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# Wunderkammer

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Dai Toyofuku

artist statement

In 1551, Konrad Von Gesner, considered to be the father of zoology, believed that unicorns "must exist on earth, or else its horn would not exist." These horns were prized for their magical, medicinal properties, the most famous being the "horne of Windsor" owned by Queen Elizabeth, purchased at the time for an enormous sum. By the seventeenth century, Ole Worm, having such a horn in his *Museum Wormianum*, concluded that it was in actuality a Narwhal (a type of whale) tusk. Being influenced by both medieval lore and scientific experimentation, Worm poisoned his pets and then fed them ground up Narwhal tusk to see if the "unicorn horn" actually had anti-poison properties. These tusks, once prized by queens and princes when they were unicorn horns, suddenly lost favor and monetary value. As for the Narwhal, which we consider to be a mammal, did not become so until the eighteenth century. As late as 1735 none other than the father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, classified whales as fishes in the first edition of *Systema Naturae*. Throughout these three centuries, Narwhals and their tusks remained the same, but people's perception and treatment of them drastically changed.

I manufacture objects that confuse classification and cross boundaries. Part unicorn horn and part Narwhal tusk, these objects straddle categorical containers. My sculptures attempt to break free from inherited structures of knowledge and modes of seeing. The boxes and pedestals are akin to these imposed structures, though these traditional structures always fall just short of fulfilling their supposed function; these categorical containers slowly leak.

A categorical leak happens when I think about humans' changing relationship with the environment, and with technology. The topography

between human culture and non-human culture is not an agricultural/industrial city on one side and a natural eden or cold robotic dystopia on the other, but rather it is a phantom space. This phantom space is a perceptual space, ethereal and easily changed as soon as one changes one's perception of it. Though I work in many mediums, both inside and outside the gallery, all my work resides in this phantom space and attempts to make connections between human and non-human cultures. Lines and surfaces in my work are not meant to delineate, separate, or create boundaries. Lines and surfaces are ropes that tie things together.

It took over two hundred years for *Wunderkammers*, which mashed objects of all sorts into the same room, to become modern museums that neatly illustrated Darwinian evolution and scientific classification. One explanation offered for the rise of these "chambers of wonders" in the sixteenth century is that there was a deluge of strange objects streaming in from the recently discovered New World, and another is the primacy of religion being challenged by a growing secularism. The response to these newly discovered objects began with wonder and confusion, which in turn led to a questioning of conventional thought, and resulted in perceptual, scientific, and cultural innovation. Over time, these innovations became ossified into our assumptions about our relationship with the natural world. My work attempts to reinvigorate the conversation by questioning our conventions.

For more than two centuries, radically different and opposing systems of thinking, categorizing, and presenting objects were practiced, discarded and fought over. Old mythologies were replaced by new ones when society needed to reinvent itself. In a time where we are currently surrounded by unknowns, where the world we believed in is coming apart at the seams, perhaps wonder and confusion are the most useful tools we have.