dressed in lab coats and headpieces made of preserved rabbit heads (by products of the rabbit meat industry, but could just as easily be casualties of laboratory tests) – macabre Easter bonnets of sorts. The rabbits are eyeless and white – angels of death with a promise of sustained life as each capped figure holds out a pacemaker in their small hands. Each pacemakers has been harvested from the final demise of a prolonged human life. Unlike Percy Shelley's heart, pacemakers explode in extreme heat and therefore must be harvested before cremation. These figures stand as a frightening variation of the Duracell bunny with the promise that nothing lasts longer.



Pacemakers 11/25, 2010

The fact that each rabbit has been systematically slaughtered is a completely disturbing notion, but not as disturbing as the fact that these creatures – hybrid monsters of sorts – are offering their butchers a piece of biotechnology that is one step away from living forever.

McRae's work is testament to the collateral damage of human activity and draws attention to the attempt of humans to simulate a world that suits their needs and desires, despite, or in spite of, the laws of nature. Our presence in the world is having an imbalanced effect on nature's carefully defined (and refined) systems of life. The artist's work draws attention to the futility of our drive to stay in control to maintain our fabricated existence. Yet, at the heart of the matter is human nature, and these pieces draw attention to the one instinct that most humans share and are driven by: to maintain a beating heart. At all costs...

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