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FOREIGN BODIES, STRANGE PARTS
BY CHRISTINA BARTON

When I was a child of perhaps three or four, my parents took me to London Zoo. They tell the story that I delightedly pointed out to them some sparrows on the path ahead, failing to see that the birds were standing on the ground at the feet of an elephant visitors at that stage (in the early 1960s) were still allowed to ride. My misplaced focus resonates when I think of my first encounter with the work of Zac Langdon-Pole. That encounter took place in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2013, at the gallery of Michael Lett, the city's most adventurous and ambitious art dealer. I don't precisely remember the focal point of his *Pale Ideas* exhibition: the paintings hanging in the intimate back room. However, I do recall the scattering of leaves in the main space, which seemed to have randomly blown in from outside, as an accidental addition to the substantial body of work by Dan Arps, another of the gallery's artists. I distinctly recall focusing on these leaves, amused by the idea that though they clearly weren't part of either installation, they could still be "art," re-designated as such by their auspicious context. I remember wondering where they could have come from: Perhaps the loading dock that opened to the car park at the back of the building had been left open? But then, this was a busy central-city location, one of a strip of commercial buildings, with hardly a tree in sight. It was only later, in conversation with the gallerist, that I learned they had been placed there by Langdon-Pole as a subtle insertion into the other, more senior artist's exhibition, and as an outlier to his suite of stretched canvases that variously deployed pre-used fabrics as readymade abstract "paintings."

In a conversation with the artist, I eventually learned the full complexity of *Untitled (Alex)*, as the work is titled. It is a conceptual piece that can be reconstructed from Langdon-Pole's written instructions, to wit: First, find a leaf or leaves, ideally in the vicinity of the venue, and arrange them in the space. Then, locate a second leaf or leaves as near as possible in likeness to the first, and carefully replicate the arrangement elsewhere in the same space, as the original's mirrored doppelgänger. No simple reiteration of the logic of the readymade, this is a disconcerting intervention, designed to set in play a series of open-ended questions. While my first, innocent reflections on the presence of leaves in a gallery intuited how context crystallizes perception, prompting me to look again at a thing in the world because it had been selected and repositioned by an artist as an object of attention, what I missed was the uncanny effect of their doubling. Now, the poetry of a blown leaf twists into a conundrum about sameness and repetition, singularity and difference, the event and its re-presentation. If such staged randomness seemed to challenge the improbability of these two events ever occurring by chance, then Langdon-Pole's placement and titling further acknowledged the gallery as a storied place, a network and system in which connections are made, lineages established, conventions passed on—and where, not coincidentally, dynamics of power play out. Literally at the feet of another practitioner, someone senior to the still-emerging artist, his leaves could be read as a messy intrusion or a

more pointed homage: “You are the oak, I the mere acorn.” And who might Alex be? Ambivalently gendered, the name encodes the twin figures of either a male or a female dedicatee. This name-in-parentheses suggested another order of relationship, one to which only those in the know were privy, an axis in the work that allowed in autobiography as well as art history.

Much is augured in this simple gesture. I see this, a relatively early work in the artist’s oeuvre, as encapsulating many of the strategies and framings that condition his practice. A leaf is a fragment, part of a larger whole; it is a singular object, but it shares a shape, color, internal structure, and function with myriad others that together are necessary elements of a larger system. The tree—along with all its parts—belongs to the even larger category of natural things: an organic realm on which we humans depend, but from which we are separated. The gallery is a human space, a site where “man”-made objects are seen and traded. It, too, is a system. Langdon-Pole brings these two together with a lightness of touch that belies a deeper understanding of his context’s signifying function. He may leave the work untitled, letting it appear to have simply landed there by chance, but he selects and arranges with a sophisticated understanding of what a gallery does.

This is a different mode of practice from the one with which we are familiar. Langdon-Pole’s art is not manufactured from scratch; he doesn’t paint or sculpt from the inner wellspring of his creative imagination. Instead, the artist orchestrates a meaningful coalescence of pre-existing fragments that are put together in carefully constructed situations, so that in the instance of their combination the world in all its complexity is momentarily held together in a manner that is at once personal and political.

This modus operandi advances and evolves in his ongoing series, revolving around a photograph taken in September 2015 by his teacher, the artist Willem de Rooij. This was a culminating project for Langdon-Pole’s master’s degree, undertaken with de Rooij at the Städelschule Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, in Frankfurt am Main. On the student’s instruction, his professor traveled to New Zealand to take a single picture at a specified location. Langdon-Pole then printed the photograph, presenting it as a framed image, one of an open-ended series that, when hung, shows the scene of a river flanked by trees at the point where it discharges into the sea, across a rocky shoreline. Unseen by the viewer, on the back of the mount, the artist adds additional information compiled in response to the image, but adapted for each iteration. So far, he has produced at least ten of these variants, titling the individual photographs after the chosen material concealed on the verso of each framed image. In one instance, this is a brooch-like assemblage made by his mother out of shells that forms a petaled frame for a tiny plastic Madonna (*Motherland*, 2015); in another, it is a photograph of poet Gregory Corso’s gravestone, titled with the words of its inscription: *Spirit / is Life / it flows thru / the death of me / endlessly / like a river unafraid / of becoming*

the sea (2016); in a third, there is a collage of visual and textual references to the planet Mercury, the charting of the passage of which across the sun was one of the tasks James Cook undertook on his first voyage to the Pacific, in 1769 (*Transit of Mercury November 9th 1769*, 2015). Again, the works constitute a play with sameness and repetition, with doubling (a “work” that has two faces, though one is usually hidden), with art-world lineages and the dynamics of power they demonstrate, and with a natural subject and its historical, political, and cultural associations, which, in several instances, can be linked to the artist’s own biography.

The destination to which de Rooij was sent by his student Langdon-Pole is a popular spot on the scenic Coromandel Peninsula, on the east coast of the North Island of New Zealand. It is where the artist and his family regularly spend their holidays. A stream flows into the bay where Cook made first landfall. This is where his crew set up camp to replenish supplies and observe the transit of Mercury, by which, along with his astronomical observations in Tahiti, he definitively established longitude, and therefore the means to safely navigate and plot the globe in a system of gridded measurement. It was here, on November 15, 1769, that he raised the British flag, claiming his surroundings in the name of King George III. The place is now called Cooks Beach, and it looks out onto Mercury Bay. There is a cairn marking the spot where the explorer recorded his observations with the astronomer Charles Green. These names overwrite the earlier ones accorded to the place by Māori who called the bay Te Whanganui-o-Hei, after an important chief who sailed aboard the Te Arawa waka, one of the great fleet that arrived in the fourteenth century—a location already known as the first landing place of the legendary Polynesian voyager Kupe. Langdon-Pole mires his European mentor in this mesh of biography and history, acknowledging the artist’s own complicity in this complex of overlapping narratives. In its cumulative unfolding, meanings accrue across time and space. While the landscape itself is mutely resplendent—a constant in which rocks and trees, sky and land, river and sea, are caught in a scintillating play of brightness and shadow—a veritable torrent of human insights and reflections adheres in secret behind it, winding together science and art history, romantic poetry and religious convictions, to navigate a peculiarly personal investment in the past and present of that site. There is an ethical dimension, too, in Langdon-Pole’s request that his teacher should suspend his authority and encounter for himself a loaded destination at the farthest reach of both imperial and Oceanic expansion, to learn firsthand the extent and limits of his privilege. We may intuit the charge of this in the image’s traumatic repetition.¹ Over and over, that stilled rush of water on its way to the sea reminds us that a frighteningly unknowable real precedes us.

1 I owe this reading to Hal Foster. See his “The Return of the Real” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, pp. 127–170.

As Langdon-Pole's practice has developed, this trafficking between times and places has intensified. In a reverse trajectory, he has returned objects from the New World to the Old, merging the natural and the constructed, personal narrative and shared history in installations and situations that produce complex constellations of meaning. Take, for example, the wooden furniture he shipped from his parents' home in a series titled *Punctatum* (2017). With each of the three items (a long-case clock, a letter desk, and a music shelf), the artist has plugged the holes left by the common wood borer (the Latin name for which is *Anobium punctatum*) with twenty-four-karat gold. This invasive species infiltrated New Zealand with the arrival of the first colonizers and their imported possessions. In a country with a temperate climate where most buildings are constructed from timber, borers are a constant nuisance. Their incessant tunneling is a reminder of the catastrophic effects of European contact. Tiny spots of glistening gold, these plugs suggest multiple and irresolvable readings. Is the decision to seal the holes with a precious metal a remedial gesture? A means to resist post-colonial forgetfulness? Or does the closing of these lifeways hypostatize the once-symbiotic relation between parasite and host? By returning the furniture to Europe, is it the artist's intention to turn these objects into monuments to a history of unwanted transmission? Or are they a gift with hidden treasure, the realization of the promise that every new colony offers?

Langdon-Pole's ambivalence is legion. There is a barb to his open-endedness, and a subtle violence to his artistic decisions that refuse the charge of prettiness, exposing our fraught relations to nature and the burden of history as its legacies prey on the present. This is especially evident in *Paradisaea Apoda* (2015), and *King Bird of Paradise (Apoda)* (2016). These are permutations of an unfolding project centered on the so-called birds of paradise, a spectacular species native to Papua New Guinea, numbers of which were traded in the sixteenth century between Papuan tribespeople and European explorers. In these works, Langdon-Pole incorporated two specimens—preserved and with their legs missing—as inert focal points for thinking through the connections and dislocations of colonial exchange and the myriad ways in which humans invest in, interpret, and exoticize nature. Fragile corpses, they lie cloaked in brightly colored feathers, as deformed and foreign bodies now in utterly strange places. Removed equally from the organic multiplicity of their jungle homes and the dioramas and display cabinets of the museum, these small preserved creatures take on a solemn grace, laid as if by mourners who have come to pay their respects.

Langdon-Pole draws us to the story that European naturalists believed, namely, that these birds were born without feet because this is how they were received, having had their legs removed before the birds were traded. He dwells on the irony that scientists came up with the improbable reason for their missing anatomy by hypothesizing that the birds spent their lives aloft, falling to the ground only when

they died—an account that found its way into several encyclopedias. These creatures were given their celestial name because of this faulty logic, proving that the West's quest for truth can be undone by a simple lapse in attention, whereby fanciful thinking usurps empirical fact. Tracking this misconception, the artist worked with a taxidermist to re-prepare the already-preserved birds, removing their legs to recall the earlier Papuan practice.

For *Paradise Blueprint* (2017), Langdon-Pole then displaced these appendages further, by reproducing their tiny forms as a spiraling pattern of small, white negative shapes on a cyanotype-blue field of decorative wallpaper. Here, ghostly indexes twist and fall as a repressed reminder of human brutality always administered for our own devices, whether in the interests of trade, through the dictates of custom, or even for the vagaries of fashion and decoration. The artist plays elegance and restraint against cruelty and destruction. No wonder he calls one of his installations—a gorgeous yellow greater bird of paradise lying on a runner of blue carpet in the basement of Kunsthalle Darmstadt—*Tomb(e)* (2018), a title borrowed from Hélène Cixous that suggests the moment of “falling” (*tombe* means “falls” in French), the place where death is commemorated, and the “tomes” where all human knowledge is ultimately collected. Of course, the artist is here referring to the bird's demise, but might he not also be invoking another monumental Fall: the Christian narrative of an original transgression (a desire that overwhelmed the rule of law) that God repaid by banishment from the Garden of Eden and with the curse of mortality? Such larger questions are the artist's deeper purpose.

Passport (Argonauta) (2018) is one of Langdon-Pole's most recent installations. I had the good fortune to see it in Hong Kong in 2018. Nine paper-nautilus shells were pinned directly to the wall in a single line, at just a little below eye level. Each of these was filled with a metal wedge that, on closer investigation, turned out to be carved from meteor fragments of a kind that the artist has for some time been collecting. At first encounter, these reminded me again of Marcel Duchamp. Rather than the readymade, I am thinking of his *Coin de Chastité* (“Wedge of Chastity,” 1954/63), a late work he made as a gift to his wife Teeny. Originally made from plaster, then cast in bronze and dental plastic, Duchamp's small sculpture fitted two shaped forms together. Like a finger in a glove, his cast object seemed to give form to the negative and positive spaces of the female vulva. Juxtaposing pink, flesh-like plastic and dark metal, it was one of several erotic objects he made alongside his secret final work, *Étant Donnés* (1946–66), which, as Carmen Fernández Aparicio suggests, “signal his interest in restoring an explicit, powerful, threatening female presence.”² Langdon-Pole's objects

2 Carmen Fernández Aparicio, *Coin de Chastité*, collection catalogue entry, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte, Reina Sofía, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/coin-chastete-wedge-chastity>, accessed August 26, 2019.

may not share Duchamp's sexual overtones, but there is a hint of the master's underlying violence. There is something powerful, oppressive even, in the heavy metal's filling of the delicate shells' interiors. But his tampering recodes the French artist's gesture in various telling departures.

Most obviously, rather than casting his own forms, Langdon-Pole brings two existing materials together, the rarity and conspicuous beauty of which are compelling new dimensions. Paper-nautilus shells are exquisite instances of nature's own creativity, prized for their fragile beauty, and also because their spiral form is thought to fit the sacred geometry of the golden ratio. Meteorites are likewise collectors' items, gathered after they have breached Earth's atmosphere, plummeting not just from outer space, but from deep time—even before Earth existed—and named after the locations where they landed. These two elements are therefore freighted with significance, most obviously for the sciences, but also as rich subjects of cultural storytelling. Together, they encode a variant set of binaries, far more than simply those of male and female, positive and negative. The shell lives beneath us, a denizen of the sea; a meteor hails from above, falling earthward from the sky. One is soft, the other hard. One once housed a living organism in the cold depths of the ocean; the other is a dense consequence of the reactions that obtain when chemicals are exposed to extreme heat. Brought together, they condense vast distances and different times into a tightly knotted unit, and then, laid out spatially according to the geographical locations where each meteor fragment was found, they follow a trajectory that maps the planet as but one destination in an infinite cosmos.

Despite their differences, *Passport (Argonauta)* bears more than a passing relation to *Untitled (Alex)*. Both bring naturally occurring substances into gallery settings; both treat their contexts as threshold spaces where near and far; past and present; the visual, material and written are conjugated for the purposes of examination and reflection. Both materialize the idea, posited by Édouard Glissant and recorded by Langdon-Pole in one of his notebooks, that “difference coming into relation is what creates the world.”³ There is, of course, a shift in scope and ambition, which is a measure of this artist's evolution and the opportunities that have been presented to him. But the constant that holds his practice together is in the duty of care he demonstrates in seeking to combine scattered things, making the familiar strange (and vice versa), while at the same time proving that everything—however disparate—is somehow connected.

3 Zac Langdon-Pole, email to the author, July 3, 2019.