



Emily Jan, *After the Hunt*, 2014. Photo: Eric Tschaeppeler z

## After the Hunt / Before the Fall

Text by Dr. Tammer El-Sheikh

*“The world teeters on some sort of brink. It seems utterly ridiculous to make effigies of animals or objects dead four hundred years. What magic would I hope to work with them? Still I show up; they are also the things I tend. Slowly they grow.”*

—Emily Jan, *Still Life*, 2014

The histories that converge in Jan’s ambitious *After the Hunt* (2014) are that of the Dutch 17th century and our own late-capitalist one. The installation is a cheeky updating of a painting by Franz Snijders titled *Game Still Life with a Roe Deer* (c. 1630). Where Snijders’ painting describes a colonial “embarrassment of riches” in the genre of a post-hunt tableaux, Jan’s work gathers an assortment of plastic objects – flowers, fruits, silverware, found at various Montreal *marchés aux puces* and a *fripperie* called “Renaissance” near her studio. This “groaning glut of goods and commodities” is arranged carefully around a central element: a life-sized gutted roe deer, handmade over a period of four months out of dyed merino wool. But this is not an homage, to Snijders’s work nor to the Dutch 17th century. Jan’s attitude toward this canonized art history is one of informed suspicion – of its teleological presentation, its Eurocentric bias and its criteria of selection.

Snijders’s painting is interpreted symptomatically by Jan, as an intended picture of Enlightenment promise that actively conceals a colonial violence: the extraction of objects from far-flung contexts for the satisfaction of Dutch appetites. The work is a commentary, and a rather bleak one, on the relationship between a celebrated moment in the Northern Enlightenment and our age of excess or runaway production and consumption.

*“There are things that drift away, like our endless, numbered days...”*

– *Iron and Wine, Sub Pop*, 2004

Jan completed *After the Hunt* in May of 2014, the product of a year and half of thinking, collecting and fabricating. A few months later she began work on *Before the Fall* (2015). The installation is centered around a life-sized replica of a *quagga* made of reed, wool, resin, and human hair. The *quagga* was a sub-species of zebra native to South Africa that was distinctive for its solid coloured hindquarters, and was hunted to extinction in the late-1800s. It stands here under a salvaged chandelier, surrounded by several hundred monarch butterflies made of silk and linen.

Jan’s work on the piece began in November of 2014. It took 300 hours of labor, the last 100 of which were spent in her Montreal studio during Quebec’s coldest February in 115 years, which some regard as yet another harbinger of catastrophic global climate

change. One hundred thirty-two years prior, the last *quagga* mare died in an Amsterdam zoo. A photograph of this mare, along with a late-18th century court painting of a *quagga* stallion from the menagerie of Louis XVI, were Jan’s primary sources for the handsome central element of the installation. In 1987, 104 years after its extinction, a University of Cape Town biologist named Reinhold Rau began his attempt to “breed back” the *quagga* from Burchell’s zebras captured in Namibia. His recovery of the sub-species would involve what Jan calls a “breeding away of the bottom half of the plains zebra’s stripes” – a partial loss of visual incident, following a total loss of the sub-species, in the interest of a return. What do we make of all these data points, scattered across thousands of miles and hundreds of years?

The image of the installation occurred to Jan fully formed one year ago, a condensation of the artist’s lived experience in California, Mexico, and South Africa. While living in Cape Town in 2005, she encountered Rau’s re-bred animals. And the monarch’s annual migration from California to Mexico reflects the artist’s own movement between those two places over the years. Two ideas mingle here then: one of a declining monarch population and another of a re-emergent *quagga* population. Indeed the monarchs and the quagga are paired in the installation as two expressions of the mystery of genetic and collective memory, to which Jan is repeatedly drawn in her work.



Emily Jan, *Before the Fall*, detail, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

This then is the *matter of Before the Fall*, but the installation unites these disparate pieces in an emotionally charged atmosphere. It is a work about matter, but also about memory – personal memory and political memory, and the endless passage of one into the other. Before its extinction, the *quagga* was a trophy of colonial conquest, recorded in paintings for the court at Versailles or displayed for popular entertainment at European zoos. For Jan, the

last specimen surely died in captivity of “loneliness”. Jan is similarly attuned to the political context and emotional tone of Rau’s work of the late-1980s. His “breeding-back” effort began after nearly a decade of failed anti-apartheid reforms, and seven years before the first multi-racial democratic elections – elections that formally if not actually ended South African apartheid. Rau’s project for Jan is inseparable from that complex and sordid history of colonial violence, and her installation is a poetic reflection on the questions of loss, hope, and the regret that motivates healing.

In 1910, some 30 years after the death of the last *quagga*, the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote about the poverty and selectivity of numerical measures of time, noting: “time... is not mathematical... it coincides with my impatience, that is to say with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like... it is something lived.”\* For 300 hours, patiently, during a record cold winter in Montreal, Jan worked on *Before the Fall*. The installation describes the audacity of colonial authority, the loneliness of the quagga, and a certain yearning in the face of the irreversibility of time. For Bergson, and for Jan, it seems our conventional measures of time provide only a limited angle on an embodied, mysterious, and deeply felt experience of temporality.



Emily Jan, *Before the Fall*, detail, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Emily Jan** is a Montréal-based sculptor originally hailing from San Francisco, California. Jan has traveled to 32 countries and lived in four (South Africa, Mexico, the US, and Canada). She draws inspiration from the eclectic experiences of a life spent largely on the road as well as from the culture of scientific inquiry that characterized her upbringing.

Upcoming exhibitions include solo exhibitions at Union Gallery, Artcite, and Harcourt House, and curated group exhibitions at Centre des arts actuels SKOL and PDA Projects. She is a MAI Mentorship Grant (Programme d’accompagnement — créativité et développement de carrière) awardee for 2014-2015 and a Clipperton Project residency awardee for 2015. Recent exhibitions include *OK OK OK* at Les Ateliers Jean Brillant in 2014, *falling through the mirror*, a two-person exhibition at both Latitude 53 and the FoFA Gallery, *De Rerum Natura* at Joshua Creek Heritage Centre, *Spectrum/Spectro* at the Museo Textil de Oaxaca, and *TRA(MA)/PA* at the Casa de la Cultura of Holguin, Cuba. In 2011, she was recognized with an award at the 6th International Biennial of Contemporary Textile Art (WTA – Aire). Jan holds an MFA from Concordia University (2014), a BA with Honours from Brown University (2000), and a BFA with High Distinction from the California College of the Arts (2009).

**Dr. Tammer El-Sheikh** is a Visiting Scholar in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University. He received his PhD in Art History from McGill University. His writing has appeared in the periodicals ARTMargins, Parachute, Canadian Art, ETC and C Magazine.

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Free admission



# Emily Jan

## After the Hunt / Before The Fall

March 28 - May 9, 2015



\*Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1911) p. 10.