

Fauna Secreta's Creatures Play an Amusing Hoax

VISUAL ARTS

Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera

Fauna Secreta

At the Presentation House Gallery until
July 30

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

I'm wondering if a generalized condition of silliness has settled on the local art scene—or perhaps silliness is the way Vancouver's galleries and artist-run centres lapse into summer? Humour, irony, parody, playfulness, slightness, liteness, even giddiness have characterized the last few exhibitions I've reviewed in the Lower Mainland. It's starting to look like a trend.

Although created by Spanish artists Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera and curated by Montrealer Sylvain Campeau, Fauna Secreta accommodates this trend, both

in the elaborate and humorous fiction upon which it's predicated and in the fantastical creatures it purports to document. The exhibition evokes an antiquated natural-history museum, with zoological exhibits that include scruffy stuffed animals;

blotched and smudged field notes, handwritten in fading brown ink; texts that classify and describe the weirdly hybrid creatures under study; dissection drawings; and artificially aged, blurred, and damaged photographs of the specimen creatures, in the wild and in captivity.

X-rays, audiotapes (recordings of the calls of the fictitious specimens), and an interactive CD-ROM introduce more contemporary technologies into the exhibit, but towards the same end: setting up conditions in which the bemused viewer will question how scientific truths are established and perpetuated. Through their strategies of manipulating, disrupting, and confabulating—yeah, messing with the evidence—the artists cause us to reexamine the means by which institutions (including the media) produce and convey knowledge, how they tell their version of the truth, and what role photo technologies play in establishing the credibility of that knowledge, that truth. How do we know, they ask us, that human beings have actually walked on the moon? Wouldn't it be possible to fake a moonwalk for all us gullible, TV-watching folks back home?

Fauna's essential hoax, its underlying fiction, is this: that the exhibition has been gleaned posthumously from the archives and laboratory of one Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen (his surname is German for "anthill"), a brilliant, if eccentric, naturalist who

Kubert"), tracking, photographing, sound-recording, drawing, dissecting, stuffing, and classifying these creatures. The creatures themselves include such wonders as *Cercopithecus icarocornu*, a winged monkey with a single horn protruding from its forehead (a photograph records this simian monster impaling a hapless little hedgehog on its horn); *Myodorifera colubercauda*, a gopher-like creature with webbed hind feet and a snake for a tail; *Threschelonia atis*, a long-beaked bird-turtle hybrid; *Centaurus neandertalensis*, a baboon-deer hybrid; and *Pirofagus catalanae*, a fire-breathing crocodile with a tall dorsal fin—in other words, a *dragon*—living in the vicinity of Mount Etna on the island of Sicily. Dr. Ameisenhaufen notes that the dragon's fire is "undoubtedly due to the production of gastric gases which ignite upon direct contact with the atmosphere".

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Fontcuberta and Formiguera have not only manufactured all the evidence of these creatures' existence, in image, text, and audiotape, at great and often amusing length. They've also manufactured the evidence of Dr.

Ameisenhaufen's life—his parents, his childhood home, his colleagues, his lover, his expulsion from academe, his mysterious death—in the form of photos, letters, and other documents displayed in museum cases, a biographical essay in the catalogue, and an interview on the CD-ROM with his surviving half-sister, "Elke". The scientist, then, becomes as much a museum specimen as the creatures he brought to light.

Mixed in with the faked photographs and documents are a few actual, historic photos, albums, and books, and images of creatures as unlikely-but-true as a duck-billed platypus, a large-eared bat, and a warhog—any one of which could have been the product of some medieval monk's imagination. Then there's Ameisenhaufen's report of "The Great Warden of All Good", a kind of winged deer that the perplexed naturalist could not classify as a zoological entity, despite his own observations and his assistant's photographs. Even in the realm of fantastical pseudoscience, miracles may be supposed to occur. And speaking of playing God, no small political commentary is made by "evidence" of the naturalist's fatal impact on many of the creatures he classified: they've either died in captivity or been killed for dissection, to further scientific knowledge.

Different versions of the Fauna project have been on the road for more than a decade. (The exhibit on view at Presentation House has