The significance of being a rhino

In the exhibition FREIGHTED, 500 years of rhinoceros collection and display, South African artist Fritha Langerman, from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, explores not only the themes of colonialisaton and its socio-cultural implications, but she also articulates with institutions that are interested in the relationship with the natural world and the threat to endangered species. The exhibition includes reproductions of images, texts and objects from collections in museums, zoos and public archives.

Fritha Langerman, by appropriating scientfc techniques and museological methods of exhibition in her work, challenges the ideas and conventions related to environmental problems and questions collections of natural history and their origins. Her work challenges the boundaries between natural history, science and art as well as the cultural representation of nature.

Freighted, 500 years of rhinoceros collection and display, is a travelling exhibition that was previously shown at the Iziko South African Museum, from November 2018 to December 2019. As a contemporary art exhibition presented in a science museum, it demonstrates the capacity of art to adapt to other paradigms, creating complex narratives, with inventive thematic pairings. In the summative evaluation of the Mark Dion System Metropolis contemporary art exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London, conducted by Yvonne Harris Consulting in 2007, Dion tells us that while the target audience of the museum is visitors interested in science, those visitors are also interested in contemporary art, and exhibits such as his are able to confound expectations. The museum thus becomes a place for surprise learning and discussion.

This exhibition draws attention to the crisis of extinction of animal species, particularly the rhino. According to Fritha Langerman, the exhibition presents the rhino as an object of spectacle, study, currency and desire. It begins with the 1515 engraving of Dürer’s rhinoceros, which he termed a precise copy of an absent original. This rhinoceros is connected to our history. “May 20, 1515. Next to the Tower of Belém, in Lisbon, the fleet of Cristóvão de Brito, newly arrived from India, disembarks. From the ship Nossa Senhora da Ajuda, a creature descends that, since the time of the Roman empire, had not been seen in Europe. The population of the city and the surrounding area accumulates near the water line, with great clamor and confusion, hoping to see with their own eyes such a strange monster. The animal, an Asian rhino, had been offered by the Sultan of Cambaia, Modofar II, to an embassy of the Viceroy of India Afonso de Albuquerque (...) only a copy of the document survived, where Fernandes reports what happened to the rhino in Lisbon. Another letter was sent by a Portuguese correspondent and was accompanied by a drawing of ‘ganda’. This missive came into the hands of Albrecht Dürer who drew, from there, an engraving on wood that would become the classic representation of the animal. The artist would add the date 1515, the Latin designation of the pachyderm Rhinocerus and its anagram (A. D.). ”(In: Luís Tirapicos, Dürer’s Rhino. Instituto Camões. 2004 2005).

This exhibition project is particularly opportune in the current context, where the rhinoceros is threatened with extinction, and at the risk of being transformed into a digital image only. The exhibition includes a wide variety of references, from the dissection of the Versailles rhino in 1793, to the AMNH Lang-Chapin Congo expedition, to the decimation of rhinos during the Angolan civil war. The exhibition is confined to a wooden crate, the size used to transport rhinoceroses. It is an exhibition of reproductions and does not contain real specimens, but presents the rhinoceros in fragments, with a sense of its absence.

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