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Emporium

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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BFA, Florida State University, 1988-1992

Director: Michael Jones McKean,
Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

EMPORIUM

By John Orth, BFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Major Director: Michael Jones McKean, Associate Professor,
Sculpture + Extended Media

My MFA thesis project is a ten-minute video installation entitled *Emporium*, in which I adorn, strap, tie, hang, and wrap the bodies of performers with my sculptures, and then let loose these hybridized bodies in the non-linear dream-time of cinema. Riffing on the fantastical taxonomy of Jorge Luis Borges's *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, I attempt, as Borges proposes, to penetrate the "divine pattern of the universe" by creating patterns of my own. These patterns required a choreography of process that was new to me, leading me to film in truck stops, to grow water lilies in my studio, to wade into the James River at night, and to build sculptures to be dragged behind my truck at great speeds. By interpreting this classificatory system in video and now through writing, I seek to demonstrate the inherent tendency for this system (and in turn, all such systems of division and signification) to collapse under the weight of their own contradictions. In my invented world, delineations collapse, ooze, seep, vibrate, take root, entwine and decay in defiance of a world that, as of late, seems to encourage excessive polarization and unyielding boundaries.

In the following pages, I reinterpret eight of Borges's categories of classification that I addressed in my thesis videowork. This writing is not ancillary to the video work, but rather it is a new iteration of the project. I apply the same methodology in which I developed the video—addressing these categories metaphorically and poetically rather than literally—to be true to Borges's intentions and to stay true to my thesis's aim to always serve as a further point of departure.

BELONGING TO THE EMPEROR

I rode the dark currents. I cut a line across the froth and petroleum shimmer to get to you. I came to offer declarations, released into this room like wolves pouring down snowy pathways into a box canyon. I had imagined starling swells and smears of golden light, timpani charges and fountains of embers sucked into the night. But now I stand before you, quiet. I tip back off the balls of my feet. I feel the wetness and twist of my socks around my toes. The room smells of burnt rice and vinegar. I am a flare sputtering and losing light, pink to pale, pale to white.

When you return from the kitchen, I am fully dressed. It is too late for you to walk me to the station. It is too late for you to swipe me through the turnstile and to stand outside the gate. It is far too late. On the platform, I release some kind of war whoop. It is girlish and strained. I confess everything into the clatter and the anemic, yellow light of the train.

I belong to you.

Internet searches related to BELONGING TO THE EMPEROR:

1. Dom/Sub
2. Boarding School Fagging
3. Depeche Mode's "Master and Servant"
4. Hazing Rituals (Paddling, Elephant Walk)
5. Emperor Sound System
6. Glass Caskets

EMBALMED

They sealed the lid of the glass casket. It was only the next day that they noticed a salamander amongst the gardenias that they had gathered around her head. During the day, the pale, slick creature settled in the cool billows of her dress, but at night it slowly wriggled its way up her slender neck and onto her face. Her caretakers nervously laced and unlaced their stubby fingers, holding their breath as it approached her lips (lips painted Frosted Ember, a hasty but accurate drugstore purchase on the part of the dwarves). The salamander spent the night, and every night thereafter, perched on the edge of her mouth as if at the opening of a cavern, breathing in her shallow, loamy breaths. It left small dashes of excrement on her skin. At first, these spots could be mistaken for beauty marks, but over time the constellations grew more dense and foreboding. Her caretakers grew less fastidious with their cleaning of the glass and let lichen fringe the surface.

They refused to focus on her slow ruin, for that would have been a meditation on their own failings, a recognition that she was, like them, flawed, more salamander than porcelain. Resentment grew in their ranks. They closed their eyes to remember the night they prepared her body for sleep. She was slightly too long for their kitchen table, so stacks of books propped her feet. Through the night, they bathed her with long, soapy strokes. They changed the water often, using it as an excuse to take a full breath and to stoke the fire. Water wrung from their sponges in sappy tendrils of light.

As her beauty dimmed, the salamander grew plump inside the fogged glass casket.

Internet searches related to EMBALMED:

1. Heavy Metal Bands named Embalmed (Swedish and American)
2. Glass Caskets
3. Salad Bar Rentals

**Names given to dwarfs in an early retelling of Brothers Grimm's Snow White in a
1912 Broadway play:**

1. Blick
2. Flick
3. Glick
4. Snick
5. Plick
6. Whick
7. Quee*

*Quee was the youngest "boy" of the seven, a 99-year-old dwarf with a penchant for kleptomania.

TAME

Most popular parakeet names:

1. Charlie
2. Angel
3. Coco
4. Max
5. Pickle
6. Sunny
7. Baby
8. Lemon
9. Birdy
10. Peaches

Internet searches related to TAME:

1. Domesticated Birds
2. Bonsai
3. Making Your Own Falconry Hoods
4. Novelty Underwear (Elephant)

A conversation overheard regarding a lost parakeet or love:

- When did he leave?
- I don't know. But I remember when I realized he was gone.
- Coco never liked you.
- Fuck you. Coco never liked anyone.

SIRENS

Once I met a man down by the river. He followed me from the parking lot into the woods. A radio played in the duffle bag slung over my shoulder, the words of pop songs were muffled by gym socks and a towel. He was not afraid to meet a stranger on an especially dark night but talked endlessly of his fear of alligators. He kissed me and unbuttoned my shirt. He ran his fingers over my hips and up my stomach. When he reached my chest, he retracted his hands with a start.

“What is the matter with your chest?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I replied. “What is the matter with your hands?”

He was holding them out from his body, elbows locked and palms towards me as if in a gesture of surrender. I took hold of his wrists and slowly pulled his hands forward. When he went to touch my chest, his fingers met no resistance. His hands slowly passed through me, endlessly reaching into darkness, a slick reptilian slide into the black water below.

Internet searches related to SIRENS:

1. Carnivorous Plants (Pitcher Plants)
2. Pectus Excavatum
3. Positive and Negative Phototaxis in Insects
4. Fruits as Temptation (Sex with a Watermelon*)

*If you are going to have sex with a watermelon, you might want to consider a vent in addition to the point of insertion. This vent serves to prevent an airlock upon insertion of the penis. Note that a vent that is too small might make a wheezing or gurgling sound with each thrust of the penis and might prove bothersome to some.

STRAY DOGS

I am tethered to your bloodless thumbs, a kite flown in the darkest night.

I roar ragged circles, lazy looping cursive.

Twine whimpers and buzzes as I tie ugly knots.

You cut me loose.

Hurling into endless darkness, jowls clacking and tearing at the edges.

I am a flare sputtering and losing light.

I am a cinder sucked into the night.

Internet searches related to STRAY DOGS:

1. Lou Reed's "Andy's Chest"
2. Surviving a Dog Attack
3. Making Your Own Flares

FROM A DISTANCE LOOKING LIKE FLIES

From a distance, it looked like you. “Coco?” I was convinced it was your muted laugh between the crash of waves. I followed you in and out of focus across the horizon. I watched the whipping scarf at your neck, the one I had seen so many times in your top drawer but had never seen you wear. And you were laughing and he was laughing and from a distance, it looked like you, and from a distance, it looked like us. “Coco!” I called out. Fuck you, Coco.

Internet searches related to FROM A DISTANCE LOOKING LIKE

FLIES:

1. Roadside Attractions From Above
2. Roadside Elephants, Hardeeville, SC
3. Google Earth, Hardeeville, SC

FROM A PREVIOUS CATEGORY

The EMPEROR rests quietly on the ocean floor. The barnacle pocked plywood curls at the edges. The lions painted on speaker cabinets are shadowed with silt and algae. The inlaid gold mirror reflects a fogged shimmer of the surface and the milk-white bellies of rays as they glide overhead. Crabs skitter in and out of the speaker heads. They pause to nervously rub together their bony appendages, making dull clicking sounds. A jon boat passes above, the muted whine of its motor makes the crabs go still for a moment. The barnacles retract their tongues.

In Jamaica, there are notorious sound systems. These massive assemblages of speakers and amps tour the island as might a band with similar promotion, and excitement greets their arrival. Parties are organized around their visits.

Certain DJs and MCs are associated with certain sound systems; rivalries ensue. The Emperor Sound System, also known as EMPEROR SOUND, was renowned, a ten-foot stack of subwoofers, speakers and a crown of tweeters ratched together and inset into a plywood cabinet that was painted black and gold. Gold mirror insets across its surface made the system pulse and strobe in the lights. The mirrors suffered the constant smear of sweat-soaked hands and bodies.

After a late night party at the base of Negril Lighthouse, the EMPEROR was loaded onto a pontoon boat named Extazy for a short crossing of Little Bay (also known as

Little Boy, Boy Bay, Bay Bay, Boy Boy or Baby by the locals) back to Savanna-la-Mar.

The cabinets were still hot, so it was not tarped or strapped to the deck. Just around the tip of St John's Point, Extazy started to list. The boat dropped into the trough of a wave, and when it crested, the EMPEROR sheared off the surface and fell, almost silently, into the dark water below.

Overheard the next morning at a corner store:

- Last night the Emperor was swallowed by the Boy.

ET CETERA

Watermelon varieties whose names might have been better titles for this project:

1. Tender Gold
2. Bijou
3. Small Shining Light
4. Faerie Blacktail
5. Early Moonbeam
6. Extazy
7. Dark Belle
8. William's Sugar