

Beauty Plus Pity, Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby : an Interview by Monique Moublow

Galerie B-312, 2011

I like interviews with artists. They give an idea of the process of making the work, and situate it in the context of the artist's life. When I first began writing about the installation Beauty Plus Pity at Gallery B-312 in Montreal, I considered interviewing Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby about their work. It seemed appropriate. Since they began collaborating in 1994, Duke and Battersby's videos have been like an open book, with very little separation between their art and life, and no story too private to reveal. From *Being Fucked Up* (2000) to *Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure* (2006), themes of alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, or depression have run through the work, all of it smartly narrated with a dark sense of humour and poetry. However, the more I thought about doing an interview, of unearthing more personal details or insight about the artists' work and lives, the more I hesitated. *Beauty Plus Pity* was in no way less intimate than any of Duke and Battersby's other videos. It contained some of the same public/private struggles, but this time it seemed as if the darker details were lurking between the words. For some reason, I wanted to step back. To maintain a distance. To stubbornly ignore the elephant in the room. Of course there was no elephant, but there were a lot of other animals: a fawn, lynx, goat, coyote, raccoon, cat, kitten, otter, lamb, fox, two ducks, and a bird, and that's when I realized that if I had no interest in talking to Duke and Battersby, I could interview the animals instead. Like the hunter in the video, I also like dead animals. I like talking to them. I like looking in their eyes and pretending that they are listening to me. In some ways, it makes for a perfect interview.

Monique: I wanted to begin my interview by letting you know that I'm not going to talk about your life, or how you died. I'm not interested in that. I'm more interested in what comes after.

Coyote: ...

Monique: When I walk into this installation, with all the taxidermied animals and plinths, I know that this should remind me of a museum (it is an art gallery after all), but it feels more like an afterlife. I wouldn't say that this is a morally ambiguous afterlife, there is good and evil here, but there are multiple ways to be absolved. That's frightening, but it's also very reassuring. For example, at the beginning of the video, the viewer is advised not to have children so that we won't fuck them up in the same way that our parents messed us up. But in the next breath we are told that if we do have children, the children might become good, and that could make up for our own depravity. It seems like no matter what we do – whatever wrongs as humans we commit — it will all be ok. Even a Catholic Priest who tells a grieving mother that her daughter's death is her own fault, seems blameless. He's not being cruel. After all, it's God who made up the rules...

Raccoon: ...

Monique: The video begins with the line, "I am not cynical. I am an optimist..." This might be strange to say, but I think I agree. I take the artists at their word. However, even if the viewer decides that this initial statement is tongue in cheek, the work leads us through a series of episodes where irony isn't a constant. The cynical, self-assured pronouncements of one section are unraveled in the next, and in the end there is no joke to "get." The world is a beautiful place. The world is a horrible place.

Otter: ...

Duck: ...

Monique: The title of the show is taken from a quote by Vladimir Nabokov, "Beauty plus pity - that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual." In this video and installation, I'm sometimes struck by the thought that everyone here is already dead. Even the children.

Duck: ...

Monique: The hunter says, "I don't kill because it's thrilling, or what they call fun... I am honest about my feelings. I kill animals because I want to touch them. I kill animals, because I want to be able to touch them and hold them and it's the only way they can allow me to." There is a parallel here between the hunter's desire to touch, and what has become a well-explored quality of video. By that, I mean the separation between the viewer and the artist. (Although I could also talk about the separation between the writer and the reader, or the distance between "I" and "you.") I'm thinking, for example, of the game played out by Vito Acconci in the video Theme Song (1974) where he says, "Don't you want to come in here... I can feel your body right next to me... No, I'm kidding myself, there's no one there." Acconci peers out at the audience from the monitor. There's an intimacy to his words, but of course he can never touch the viewer. He is separated in time and place from them. If you think about it, by killing the animals, isn't the hunter really just creating a boundary and maintaining a relationship that is defined by separation?

Coyote: ...

Duck: ...

Monique: I've known Duke and Battersby as single-channel video artists for many years...

Otter: ...

Monique: ... and this question will probably seem a bit harsh. But after seeing so many other video artists make the transition to installation, or multi-channel work as a way to gain entry into the art world, I'm a little cynical about your presence here. Are you animals really spirit guides? Or are you just giving the work a certain authority? Are you the excuse for it to be in a gallery rather than just a screening at another festival? Although having said that, there is nothing cinematic in this work. It's very modest. It's not like the large-scale, expensive, high-production videos that have become so common in art over the last decade.

Raccoon: ...

Coyote: ...

Monique: In videos by Duke and Battersby, someone is always talking. There's a wall of words. Even the singing is closer to speech than it is to music. After spending so many hours with this video, don't you ever wish for a moment of silence? Some room to breathe? The writing is well crafted, but words belong to the human world, don't they? Duke said in an interview with Mike Hoolboom, "Animals can be forgiven for things that we would despise a human for... put the same words into the mouths of animals or children and it's funny and charming." It's a clever device, but don't you resent having words put in your mouth? I have to wonder, if the tables were turned, are there any words that you would like to put into our mouths?

Otter: ...

Raccoon: ...

Coyote: ...

Duck: ...