

SOLOMON'S HOUSE

Photography by Sarah Cusimano Miles

Exhibition reflection essays by

Sean Dillon, M.F.A.
Associate Professor of Theatre Arts

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Associate Professor of Biology

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
January 30 through March 24, 2017



Lilac-breasted roller (Coracias caudate) with kumquats, © 2017 Sarah Cusimano Miles

A live, interactive video conversation with the photographer is scheduled at 5:00-6:00 p.m. Thursday, February 16 during the reception in the Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography.

Sarah Cusimano Miles describes this work...

The photographs in the body of work, *Solomon's House*, explore the collections repository of the Anniston Museum of Natural History in Anniston, Alabama. The specimens are taken from the dark storage where they reside, on shelves, in bottles, and in drawers, and bathed with light to illuminate the often disturbing and exquisite elegance of the accumulated and warehoused organisms. By portraying these objects through the tradition of the still life, the artist explores ideas of cultural decadence and beauty in stasis. In addition, many of these photographs are comprised of numerous single frames combined to construct high-resolution composite images. This allows for the capture and portrayal of the subject in a manner that goes beyond that which is possible through a single exposure. In this way the image exists as a double construction; once as the objects are assembled to be photographed, and again as the frames are combined to form the final image.

The title, *Solomon's House*, references a work by Francis Bacon published in 1627 called *The New Atlantis*. In it, he wrote of a fictitious utopian science facility he called "Solomon's House" that embodied the growing scientific ideals of the 17th century. Stirred by this fabricated institution, The Royal Society of England requested donations of private collections of natural objects to the society's future museum of natural history and science. This repository of specimens was used for empirical observation and scientific study; however, the original function of the cabinets of curiosities from which the specimens were collected was to stimulate wonder and awe. It is this mysterious allure of the disquieting collection and the attraction to the confluence of science, technology, and art that informs these photographs.

-Sarah Cusimano Miles
January 30, 2017

About Sarah Cusimano Miles ...

Sarah Cusimano Miles is a native of Gadsden, Alabama, where she is an exhibiting artist, photographer, and educator. The grandchild of Sicilian immigrants who settled in New Orleans and later moved to northern Alabama, her familial experiences were steeped in old-world tradition and Southern storytelling. As a child, she lived next-door to her grandmother and spent hours rummaging around the room her grandparents shared before her grandfather died, enshrined with their belongings from a bygone time. She marveled at the collections of costume jewelry, lacy gloves, beaded purses, and other sundries that were delicately packaged and stored in their original boxes, then carefully arranged in drawers, cabinets and cedar-lined closets, creating a memoir of objects that conveyed an unfamiliar history. Her grandmother even kept a life-sized statue of St. Lucy, the Saint of sight, in her closet as a tribute to her husband who suffered blindness from diabetes. The elegant figure delicately balanced a platter on which rested two eyeballs: a vivid example of the overlap between disgust and allure that resonates in the rich symbolic lexicon evident in the Catholic religion. It was many years later that Miles recognized this as the origin of her fascination with collections and the visual language of religious art.

Although Miles received her first camera when she was six years old, it wasn't until she was an undergraduate at the University of Alabama that she began to view photography as a serious endeavor. After she completed a degree in psychology she intermittently worked as a free-lance photographer and medical illustrator. She began to teach photography classes at a community college and the local cultural arts center, eventually returning to school to complete a Bachelor of Fine Arts and then a Master of Fine Arts in Photography.

Currently, Miles is an Assistant Professor at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, where she teaches courses in digital imaging and darkroom photography. In her hometown of Gadsden, she advocates for the community advancement of the arts through her participation in the Walnut Gallery, a non-profit gallery dedicated to promoting contemporary art. She is also actively involved with the Society for Photographic Education's national and regional organizations. Recently, her work has been included in exhibitions surrounding the broader human relationship to animals as a metaphor of our own existence, and the ethical issues of the incorporation of animals in art practice.

In reference to the photographs from *Solomon's House*, which were taken at the Anniston Museum of Natural History in Alabama, Miles says, "When I started photographing at the museum, I felt that same kind of reverence and awe that I felt as a young girl at my grandmother's: that all of the stored and labeled specimens had an intrinsic value and elusive past. The relics are held in stasis so that we can marvel at the beauty of their exotic nature: the texture of fur, the delicacy or roughness of tissue, the vibrant color and pattern of markings. At the same time they are halted in the completion the cycle of birth/life/death/decay. The photograph traditionally functions in this same way, suspending its subject in stillness and fossilizing a moment in order to contemplate it at a later date."

Between Composition and Decomposition
Sean Dillon, MFA
Associate Professor of Theatre Arts

These are dead things. Upon being confronted with these images at first, without context or the insight that is cultivated only after those initial moments, the fact that these are dead things seemed to be the common thread. Given a moment to consider further, these still images of equally still animals provoke questions as quickly as they foster an appreciation of the photographer's art. To state it most plainly and unimaginatively, *Solomon's House* is a collection of images of animal specimens. What is most interesting about it, though, is that each image represents a point on the continuum between the clinical and the poetic.

In the process of noticing the degree to which each composition is deliberately posed, one may also form an impression of where the visual information falls between the poles of science and art, and whether the animal subjects are therein described more aptly as clinical specimens or God's creatures. This is clearly not accidental, after all. Some images are a stark document of the organic material, others show more evidence of human intervention in the display, and still others are heavily manipulated, creating an effect that hints at the animal's place in the natural world. Some images would seem appropriate as an illustration in a journal article, others more painterly, like a still life to be hung on the dining room wall.

An image like that of *Barbary Sheep (Ammotragus lervia)*, with its skin laid out on shelves lined with acid-free paper, and showing a string tag dangling out of the frame, tells us in no uncertain terms that this is an archival holding, a sample of scientific purpose that makes no effort at all to recall the majesty of the living animal. The image of *Copper Pheasants (Syrnaticus soemmeringii) with apricots*, on the other hand, is meticulously staged as the subject of a photograph or a masterpiece in oil, with light and shadow playing across the folds of decorative fabric and a silver fruit bowl. While one bird lies on the table, another hangs in mid-air, its wings outstretched in a simulacrum of flight. Most images in *Solomon's House*, however, fall intriguingly in between these extremes. *Red Deer (Cervus elaphus) with specimens* shares the Barbary sheep's convoluted repose in tissue paper, but sits on a shelf below a neat row of jars holding reptiles in fluid. Objects self-consciously placed into the composition demand that the viewer acknowledges the artistic intent; the artifact makes the art. The pomegranate gives a fresh context to *Goliath Heron (Ardea goliath) with pomegranate and specimen*, as the artichoke changes our perspective of *Herring Gull (Larus argentatus) with artichoke*. The subject of *Pangolin (Manis gigantean) with garlic* could nearly be mistaken for a living animal, albeit one that looks like a cross between an armadillo and a pine cone, as it traverses a black velvet landscape dotted with quaint, corked specimen jars and a sprouting bulb of garlic. The black velvet spanning the background reveals its "wrong side" and selvage edge at the boundaries of the frame. The artist wants to capture the subject against the pristine deep black of a dark background, and yet also must want us to see that the background is in fact a swatch of velvet hung for just such a purpose. In *Two views of unlabeled seahorse (Hippocampus) specimen*, two seahorses float in a black void facing away from each other with an ornate symmetry, but the contradiction in the symmetry comes in a moment: evidence of decay in the bodies forming a window into the desiccated bodies, voids in the brittle sockets where eyes once sparkled. At times we are given only a partial view of the specimen, invited to appreciate the gossamer structure of a wing in *Bat (Chiroptera) specimen*, or a fragment of *African Elephant (Loxodonta africana) skin specimen* that is reminiscent of a parched and cracked desert floor. We are shown the fine and subtle suture on the underbelly of *Unlabeled fish specimen*, as well as the cruder, more obvious stitching on *Puffer Fish (83.12.4) specimen*, that trails a hanging tag like a hastily-repaired stuffed animal at a garage sale.

These images may tell their own stories, or inspire us to make up our own. Is that pattern and texture among *Frog specimens I* the body of a snake? What inspired the comical, jaunty expression on the face of *Brown Bear (Ursus arctos)*, whose disembodied head balances its own neatly-folded pelt? What does the bird in repose have to do with the spilled kumquats in *Lilac-breasted roller (Coracias caudate) with kumquats*? These are dead things brought to life by the power of imagination, and science made art by means of artifice.

Kathleen Weaver, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Biology

As a biologist and a former assistant to a curator of museum collections, my first instinct was to catalog these specimens. Animals stored in jars of preservative, skins removed and dried, pieces of animals as well as whole specimens. In *Pangolin (Manis gigantean) with garlic*, the Pangolin, an unusual and ancient animal, is beautifully preserved. The scales have an amazing color and texture. I could almost see the animal moving as it was positioned. I have seen dozens of birds in museums positioned as in *Lilac-breasted roller (Coracias caudate) with kumquats*. My early training in museums taught me that diversity is to be observed, identified, and recorded.

However, as I continued to reflect on these images, unexpected emotions began to surface. I began to ask – why these specimens? In *Lilac-breasted roller (Coracias caudate) with kumquats*, why are some of the kumquats in an overturned bowl and others are neatly arranged on a plate? In *Barbary Sheep (Ammotragus lervia)*, did the photographer arrange the skins herself or was it organized that way for storage by a curator like my former adviser? Is the positioning and composition supposed to lead the observer to question, doubt, and anger?

Once I asked questions, the other side of my nature – ecologist, animal activist, and vegetarian – came to the forefront. It was hard to look at the specimens without feel extremely uncomfortable. I reflected on my own transition of thought regarding biology and research, as well as the influences of my friendship and co-teaching experiences with Zandra Wagoner. The more I have learned about animal consciousness, animal welfare, and the importance of conservation, the more I appreciate the beauty and wonder of the natural world. We are meant to see animals running, flying, and swimming. As many animals as I have seen in museums, none bring me joy like the ones I see in the wild.



Pangolin (*Manis gigantean*) with garlic



Turtle specimens



Chameleon (*Chamaeleonidae*) specimen



Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) with specimens



American Bitterns (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) with rose



Goliath Heron (*Ardea goliath*) with pomegranate and specimen



Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*)



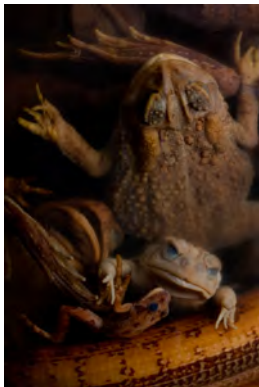
Copper Pheasants (*Syrmaticus soemmeringii*) with apricots



Bat (*Chiroptera*) specimen



Puffer Fish (83.12.4) specimen



Frog specimens I



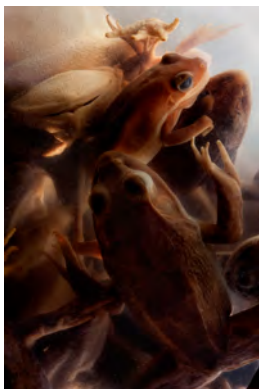
Caiman (*Caiman sclerops* - juvenile) specimen



Barbary Sheep (*Ammotragus lervia*)



African Elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) skin specimen



Frog specimens II



Two views of unlabeled seahorse (*Hippocampus*) specimen



Unlabeled fish specimen



Lilac-breasted roller (*Coracias caudate*) with kumquats



Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) with artichoke