

Simon Starling: *Cuttings (Supplement)*
The Power Plant, Toronto
1 March – 11 May 2008

Like a boomerang propelled by the potential energies bound in process, Simon Starling's practice is one of far-flung returns across the bend of time and space, gathering momentum around a singular object or event whilst striking unexpected targets along its strange trajectory. The gathered threads of these meticulously rewoven journeys and histories are fully in evidence between the nine works surveyed in *Cuttings (Supplement)*, an exhibition that also provides the crucial yet understated resolution of Starling's Toronto-based commission for The Power Plant.

The invisible narrative of *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* pivots upon art historian and British spy Anthony Blunt, whose counsel to the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) led to the city's present status as a major holder of Henry Moore's sculptures, starting with the acquisition of *Warrior With Shield* (1953-1954). Blunt's role as an agent of Russian espionage – and, from a paranoid Canadian perspective, of British colonial influence – provides a metaphorical link to present concerns surrounding the migration of Russian zebra mussels from the Black Sea to Lake Ontario via the bilge water of incoming trading vessels, with Starling's own British identity completing the repetition of a non-linear history of cultural exchange.

Starling's steel replica of *Warrior With Shield* was submerged in Lake Ontario for 18 months, allowing a colony of zebra mussels to cluster across the terrain of the sculpture in baroque blooms of delicate shells now unhinged in deathly consequence of the object's present display in the gallery, the sculpture's rusted decay echoing local anxiety about the mussels' impact on the native ecosystem. With its capacity to both nurture and isolate biological threats, *Infestation Piece* has its strongest analogue in *Island For Weeds (Prototype)*, originally shown in the Scottish Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. Both address the infiltration of territories by non-indigenous forms of life – Swedish rhododendrons in Scotland, Russian zebra mussels in Canada – and devise correspondingly unnatural ecosystems that effectively preserve ambivalent attitudes towards a changing global landscape that is at once wondrous and alienating.

The photographic works included in this show, such as the sole image of an altered bicycle representing the breadth of his *Tabernas Desert Run*, tend to obfuscate the facts underlying Starling's narratives; however, his series of 21 platinum prints commissioned by Kunstmuseum Basel's Museum für Gegenwartskunst are exceptional examples of his often overlooked visual strengths. Depicting American photographer Christopher Williams' collective images of Switzerland's Grande Dixence Dam, *By Night* is a highly effective parable of the withholding and dispersal of both natural resources and art objects across the boundaries of nations and institutions. Like Matryoshka dolls nested each in each, Starling's photographs of photographs depicting the containment of water by a dam, held in turn by foreign museum vaults, are both confounding and engaging, well before Starling's guiding narrative has entered the picture.

For those who claim that Starling's work exists entirely in backstory, *Cuttings (Supplement)* proves that his conceptual research is visually viable beyond its status as rumour or myth, his unexpected findings manifest in the objects of lost narratives fully found.

Stephanie Vegh
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