Andy Holden & Peter Holden: Natural Selection



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Former Newington Library

155 Walworth Road

London SE17 1RS

10 September – 5 November 2017

Wednesday – Saturday, 11:00–19:00

Sunday, 11.00–17.00

<https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/natural-selection>

#AndyHolden

Introduction to the exhibition

Looking at a blackbird building a nest in the garden of his parents’ house several years ago, the artist Andy Holden began the extended conversation with his father Peter Holden which led to this exhibition. Birds had been a constant presence in the Holden household whilst Andy was growing up. His father, a well-known expert on birds, ran the RSPB’s Young Ornithologists’ Club for over 30 years, wrote several popular guide books on British birds and featured as the ‘bird man’ on Blue Peter.

Andy had returned to the family ‘nest’ in Bedfordshire after finishing his studies at art school in London. Resuming a conversation about birds was a way for father and son to re-connect with each other. Working on occasional joint lectures in museums around Britain, they honed in on an often overlooked aspect of bird life, the nest. Andy then decided to shape their exchanges into an exhibition of objects, sculptures and videos.

Natural Selection is presented on the ground floor and basement of

the former Newington Library. The Victorian municipal building was once home to the Cuming Museum until a fire forced it to close in 2013. Like the Holdens’ exhibition, the collection of the Cuming Museum was put together by a father and son team. Richard Cuming and his son Henry Syer Cuming’s collection included hundreds of objects reflecting their interest in archaeology, anthropology and natural history.

On the ground floor, nests collected from the natural world are gathered together with others made in the artist’s studio (it’s not always clear which is which), and presented alongside photographs, drawings and a video installation. The second part of the exhibition, in the basement, shifts focus from birds’ nests to birds’ eggs. It considers the psychology of collecting and how the desire to possess something rare can sometimes have terrible consequences for the thing collected.

A Natural History of Nest Building

Ground floor

In the centre of the ground floor space sits an arched structure

built with willow to echo the elaborate nest of the bowerbird. The construction of the bowerbird is not actually a nest (the female doesn’t lay eggs in it), but a stage for a courtship ritual. In the hope of attracting a mate, the male bird carefully arranges objects around the bower, guided by considerations of shape and colour. This remarkable behaviour prompted Darwin to consider the bowerbird as the closest thing to an artist found in nature.

Andy Holden’s collection of birds’ nests and Peter Holden’s collection of feathers are displayed in vitrines near the bower. The feathers are clearly laid out to suggest a conventional system of classification, as if in a natural history museum, and behind the nests are nature illustrations, following the Victorian tradition of displaying specimens taken from the natural world in front of an idealised image of nature. Amongst the collection of birds’ nests are a number that have actually been made in the artist’s studio. This subversion of traditional boundaries between nature and culture is echoed in a number of wood-turned sculptures whose forms are derived from sonograms of bird song.

Beyond the bower is a three-screen video installation, A Natural History of Nest Building, featuring father and son talking about different types of birds’ nests, nest sites and materials. Whilst they find common ground in their shared wonder at the ingenuity and skill of a wide variety of birds, from the chaffinch and the crow to tailorbirds and weavers, they sometimes diverge in what intrigues them most.

Peter’s approach is firmly grounded in Darwin’s theory of evolution and ‘natural selection’ (the title Darwin initially gave to the book eventually published as On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection) whereas Andy is absorbed by the idea that nest building is a considered creative act. As they look at the extraordinary diversity of nests that birds build, their conversation touches on instinct and learning, the importance of creative collaboration and the nature of parental influence.

A Social History of Egg Collecting

Basement

Copies of cartoons featuring a young rook character recently drawn by Andy Holden hang along a corridor in the basement. The cartoons first appeared in Bird Life, the magazine of the RSPB’s Young Ornithologists’ Club for which Peter Holden was responsible. Peter appeared in the cartoons as Mr. Holden, a figure of authority charged with keeping wayward Rook in line.

Lined with shelves which once stored objects from the Cuming Museum, the basement area looks at the phenomenon of egg collecting. Narrated by a talking crow who flies across a series of well-known landscape paintings by the likes of Turner, Constable and Hockney, the video installation The Opposite of Time recounts the history of egg collecting in Britain, which evolved from aristocratic pursuit to widespread hobby until it was made illegal in 1954. The crow reveals the extraordinary lengths to which collectors went to pursue their passion and conceal the spoils after the ban was imposed.

Following Pearson’s conviction, the RSPB destroyed the hoard in its entirety in order to discourage other collectors. In contrast to the displays found in natural history museums, the ‘stolen’ eggs were stored in polystyrene trays and tin boxes, underlining the need for the collection to remain hidden from view. The installation lays bare the pathology of the collector, driven by an uncontrollable desire to possess something unique even if it risks killing the thing that is loved.

Publication

A special 120 page publication, Natural Selection, is divided into two parts, A Natural History of Nest Building and A Social History of Egg Collecting, and includes new essays by Darian Leader and Helen Macdonald.

Special exhibition price £11.95.

Artangel

Artangel produces and presents extraordinary art in unexpected places in London, across the UK and around the world. For over 25 years Artangel has generated some of the most talked-about art of recent times, including projects with Jeremy Deller, PJ Harvey, Roger Hiorns, Michael Landy, Steve McQueen, and Rachel Whiteread and last year, Inside, an exhibition by over 30 artists and writers inside Reading Prison. A new project by artist, writer and filmmaker Miranda July is open in Selfridges on Oxford Street until October 22.

Commissioned by Artangel, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, Leeds Art Gallery and Towner Art Gallery, with the support of the National Lottery through Arts Council England, Bristol Green Capital 2015, the Henry Moore Foundation and Artangel’s Guardian Angels.

Natural Selection is part of The Artangel Collection, an initiative to bring outstanding film and video works commissioned and produced by Artangel to galleries and museums across the UK. The Artangel Collection has been developed in partnership with Tate and is generously funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Foyle Foundation.

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