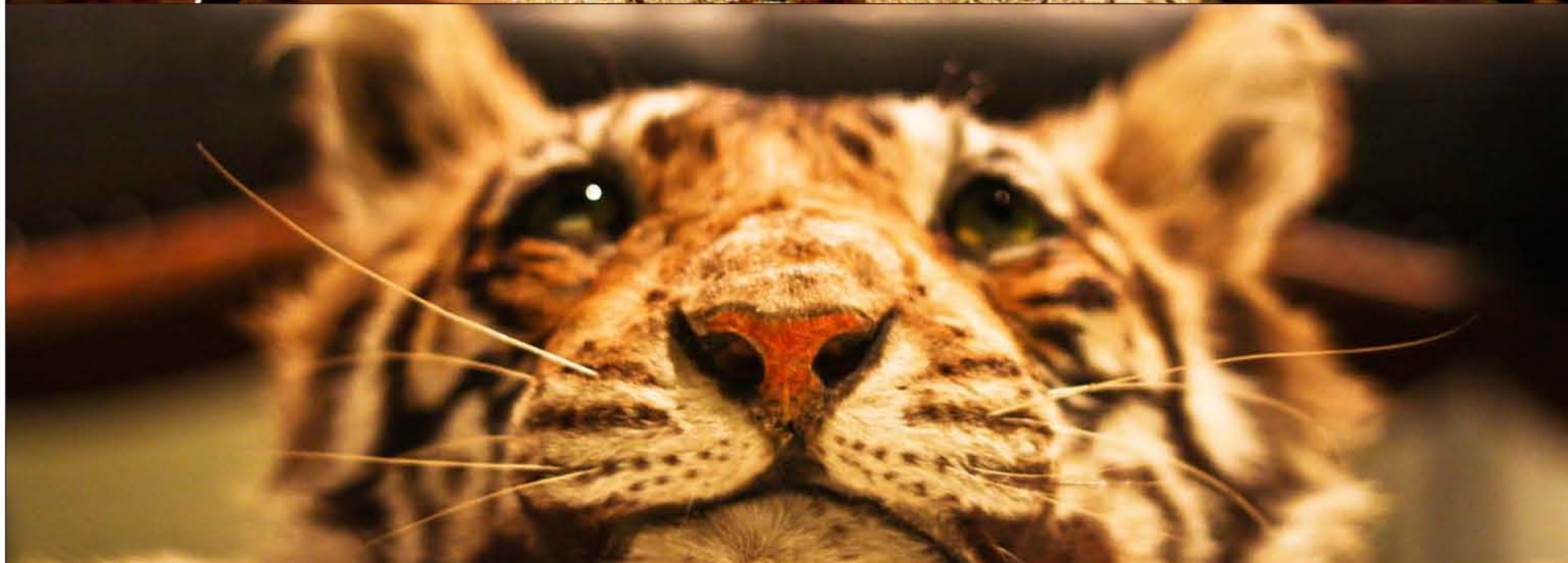


MUSEUM EXHIBITION



FROZEN IN TIME



Mark Burnham / **THE PEAK**



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The MOV's exhibit on taxidermy, *Ravishing Beasts*, draws hipsters and antiquarians alike

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Ravishing Beasts runs at the Museum of Vancouver until February 28, 2010.

While I, like many others, after viewing *Night at the Museum*, enjoy natural history, for some reason I have always been slightly frightened by the concept of taxidermy. However, it seems I am now alone in this antiquated way of thinking. In the past few years, particularly since the rise of hipsterdom, there has been an increase of interest in taxidermy. When I mentioned this renewed popularity to Rachel Poliquin, curator of MOV's new exhibit, entitled *Ravishing Beasts*, she nodded enthusiastically; when I asked her about the specific hipster appeal, she points out that taxidermied animals are the epitome of the anti-modern object.

In addition to its appeal to the young urban crowd, taxidermied animals cannot be serially produced or mass purchased; they are unique and they carry their own history. Add to that the fact that they're very dark and edgy, and the attraction is clear. However, scenesters aside, many museums today are beginning to get rid of their taxidermy collections. While at one time taxidermy was a common way of educating the public about nature, since the development of high quality animal documentaries like *Planet Earth*, museums have found themselves at a loss for

what to do with their taxidermied animals. Many end up sitting in storage, as did the MOV's until this exhibit.

Poliquin explained that the museum actually owns a vast collection of 110 specimens, now on display. Several of these specimens hold a mysterious past: all that is known about them is that local residents donated them sometime between 1894 and 1950. Additionally, *Ravishing Beasts* features various animals on loan from other museums. Rather than arguing the benefits of taxidermy, as you may expect from an exhibit of this nature, the MOV instead seeks to make the viewer question taxidermy, its whys and hows, its process and purpose. The exhibit invites your participation.

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The doorway to the exhibit, while blank when I viewed it, will be adorned with heads of game pieces — your game pieces, hopefully. The museum has an open call for these pieces from residents of the area. Poliquin insists that donators will certainly get their pieces back as the museum is simply interested in displaying interesting vintage taxidermy that people may have picked up here and there. *Ravishing Beasts* shows the original reasons for taxidermy, which largely involved using the preserved animal as proof of their existence for explorers to show when they

returned home. As explorers grew more and more desperate for discoveries to brag about, this sometimes resulted in created creatures such as the jackalope (a strange fake hybrid between an antelope and a jackrabbit).

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The exhibit explains the process behind taxidermy, which even includes touchable pieces. This also details the old-fashioned methods of taxidermy, one of which involved completely dousing the animals in arsenic to preserve them. Indeed, many of the birds at the MOV exhibit are behind cases not just because of their delicate nature, but also due to their high arsenic content. The exhibit also features several ruined pieces that were poorly preserved, including some rather sad looking animals with missing tails or rotted feet. The passenger pigeon is another star of the MOV show: a perfectly preserved specimen of the bird, which has been extinct since 1914.

If this doesn't make you question the merits of taxidermy enough, *Ravishing Beasts* stresses the importance of scale. I myself learned the actual size of a platypus, which I had for some reason imagined to be the size of a small dog (it's more like a kitten, maybe smaller). The exhibit even features a modern art section, which uses animals to create abstract art pieces. I carefully examined what looked like a skunk incased in a glass bulb with its tail hanging out before deciding this section wasn't for

me. Before this enrages you, let me remind you no animals were killed for the making of the exhibit.

The most impressive part of the exhibit, though mildly disgusting, is the hundreds of pickled and preserved animals contained in glass jars that are arranged to create a peculiar structure. Arranged on a table and stacked on others, or hanging from the ceiling, these glass jars contain creatures that were collected from all over the world and tagged accordingly, roughly 100 years ago. I felt pretty smart pouring over these old fashioned cases of animal bones, stuffed skins, and extinct animals, especially after learning the actual size of a platypus — taxidermy as an educative tool, right here.

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When I asked Poliquin which piece she thinks is the most interesting, she didn't hesitate a moment before answering, "the albino skunk." So, before I left the exhibit I made sure to find the skunk so that I could see what the fuss is about. I feel the same about the white furred, blue-eyed skunk as I did about the majority of the exhibit: creepy, yes, but ultimately worth seeing.

Plus, think of the hipster cred I've amassed from viewing all these dead beasts.