

Sameer Farooq and Mirjam Linschooten: *The Figure in the Carpet*
 Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto Mississauga
 June 14 – Aug. 2, 2015
 by Marina Fathalla

Artists Sameer Farooq and Mirjam Linschooten's *The Figure in the Carpet* examines and dismantles practices of ethnography presented as a speculative meta-museum. By proposing alternative modes of display, the exhibition exposes the problematic history of ethnography. Culminating the artists' five-week residency at the Blackwood Gallery, the installation is the result of a continuous research of collections at different University of Toronto sites. Drawing upon the animal bone collection from the Anthropology Department at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) as a frame for dialogue, the exhibition explores the mechanism of display resulting in a theatre of speculative objects. Each layer of the exhibition presents anthropological practices of taxonomy, classification and collection of artifacts.

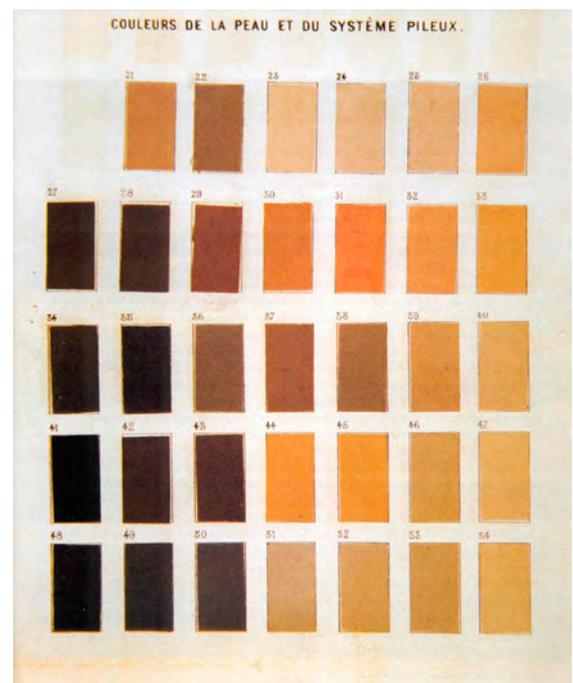
The viewer is drawn into a space of seduction and curiosity, into a dance of spectacle and spectator. The first museum practice on display is the vitrine. Nine darkened display vitrines are placed around the gallery, and upon entering in the exhibition space, the vitrines appear completely black. The viewer sees their reflection in the Plexiglas of the vitrines, before motion-sensored lights are activated and reveal the animal bone remains. It is evident that our experience of the vitrines is being choreographed. The exaggerated stillness and dramatic lighting of the vitrines brings together the notion of a distilled and closed narrative of culture.

As the animal bone remains are removed from their usual context as a collection in the Anthropology Department, the educational process, which usually remains private, is disrupted and observed from a distanced perspective by a wider audience. Deliberately

de-contextualized, the artists avoid the didactic labelling system used in archaeological research and education. When isolated, the animal bones become an uncanny landscape of objects laid seductively. The display vitrines frame a moment in time, halting history for examination, which creates a sense of disengagement from the objects. All of our senses, including tactility, are detached from the histories being presented in favour of preservation. The objects become dehumanized and void of meaning. Much is missed in the presentation of culture, including human emotion, here reduced to an objective taxonomy and singular perspective. There is also a privileging of material over ephemeral objects. The presented archive instantly becomes closed; and culture becomes industrial, as opposed to rooted in a particular socio-geographic and historic context. The clinical processes of categorization and display are exaggerated into whimsy, and at this fissure a productive critical space begins to take form.

The reduction of culture to taxonomy and classification is critiqued through an examination of the history of ethnographic practices, specifically physical anthropology. This also materializes in the carpet, which comprises modular rectangles in different shades of "skin tones" taken from a field guide by anthropologist Paul Broca. He significantly contributed to the practices of physical anthropology and craniology in the early 19th to mid-20th century by creating tools for the precise measurement of skulls, both human and animal, for the advancement of anthropological study and evolutionary biology. The study and creation of a standardized measurement was used for classifying culture and behaviour based on the physical differentiations of skulls. Here, the carpet brings the purpose of the installation into clear focus as a spatial representation of the problematic history of ethnology and race classification. Displaying the carpet pieces this way highlights tensions around racialized bodies. As viewers, we are reminded of the scale and presence of our own bodies when stepping on the carpet and onto an objective and physical taxonomy. The modularity of the pieces further places the body into boxes of standardized measurement. Reinforcing the aesthetic of the lights, it frames one perspective and limits the meaning

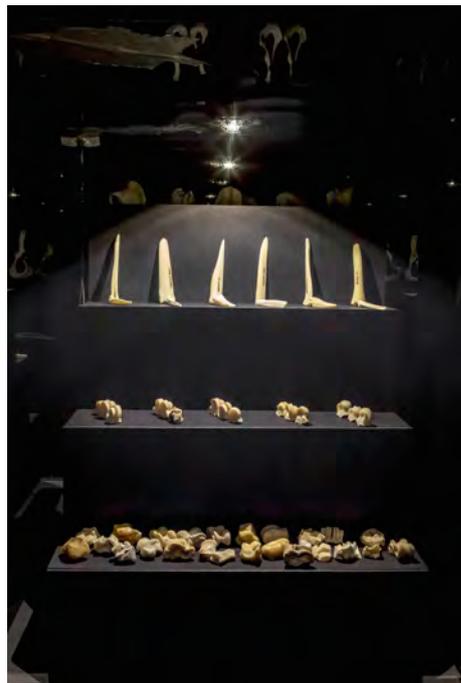
Paul Broca, "Couleurs de la peau et du système pileux" in *Instructions générales pour les recherches anthropologiques à faire sur le vivant* (Paris: G. Masson, 1879) [G. Masson is now part of Elsevier France]



of culture. The removal of context reduces culture to empirical knowledge. Presenting the carpet as a basis for the structure of the museum points to the margin for human fallacy. The ground unsettling in its categorization of race negates the complexity of culture and the failure of representation to address this complexity.

Lastly, taxonomy and language are displayed as having the power to dehumanize culture. A list of words seemingly disconnected – “Ugandan,” “Pakistani,” “plexi,” “Leopard Cranium” – is painted in the far right corner of the gallery. When displayed as a list, and displaced from their original context, the words become meaningless. This industrial list humourously sheds light upon museum subjects and materials laid bare. Free of embellishment, the list is another form of taxonomy – mirroring the carpet and the animal bones – as the words become crudely identified specimens. Each ethnographic practice on display questions institutionally sanctioned power to present the narrative of culture in a very particular light. In this way, the pseudo-museum highlights the challenges of representation and of presenting a finite iteration of the becoming of culture.

Marina Fathalla is an artist currently completing her MFA at OCAD University. She lives and works in Toronto.



Sameer Farooq and Mirjam Linschooten, *The Figure in the Carpet*, 2015, installation detail at the Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga, ON.
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED;
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, THE BLACKWOOD GALLERY, AND THE DEBORAH J. BERG FAUNAL COLLECTION

Rana Hamadeh: *Can You Pull In An Actor With A Fishhook Or Tie Down His Tongue With A Rope?*

Gallery TPW, Toronto
June 3 – July 25, 2015
by Ben Portis

At the conclusion of the scripted, 65-minute performance (part rehearsal, part lecture) that opened her exhibition, Lebanese artist Rana Hamadeh dropped into something like her natural self. Her natural voice spoke to the audience, “A quick thing about *that*, in *there*,” apologizing that the length of her monologue precluded any fuller, immediate discussion, “...if anyone is curious about that other work, I’m here drinking a beer.” “*That*” – not invoked by name, as if it were a body snatcher – referred to the audio installation closeted in a small side gallery, which so far had been kept mute and would henceforth bellow and tirade, permeating the space of the main gallery display, which conventionally comprised objects to look at. In fact, “*that*” did have a name, the only work at all explicitly titled, and lent the exhibition its mouthful designation, *Can You Pull In An Actor With A Fishhook Or Tie Down His Tongue With A Rope?* And Hamadeh’s invitation to converse about it over alcoholic refreshment, prohibited by the Quran, indicated her attitude as a modern Muslim, not an Islamic artist.

The aforementioned sound play was exceedingly difficult to comprehend, even with the aid of one of the accompanying scripts, which were provided to read or take away. For one thing, the script had been radically abridged, spliced and rearranged. Its oratory and choruses frequently imploded into noise. Key words sounded obliterated, as if redacted or coarsely muttered. Speech was prone to impediments and distortion, such as stuttering or gravelly pitch shifting. The scenario being related consequently became occluded beneath *sub rosa* tones of conflict and violence. The room contained only a regimented arrangement of amplification: loudspeakers mounted in the corners or suspended from the ceiling and subwoofers placed squarely in the middle of the floor, surrounded by acoustic baffles on the wall. Visually the installation resembled nothing so much as the configuration of a tribunal. An allegory of a trial, enacted by a phantom judiciary and ghost defendants from the ancient and recent past, was Hamadeh’s intent. She noted on the back of the booklet that “the work asks whether it is possible to script Justice: to rehearse, orate, narrate, prop, weep, chant, choreograph, scenograph or even spectate justice.” Notably, in the globalized courtroom, a spectator takes a seat within the “gallery.”

Evidence and witnessing are at the core of Hamadeh’s larger project, ongoing research that she initiated in 2011 and calls *Alien Encounters*. To paraphrase the artist, for she re-articulates it with subtle variation even in the auspice of coordinated performances/installations/exhibitions, “alien-ness (here understood with regards to the law [from which one is out-cast]) becomes literal (here understood with regard to [slimy green] extraterrestriality).” The exemplary