

BURNAWAY

Dead Cute: Joe Peragine at Marcia Wood Gallery Midtown

by Jerry Cullum / September 22, 2015

In "Love Me Till My Heart Stops," at Marcia Wood Midtown through October 10, Joe Peragine continues the tightrope walk that a Lawrence Ferlinghetti poem describes as every poet or artist's performance trick "constantly risking absurdity." Once again, Peragine performs the trick magnificently, all the more so considering that he has added self-taught taxidermy to his performing repertoire.

Peragine's taxidermic specimens are decidedly the star of the show, although they find a close second in a heroically scaled painting of a white rabbit nestled in green grass and yellow dandelions, a hark back to Peragine's earlier series of unnervingly immense renderings of cute creatures. The sweetness with an unexpected edge is replicated elsewhere in such paintings as *Sitting Ducks*, which depicts a pair of ducklings against a nursery-mural-like backdrop of stars, and *Kitten Meadow*, a small work that, for the record, is the only representation of a domestic feline in the whole show.

But despite the numerical dominance of the paintings (about which, more in a moment), the high points of the exhibition are such figures as a meticulous diorama featuring two Alaskan snow rabbits, a big-eyed chipmunk beneath a glass bell (the creature has the wrong size artificial eyes), and another chipmunk, covered with sculptures of insects and suspended by a wire held by a sculpted human hand. (This last is based on a historic artwork that Peragine has chosen not to identify, coyly calling the piece *After.... Snare.*)

The unsettling quality of the last-named piece is counterpointed by the comedy of deliberately inept dioramas in which a rabbit's whiskers are represented by the pins used to hold together taxidermy specimens, or in which a squirrel pelt hangs against the artificial torso it would cover in a finished piece of taxidermy.

All of these examples (plus a diorama of ducklings that represents the only mail-order items in the show) play off our tendency to anthropomorphize animals—the slightly altered chipmunk looks like a real-life version of a Margaret Keane figure, and the anomalous poses of the squirrel and suspended chipmunk encourage us to make up our own stories and comparisons to explain the odd combinations. The fact that we can't quite do it comfortably is part of Peragine's strategy.

So are the subversions of the conventions of Victorian taxidermy in the numerous paintings of small animals under bell jars that are visually parallel to the actual bell jar sculptures displayed beneath them. Rabbits are shown squeezed into an uncomfortably small space, birds and animals are rendered as shadows rather than the taxidermy specimens casting the shadows, and in general a cozy Victorian genre is made as disturbing in paint as it ordinarily is not in real life. Why most viewers find nothing wrong with posing dead animals in the postures of life is a question Peragine asks but leaves for us to answer.

If very few viewers of dioramas in natural history museums find them disturbing, it is perhaps because the dioramas perform an admirable job of presenting seemingly lifelike, almost theatrical scenes of taxidermic creatures in sculpted and painted replicas of their natural habitats. Their veracity evokes amazement and admiration, not thoughts of how and why the animals were killed to satisfy our curiosity about nature. Peragine unsettles this convention of viewer satisfaction, and does so most of all in the concluding section of the show, devoted specifically to the topic of natural history museums and their dioramas.

As arranged in "Love Me Till My Heart Stops," the hallway between Marcia Wood Midtown's main and back galleries features maps on one side, photographs on the other. The maps are a copy of the 1941 master plan for the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History, and Peragine's deadpan parody of the New York map in a master plan for the works on display in his exhibition. The photographs, identified on Peragine's map as "Smithsonian Archives," are vintage Smithsonian photographs of discarded pieces of taxidermy marked for destruction. Meant originally as simple documentation, the enlarged photos have been turned into systematically uncanny images.

The back gallery is identified on Peragine's map as the "Hall of North American Mammals," and the paintings that line its walls are a reduction in every possible way of the American Museum of Natural History's monumental Hall of North American Mammals: the creatures represented in Peragine's re-creation of it have shrunk from full-size taxidermy figures in a heroically depicted landscape to dramatically blurry portrait heads in modestly scaled paintings.

Peragine has stated that the dioramas of the Hall of North American Mammals hold powerful but distant childhood memories for

him, and in a very real sense this downscaled version is a dialogue between blurred memories and present-day realities of things now distant or disappeared. In much the same way, the remainder of the show is a dialogue between the bizarre realities of animal skins presented as living creatures and the various emotions that viewers project upon them, and upon animals in general. That paradox-laden dialogue is one that Peragine's exhibitions have pursued through a variety of iterations, but "Love Me Till My Heart Stops" unquestionably takes the dialogue to a new level of depth and complexity. Seldom have his viewers been pulled so pleasurably in so many almost opposite emotional directions.