

POETICS OF UNWILD THINGS

Dana Levy works chiefly with video, video installation and photography. Her work investigates historical, social and political situations, while dealing with memory, identity and the relationship between culture and nature. It explores the various ways that life is taken out of its natural context, uprooted from its surroundings and assigned a place on shelves or display cabinets or on the walls of the museum. The consequences of ecological change that impinge on Western society has triggered inspiration for these works. Here Levy explores the origins of natural history collections, and questions their role as informers about the essence of the natural world. Expanding upon Dana Levy's Poetics of the Unwild is an interview between the artist and former MOMA curator, Barbara London. This interview took place in April, 2015 as a way of referencing Dana Levy's biographical source material. The discussion is in keeping with E. O. Wilson's concept of biophilia.

Author: Dana Levy



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Fig. 1. *Fish*, 2008

Lambda print

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In 2007 when I visited *La Specula* museum in Florence (fig. 1), which was founded by the Medici family in the 16th century, I was fascinated that the division between the arts and sciences was much more fluid than other Natural History museums. These collections simultaneously encapsulated order and disorder, the natural and the artificial, life and death. They captured a whole range of divergent views, with diverse objects and styles.

In the museum one can find works of the sculptors Clemente Michelangelo Susini (1754–1814) and Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (1656–1701) who created highly realistic wax models as references for medical students. Susini's female figure's braided hair flows into her spleen (fig. 2).

Zumbo's dramatic wax statues depicting the effects of syphilis are of great artistic value (fig. 3). This museum contained a mix of the imaginary alongside the factual. Here the displays not only fed the mind with informative facts, they also provoked various emotions and thoughts.

In my video *Dead World Order* (2012, France) (fig. 4), a curator organizes a museum display around a wealthy ship-owners home, *Maison de L'armateur*. Due to his wealth and travels, he had many little *Wunderkammern* containing taxidermied animals, exotic minerals, artifacts and art objects.

Modern natural history museums often try to convey specific narratives. They are very informative but one fact they do not convey is



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Fig. 2. *Reclining Female Figure*, Clemente Michelangelo Susini, 2007, C- print, 26x34 cm
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that nature will always be somewhat mysterious and have an unpredictable aspect to it. I doubt we will ever have all the answers about nature. In the past it was more obvious that so much was unknown, so much room was left for imagination. If we look at the first botanical catalogues that were meant for medical use, they often contained myths and folklore. For example, a plant whose roots were shaped as a human figure was believed to heal a person from evil spirits. Today there obviously is a more distinct separation between art, science and magic.

In my work I try to bridge this gap. In Le Havre, the same city where I filmed *Dead World Order*, I discovered a huge storage warehouse full of natural history museum objects (fig. 5). Packed shelves of taxidermied animals were stored in its dark rooms because they were thought to be too archaic for the modern world

in, since spectators can watch animals in slow motion on HD screens.

But I was drawn to these storage rooms as they were chaotic and full of surprises, and therefore made a more accurate representation of the natural world. I came across a room that was full of confiscated souvenirs. Le Havre is a port town, where many arrive with odd keepsakes from around the globe. Some were made from real animals, and therefore confiscated (fig. 6). Perhaps, like the first collectors of *Kunstkammern*, today's collectors of these objects also gain a sense of control of the world by possessing these now dead, but once wild, animals. According to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), it is illegal to trade in objects of these kinds. But in Florida, I found many gift shops displaying similar souvenirs in colorful displays from which I created



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Fig. 3 and 4.

Il Morbo Gallico- Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, 2007, C- print, 26x34 cm.

Dead World Order, 2012. Video, 6:00 min.

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Fig. 5

The Ark at Fort de Tourneville, 2012. C- print, 75.14X50 cm.

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the photographic series *Florida Store* (2012) (fig. 7).

In my work I aim to bring back the unpredictable aspect of nature into these over orderly museums. This idea is what led me to bring 100 live doves into a natural history museum in Israel for my video *Silent Among Us* (2008, Israel) (fig. 8). The birds symbolize life and death, war and peace and living with the silent presence of those who have passed. In *The Wake* (2011, USA) (fig. 9), I brought 100 live butterfly specimens into the Entomology department at the Carnegie Natural History Museum in Pittsburgh.

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Barbara London: I grew up in and around New York. I loved visiting my father's office in the Empire State Building and pounding the sidewalks just as much as spending family summers in an outback kind of setting. There I swam, caught bugs and frogs, and watched beavers build dams. Were you also close to nature as a child?

Dana Levy: That sounds like a good mix of 2 worlds. I was born in Israel but we left when I was 3 and I grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. In our back yard there was a creek full of snakes and poison ivy, there was a tree we called the Tarzan tree, which had thick hanging vines that we would swing on, over the deep fall of the creek.

But the most interesting thing for me was that at the time the area started to change and in this very green tall tree landscape, big houses started to be built in the area, and my sister and local friends and I would spend our days in construction sites of large private homes. So the wild nature was now framed with large wooden structures. When they finished one house we



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Fig. 6

Confiscated Souvenirs, 2012. Archival print, 60x40 cm.

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would move onto the next house and spend hours there. It was dangerous, and sometimes one of us would get injured, but we kept going back. I think this is where my fascination with the contrast between the wild and the man made began. My mind sought structures to contain the wilderness. Later, when I was 10, we moved back to Tel Aviv, and even though we lived near a big park, I longed for the wild green nature I was used to.

BL: Media is a relatively recent form of contemporary art. You received an MA in Electronic Imaging from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art Dundee, which has a strong electronic arts program. What drew you into media?

DL: Since childhood I was tech savvy. We had an apple computer at home since I was a child in the 80s and I even went to apple computer camp and learned some programming when I was 7 or 8.

During high school I painted a lot. But I found it to be too messy and I didn't have room to store my paintings. In college I started hand-drawn and collage-based frame-by-frame animations, and later started working with an Amiga computer. I experimented with Super-8 too. When I turned 18 my grandfather bought me a high-end video camera and I didn't put it down. Things were quickly changing at the time. During my first year in college I edited on an analog station, onto Umatic tapes, and by my final year I was using software such as *AfterEffects*, *Adobe Premiere* and *Avid*.

I felt I could be more innovative in this medium. In London, we were encouraged to be different and unique, it may be a British thing, and this medium let me make work that was unique. Bill Viola had a show at the South London gallery, which was attached to my college, and I remember seeing this show and being very inspired. He made video into poetry with no narrative structures and this made a lot of sense to me. You, Barbara



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Fig. 7

Florida Store, 2012. Metallic print, 60x90cm.

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curated one of his first major shows at the MOMA in 1987. I felt like his works validated my desire to make videos more like moving paintings, or visual poetry, rather than narrative films.

BL: I'm curious about the formal concerns that seem to be the foundation of some of your work. Did this grow out of analytical studies in London and at Dundee?

DL: I think this started earlier. My father's brother was a painter, although he didn't gain much recognition. I admired him very much as an artist and person, despite witnessing the financial hardships that he experienced due to his dedication to his art practice. But this didn't discourage me at all. He encouraged me and mentored me. The last two years of high school I spent in England in a school with a big art department and gallery and a wonderful teacher. I was encouraged to focus on painting and do

everything else only to fulfill the minimum requirements. I spent hours studying paintings at museums and sketching them. Until today I think I am more inspired by painting than any other medium. Interestingly I always started my work by painting the canvas a very dark hue, and gradually I would introduce light. Video is similar; it starts in a darkened room into which light is introduced.

BL: Your works *The Wake* and *Silent Among Us*, are set in very special collections housed in natural history museums. In these works you judiciously investigate nature. You are a thoughtful observer of the methods naturalists use to study life. What drew you to these museum collections? Is it the ornithologists and the lepidopterists' apparent delight in their systematic learning processes? Or is it your own discovery of the splendor of the butterflies and the birds, which out in the wild move about beyond our reach?



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Fig. 8

Silent Among Us, 2008. Video, 05:24 min.

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DL: I think what initially drew me to these museums was the grid – all the species assigned a place on the shelves of a cabinet in a grid, making order as if to tame the wild. At the time I was working on a series of very long panoramas of half-built hotels in the Sinai desert in Egypt, in which the vast desert landscape can be viewed through the half built structure’s grid. Natural history museums offered another kind of grid. But both put the wilderness into some kind of structural order, and this contrast has always attracted me.

Whilst on an artist residency in Italy, I first discovered La Specola museum in Florence which blew me away, it was like a time capsule, a last reminder of the old world. These museums are a dying breed. And are also full of death. Reminders of life that once was. The more I spent time in them, the more I felt the urge to fill these places with living things, to contrast the dead. It was just a desire I had, without knowing much about birds or butterflies. To my surprise, I got permission to bring 100 live birds to the small natural history museum in Israel with a taxidermy collection of local birds, and filmed *Silent Among Us* (2008) (fig.

8). A few years later, I brought 100 live butterflies to the Entomology department of the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and created *The Wake* (2011)(fig. 9) The live butterflies fly out of the glass cabinets, amongst the dead species, and seem as if they are being resurrected. For me these works have symbolic meaning, they are about awakening, revolt, and about living with the constant presence of death and the past.

BL: The natural world seems to be an important topic. How and when did this become one of your main concerns?

DL: Even though I’ve spent most my adult life in urban environments, I’ve always loved nature, ever since those formative years growing up with plenty of wild nature around. Being politically engaged, my works after college were more focused on the political situation in the Middle East and had more documentary elements. But then I started to look to nature for metaphors. In 2005, when Israel disengaged from Gaza, I happened to be on a residency in the picturesque Austrian countryside



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Fig. 9

The Wake, 2011. Video, 05:20 min.

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(named Hotel Pupik), far from the conflicts of the Middle East. I looked to my surroundings as my vocabulary, and created “Disengagement,” (fig. 10) which shows a rural tree house being constructed and dismantled gradually from the tree. This was a poetic symbolic work, and that’s when I realized that looking to nature as my vocabulary of expression gave me more freedom to create a universal language of symbols. Especially after moving to NY, the urban landscape made me seek nature more and more. Some of my works became about nature and man’s relationship it, raising environmental issues, but often they also express social – political metaphors too.

BL: Is the natural world represented in natural history museum collections connected to your interest in history?

DL: 17th-18th century in Europe is a time in history I’m fascinated with ‘the age of wonder’. People, especially the ruling class, created cabinets of curiosity with collections of objects from faraway lands, paintings, animal parts, insects, and other

oddities and organized them in a cabinet (fig. 4). These eclectic collections made order of the world they were discovering, and gave them a sense of control (fig. 11). On the base of these collections, museums were later formed. This sense of wonder can still be felt in old natural history museums. It’s a window to the past. But there are so few left and I would love to visit them all and document them before they are gone.

BL: You recently said that you have become fascinated with objects, perhaps because as a filmmaker you don’t make “objects” per se, the way painters and sculptors do. But it seems to be much more than this. Is there something else?

DL: I like the challenge of telling stories and creating drama without dialog or even people. Objects contain stories, histories. A mundane object becomes significant if it has a significant story. In my two-channel video *Refuge* (2012), I shine my flashlight onto different objects I find while walking through underground caves near Caen, France (fig. 12). My flashlight shines onto tin



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Fig. 10

Disengagement, 2005. Single channel vertical video.

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Fig. 11 and 12
Impermanent Display, 2014. Single channel video.
Refuge, 2012 two channel video.
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cigarette boxes, broken plates, shoes, simple everyday objects of the working class, but the fact that they belonged to refugees hiding in these caves while Normandy was being bombed above them, make these objects heroic. The objects that helped the refugees stay alive for the many weeks they were hiding down there. Finding them laying in the same place, seemingly untouched, 70 years later, give these eroding artifacts the power to

transport one back in time, more so than reading about the story in a history book or even than seeing these artifacts neatly cleaned on the shelves of the museum. Authentic historical objects and documents, even just from a few decades ago, interest me as they have witnessed and survived through history, and can act as time machines. Studying and holding a single antique postcard, with its signs of wear and faded ink, can be an



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Fig. 13

Everglades, 2014. Single channel video.

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effective transporter into another era. I guess this is the role I like objects to play in my work. Storytellers that cannot lie, yet do not tell only one specific truth either, they leave room for the unknown while they give a lot away at the same time.

BL: I'm curious about your recent work, *Everglades*. The colors are so lusciously alive. To make this installation, you spent several nights with an assistant alone in the wilderness. Surrounded by darkness when dangerous snakes and alligators lurk unseen, you projected bold, colored lights onto adjacent ground coverage and trees. The piece is so visual and seems so alive; as a viewer I can feel your spirit soar. You appear to have opened yourself up more to chance with this production. Is there a reason for this change?

DL: I had a very powerful experience during my time as the sol artist in residence in the Everglades

National Park in 2014. Unexpected, yet powerful occurrences are constantly taking place – a rainbow appearing in the sky on a sunny day, bright pink birds enter the green brown landscape, vultures eating a rotting dead yellow alligator as another bird is performing displays in the tree above to attract a mate. But everything happens so subtly, almost hidden from view unless one is observing constantly. I tried to portray this “magic” I kept experiencing, by projecting synthetic colors onto the vegetation in the jungle, merging the natural and the unnatural.

Actively painting with light onto the dark landscape of the night. Oddly enough the first night, when we finished filming past midnight, a bright moonbow (a rainbow that appears at night) stretched across the horizon. The moon was full, and so the colors could be distinguished even late at night. I like to imagine it was nature’s response to the colors I had just projected onto the landscape.

When dealing with nature, or live animals, there is always room for the unexpected. which I like, I like to let things unfold and surprise me. The filming was very difficult because of the mosquitoes, even though I was wearing a full body net suits and mask. It was unbearable and felt like being eaten alive. I think this intensity comes through in the work. (fig.13)

BL: We've just been discussing the content of your work. Now I want to ask a different kind of question. What new or old tools are you attached to in your art practice? Are there tools that you have rejected?

DL: Throughout my career my main medium has remained chiefly time-based media. Some artists use many mediums, and while I admire that, I actually like deepening my knowledge and experience of one medium. Just as painters can investigate painting for a lifetime, I feel the same. I love deepening my investigation into time based media and working with its limitations. I also create still images, but when I do its usually part of a series of images, so it's also in a sense time based, like the frames in a film. I also like the idea that my entire life's work can be stacked in the small space of several hard drives, which cannot be seen without electricity and certain technologies. This adds a risk and mystery to it.

Dana Levy was born in Tel Aviv and lives and works in New York. She completed her Post Grad in Electronic Imaging at the Duncan of Jordanston College of Art Dundee University, Scotland, and holds a BA from Camberwell Art College London. Prizes include 2006 Hamburg Short Film festival jury award, 2008 Young Israeli Artist Award, 2010 Dumbo Arts Festival best studio award, and the Beatrice Kolliner young Artist Award from the Israel Museum, where she currently has a solo project titled Literature of Storms (until August 29th 2015) curated by Noam Gal. Other solo shows include the Petach Tikva Museum of Art (2014), Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv Israel; Ron Mandos Gallery Amsterdam (2012), Braverman Gallery Tel Aviv (2012), Loop art fair Barcelona (2012), and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery NYC (2010). Her films have been screened widely around the world in film festivals, galleries, cinemas and museums including The Wexner Center OH, The Tate Modern, London, The Norton Museum, FL, Bass Museum Florida. Pompidou Center, Paris, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tribeca Film Festival, International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena. <http://www.danalevy.net/>