

Wonder Room

Paul Compton

Filomena Coppola

Rona Green

Deborah Klein

Heather Shimmen

Wonder Room

The precursor to the modern museum was the Wunderkammer, which literally translates as 'wonder room'. Comprising an eclectic array of bizarre and unusual items displayed in the private home of the collector, it was initially a past-time of the elite who had both money and time to amass large collections. The Wunderkammer, or Cabinet of Curiosities as it was known in Britain, first appeared in sixteenth century Europe, becoming popular with the middle classes in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. The discovery of new countries with their strange flora and fauna, together with the trend towards empirical science, spawned interest in the natural world and collecting spread as a fashionable past-time. Amateur 'bug-catchers' and sea combers explored the forests and shores while others developed an interest in collecting all manner of natural phenomenon including fossils, feathers, eggs, teeth and tusks. Specimens preserved in glass jars were highly sought after, as were stuffed animals. Taxidermy rose to an art form during this period in response to demand. Reflecting the collector's idiosyncrasies, the significance of any one object in the collection was socially and culturally constructed around perceived notions of taste, rarity and novelty. Whereas in the public museum everything is methodically catalogued and arranged according to agreed principles of meaning for the purpose of education and the attainment of knowledge, the Wunderkammer was predominately a form of entertainment.

The sixteenth century Wunderkammer was a celebration of the abundance and creativity of God's creations.ⁱ A visual cacophony of natural history specimens, archeological artifacts and hand-crafted objects, amongst other finds, these early collections reflected a new confidence in visuality. The modern microscope was invented in the seventeenth century and increasingly attempts to understand the world focused on observable difference. Charles Darwin's evolutionary ideas in *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, sparked great interest in the concept of natural selection which was largely understood through comparative analysis. New sciences of observation measuring visual difference emerged at this time, such as Anthropology and the pseudo-science Phrenology, and increasingly in all fields of science the equation of vision with knowledge was robustly upheld. The internal logic of the Wunderkammer, with its panoply of disparate objects, was the spectacle, which provided a coherence that was otherwise absent. Specimens were often selected for their beauty. But there

was also a desire amongst many collectors to acquire natural oddities. Just as perfection was highly prized, so too was imperfection, particularly when expressed in macabre deformities and abnormalities. Many collections contained a 'monster' – a freak of nature displayed to shock and surprise.

The artists in the exhibition *Wonder Room* draw upon these past collecting practices to create their own version of the Wunderkammer for the twenty-first century. Describing themselves as 'unnatural history' artists, Paul Compton, Filomena Coppola, Rona Green, Deborah Klein and Heather Shimmen each ask us to closely consider a perplexing array of exotic creatures that are imaginary contortions of nature. Heather Shimmen and Deborah Klein both create hybrid insect forms that play upon fascination with nature's aberrations. Shimmen considers the irrational fear tiny insects provoke in many humans. Responding to true, but preposterous tales from the Australian bush, she creates a series of cameo portraits that depict her female protagonists as unnatural composite creatures. In the linocut *Creep*, 2010, a woman's face is encased within the torso of a beetle. As if trapped in a disturbing fairytale, she looks out from her insect prison beseechingly. This humanizes the insect eliciting our sympathy rather than fear. The medium of linocut is skillfully worked so that it has the appearance of early engravings. These were a common means by which many people encountered unusual creatures prior to photography. However these images were often unreliable – the fantastic creatures depicted a product of the mind rather than reality.

So too Deborah Klein extends her interest in representations of femininity in her enchanting images of insects. In the linocut *Emergent Cicada Woman*, 2013, it is unclear whether the cicada is devouring the woman or she wears the insect like a magic cloak. Its feelers reach into her immaculately coiffed hair in a gesture that is unnerving. *A Cabinet of Insect Women*, 2012, comprises thirty individual miniature watercolours, each one depicting a woman's head emerging from an insect's body. Each image is exquisitely coloured in gem-like hues. Stored within their own tiny plan cabinet, they are reminiscent of nineteenth century insect collections. Both Klein and Shimmen draw upon popular culture representations of the monstrous feminine to question depictions of woman as abject difference. They consider the shape-shifting abilities of female protagonists in fairy tales and create works that flaunt fears of otherness.

In contrast Rona Green's anthropomorphic bad-boy creatures can be seen as a loveable assortment of nature's freaks. *Booger Sugar*, 2013, and *Bucky*, 2013, are both affectionate depictions of mutant characters that appear to be down on their luck. Bucky has only two teeth remaining and his left arm is partially amputated, no doubt the result of injury from a fight. Both creatures are covered in tattoos in a spectacle of belonging signaling their membership within a gang. In these works Green examines masculinity in western societies and the macho identities of subcultures. Whereas Klein's creatures are shy beings depicted with their faces averted from the viewer, Green brings her characters close to the picture plane, insisting on a face to face encounter with the viewer. This invites us into an intimate relationship entreating us to apprehend their similarity rather than difference.

Filomena Coppola also creates hybrid creatures, specifically a strange type of organism that is neither flora nor fauna. Referencing the Australian native orchid, Coppola enlarges their shape and substitutes their petals with animal fur. These evocative images consider what it means to be caught between two cultures. Born in Mildura to Italian immigrants, Coppola's project over recent years considers the duality of lived experience and the ramifications of navigating between worlds. *15th Specimen of 24*, 2012-13, is one of the most anthropomorphic of works in this exhibition. A tongue-like form is depicted supported by two legs, their bulbous knees giving way to sinuous tails which enable the creature to stand upright. Two arm-like petals wrap around its waist. Coppola renders the absurdist plant as an amalgam of fur and skin. The fleshy tones create an uncanny quality, imbuing it with something unsettlingly human. In the spirit of the Wunderkammer we are both fascinated and repelled, intrigued and reviled by these life-forms that defy categorization.

Likewise Paul Compton's delicate ink and watercolour images depict the loathsome creature that is neither animal nor human, plant nor fish. Compton's cabinet drawings directly call up the iconography of the Wunderkammer. He depicts an ornately carved cabinet, each one housing an assortment of fantastical composite creatures. Incorporating real and imagined beings, Compton is interested in the absurd effects that come from placing the amazing alongside the everyday. *The Little Mermaid Cabinet*, 2013 and *The Teen Wolf Cabinet*, 2013, both portray so-called freaks of nature

imprisoned for the display of others. Their sorrowful expressions aptly convey their miserable existence and invite our compassion for their plight.

Visually compelling, the Wunderkammer is best understood as an optical excess that conferred social cache to its owner through possession. Objects were arranged and displayed according to the aesthetic whims of the collector in statements of dominance over the natural world. In the twenty-first century interest has waned in these personal collections. Instead the internet provides a new type of virtual Wunderkammer that is accessible from anywhere at anytime. Furthermore, genetic modification and screening practices are giving rise to a greater degree of homogeneity in living creatures than previously existed. What is lost in the eradication of difference is an appreciation of the complexity of nature and a profound respect for all living things. Increasingly many of us live disconnected from the natural environment in high-rise apartment buildings or townhouses that no longer have gardens. At a time when the natural world is changing, and many species have already become extinct or are threatened with extinction, it behoves us all to reawaken our curiosity and wonder again about nature.

Wendy Garden
September 2013

i Stephen Asma, *Stuffed animals and pickled heads: The culture and evolution of natural history museums*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 78.

Paul Compton

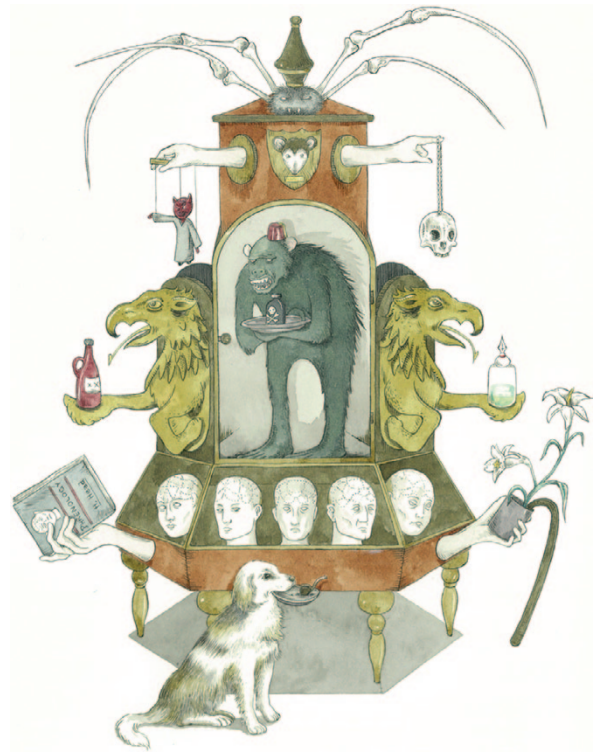
clockwise from right

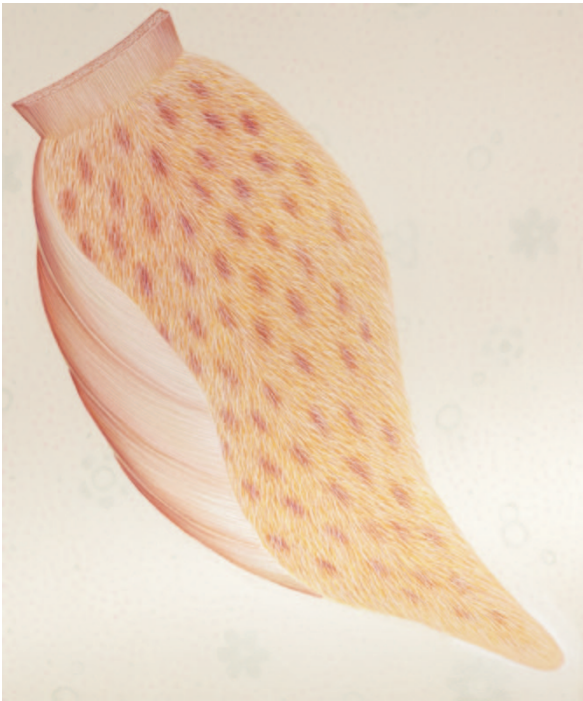
The Dumb Waiter Cabinet
2013 ink on paper 28.8 x 24 cm

The Little Mermaid Cabinet
2013 ink & gouache on paper 28.8 x 24 cm

The Teen Wolf Cabinet
2013 ink on paper 28.8 x 24 cm

www.paulcompton.net





Filomena Coppola

clockwise from left

24th specimen of 24

2012-13 pastel on paper 80 x 80 cm

21st specimen of 24

2012-13 pastel on paper 60 x 50 cm

7th specimen of 24

2012-13 pastel on paper 30 x 30 cm

Drawings from *Wallflower – A Cabinet of Curiosity*
overall dimensions 290 x 690 cm

Photography: Luke Birch

www.filomenacoppola.com

Rona Green

clockwise from right

The Doctor – III: Axos
2007 mixed media 30 x 39 x 5 cm

Booger Sugar
2013 acrylic on canvas 97 x 87 cm

The Doctor – I: Vortis
2010 mixed media 30 x 39 x 5 cm

Photography: Jeremy Dillon

Rona Green is represented by Australian Galleries

www.ronagreen.com





Deborah Klein

clockwise from left

A Cabinet of Moth Masks

2010-13 acrylic on miniature plaster masks
smaller masks 8 x 5.5 cm larger masks 13 x 9 cm
plan cabinet 43 x 47 x 29 cm

Emergent Cicada Woman from *Homo-insecta* portfolio
2013 linocut and hand colouring 29.5 x 21 cm edition 10

A Cabinet of Insect Women

2012 30 watercolours on Khadi paper 10.5 x 7.5 cm each
plan cabinet 17.5 x 16 x 12 cm

Photography: Tim Gresham

www.deborahklein.net

Heather Shimmen

clockwise from right

Creep

2010 linocut on felt 51 x 42 cm 2 of 10

The Collector

2012 linocut and ink on paper 100.5 x 60.5 cm 1 of 25

Glazed

2008 linocut on felt 31 cm in diameter multiple of 10

Photography: John Brash and the artist

Heather Shimmen is represented by Australian Galleries

www.australiangalleries.com.au




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Maroondah Art Gallery
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03 9298 4542
www.artsinmaroondah.com.au

Opening hours
Tuesday to Friday 10am–4pm, Saturday 12pm–4pm
Closed public holidays

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