

Memorializing the Memorialist: D'Arcy Wilson's Absurd Zoological Journey

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Halifax, Nova Scotia has a relatively long history of European settlement, and as such was the site of much scientific and cultural activity, which, while commonplace in Europe, was only in the process of being introduced to colonial North America.

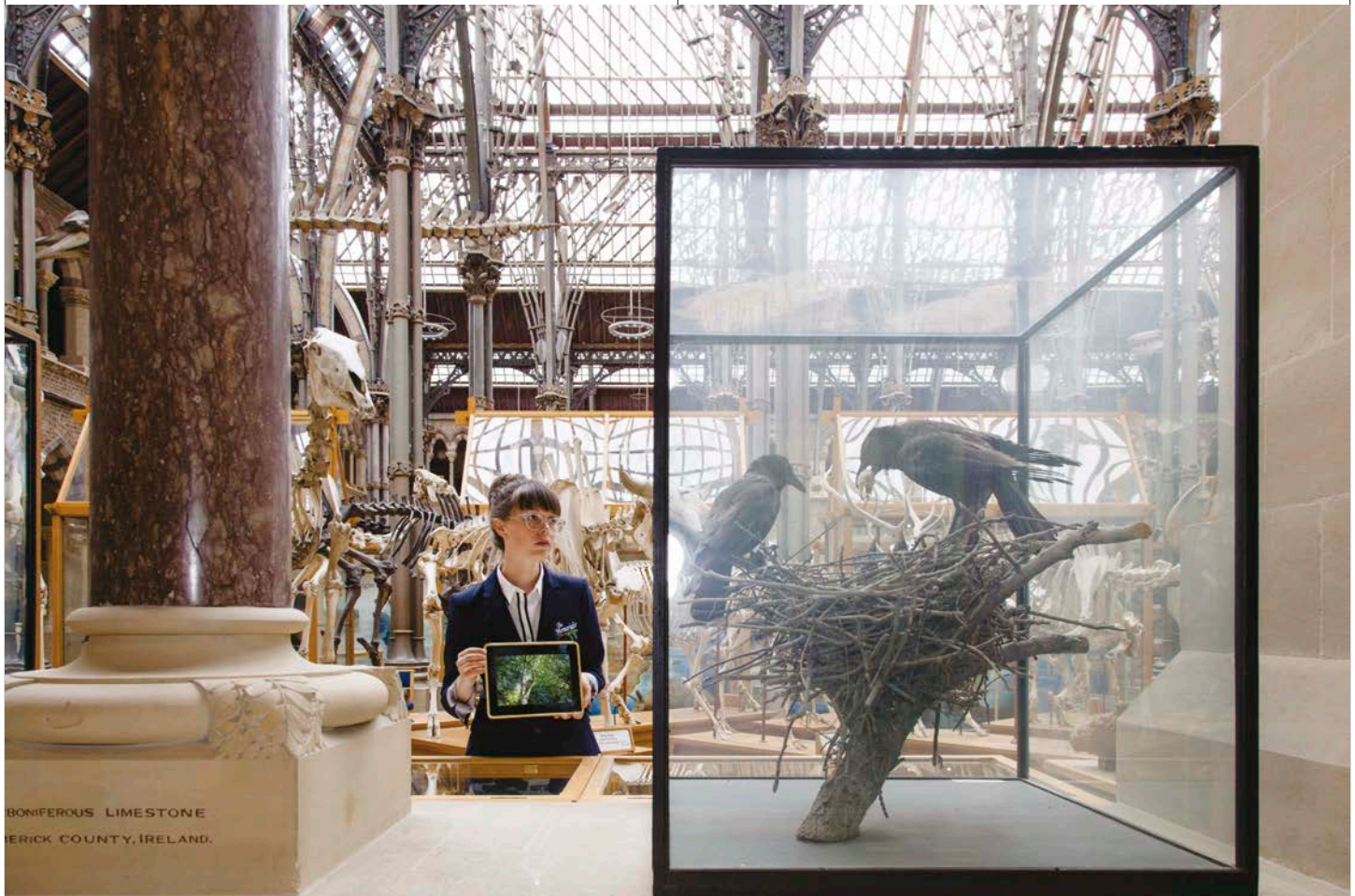
In the arts, it has just as long a history of exhibitions, galleries, art magazines and other activities as any city in Canada. Home to one of the country's oldest universities, it is also the place where the first

newspaper was published. Another early innovation, the first zoological garden in North America, was a private zoo and garden that Haligonian Andrew Downs created in 1847 on 100 hectares of land then just outside the city (its site is the current neighbourhood of Fairmount, near the Armdale rotary).

Artist D'Arcy Wilson, now a professor at the Sir Wilfred Grenfell Campus of Memorial University in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, grew up in the neighbourhood that used to be the zoological garden grounds, and the zoo has been a subject of interest to her for years. For the last four years, it has also been the chief topic of her art practice.

Since 2015, Wilson has been working on an open-ended series she calls *The Memorialist*. Comprised of performance documentation, photographs, drawings and video projections, the series explores the former site and sees Wilson visiting many of the museums that Downs supplied with specimens from North America (he was also a taxidermist). Her project is based both in research and in a purely aesthetic response to the history of Downs' zoo, including tracking down the specimens in European and American collections that Downs assembled and stuffed.

In its Halifax iteration (*The Memorialist* is a traveling project and evolves from venue to venue), Wilson has added historical artefacts borrowed from Halifax collections, including a 19th century glass display cabinet





that holds taxidermized songbirds Downs collected in Halifax. Another object displayed is a single white leather kid glove—dropped by the Prince of Wales when he visited Down's gardens, and was later collected and kept by the zoologist.

Wilson's subject, beyond the specific local history tied to her family home, is the disjunction between Western ideas of nature and the desire to contain the natural world. Zoos, which present artificial versions of the natural world, have certain poignancy. Once created to show nature as a series of wonders, brought from the wild to civilization, they now act as the only safe place for numerous species. Zoos today preserve animals whose habitats are fast eroding, if any remain at all. Rather than showing us glimpses of the wild, they highlight how little of the wild actually remains.

The Memorialist, then is elegiac. Wilson's drawings, photographs and videos act as much as memorials as they do as information, and her performances (documented in the exhibition in video and photographs and staged live at certain points during the run of her exhibition) share in that mournful tone. Often, these performances involve the artist singing lullabies and laments, both in the former site of the zoo and in natural history museums.

The absurdity of so much of our relationship with the natural world (Audubon, the great naturalist and painter of birds would kill thousands of birds over his career, often dozens in a single day) is brought to the fore in Wilson's performances. Dressed in a version of a museum guide's uniform she travels to museums to seek out specimens collected in Nova Scotia. In *Museology*, a subsection of *The Memorialist*, a series of photographs taken in museums (both in the public galleries and in the storage areas), documents Wilson showing images of their natural habitats to stuffed and posed animals in display cases. The comic effect of Wilson's pathetic fallacy only serves to make the inherent absurdity of the displays themselves more poignant.

Wilson's research is documented in performances and photographs. Before travelling to the museums that hold specimens Downs collected, Wilson had to find out which museums actually held such specimens,

she then travelled to them and arranged to have access to their collections. She documented all this activity in the works in the exhibition, adding historical depth to her absurdist project.

Wilson's drawings in the exhibition are perhaps the project's strongest elements. A portrait of Downs, a view of the lost white glove, a map showing the placement of the gardens on a Halifax peninsula emptied of any other European presence, and a remarkable diorama of the gardens themselves, all serve to provide more traditional aesthetic pleasures amidst the research, documentation and photography. The playfulness of the performances, or at least the absurd elements that drive them, seeps into (or from) the drawings as well, adding an element of whimsy to the more mournful video work.

As serious as this work is in its research agenda, and in the cultural and environmental impacts it documents, the playfulness of the drawings, the diorama in particular, roots the project, ultimately, in memory and in a certain sense of play. The diorama references a child's puppet show, with each element of the drawing mounted on a wooden stick, ranked in height to create depth. The various enclosures and buildings are represented, in a lush forested setting that has elements of fairy tale illustration.

The romantic elements of the diorama are echoed in some of the videos (one scene in particular stands out, where Wilson, in her uniform, rides the carousel on the grounds of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris) and in the absurdist photographs of the museum displays. In *The Memorialist*, we, as viewers, are still presented with a display designed to evoke wonder. But unlike the kind of zoos and gardens, which are this project's subject, we are invited to wonder at our strange and dangerous sense of the natural world.

Ray Cronin is a Nova Scotia based writer and curator. A former Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, he is the founding curator of the Sobey Art Award. The visual arts blogger for *Halifax Magazine* and a frequent contributor to several Canadian and American art magazines, he is the author of the six books of non-fiction, including *Alex Colville: A Rebellious Mind* and *Gerald Ferguson: Thinking of Painting*.