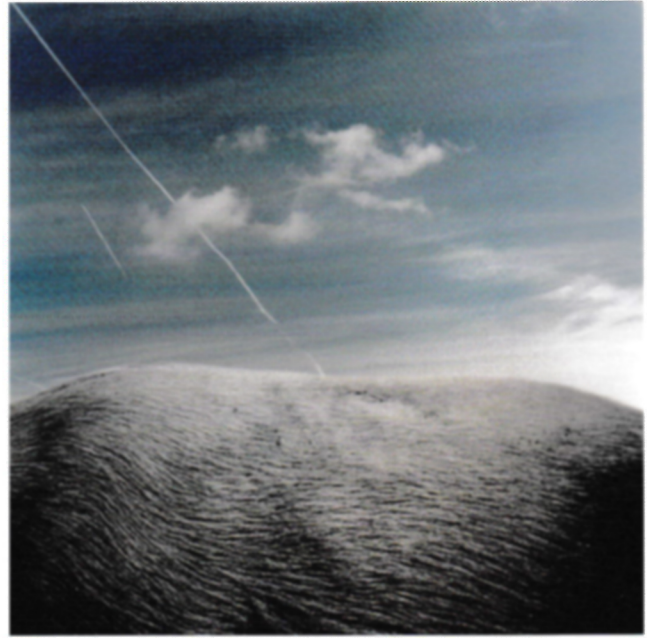


Helen Sear

Natural's Not In It

JOHN SLYCE



Untitled from the series *Grounded*, 2001

The Great Chain of Being, or *Scala Naturae*, is a commanding visual metaphor. Rooted in Aristotle's zoological works, this line in one-dimensional logic maps out life as a progression from the simplest of forms to the most complex. Its hierarchical logic structured orthodox taxonomy and the dominant systems of arrangement and display in natural history museums well into the 19th century, while supplying in kind a narrative skeleton for thought about nature and its 'truths' that continues to this day. We – humankind – are the creators and keepers of this ancient and artificial hierarchy. Within this natural and seemingly organic order of things, animals are always the observed. The recognition that they too can observe us would undermine their role as a captive object of our ever-extending knowledge and power.

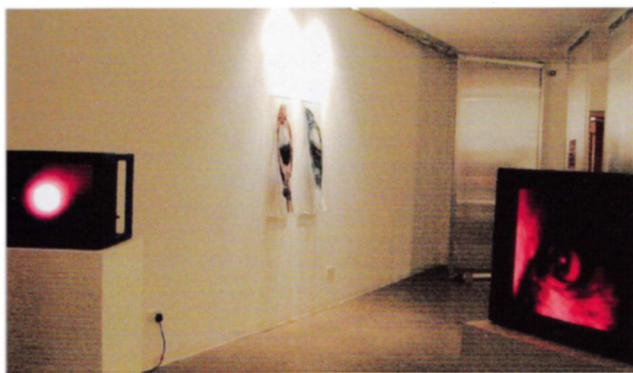
Emerging from this context, Helen Sear's pictures in the series *Grounded* (2002/2001) and *Still... a landscape in ten pieces* (2002) are both inwardly and outwardly conservational. Like 'Nature' itself, the images in these series are constructions. Sear, however, enacts only a minimal intervention in an image. In fact, it would perhaps be more correct to relate to her works here as reconstructions. In the case of *Grounded*, these twenty-three 'animal landscapes' are comprised of two image layers: an isolated section of an animal's body digitally mounted onto a ground of sky. Moving through an almost musical arrangement of seasons and emotions, these virtual landscapes cannot help but read as natural images that have been organically grown, so to speak, and captured in one stroke by a camera. That the hides of the animals appear to reflect the atmospheric conditions of a particular sky compounds this tendency. Reproduction condenses, unifies, and lends coherence to Sear's images, all of which muffles the movement and flutter in their shimmering surfaces. These photographs possess uncanny painterly

qualities easily lost. Seen in the flesh, an image is more ethereal and seems to have a skin that calls attention to its construction. It is as if these lush photographic images were somehow forced to accept as categorically distinct their material surface and virtual picture plane.

The diorama is a shared image source for the series *Grounded* and *Still... a landscape in ten pieces*. Sear has photographed individual specimens and entire displays in natural history museums in many European capitals and regional centres. The diorama is strangely analogous to the photograph in that each is a form of *tableaux vivant* built from the bodies of captured dead. Part of Sear's project in these series is the reanimation of the dead through the reconstruction of their image. These acts are part of a rigorously structured process that acknowledges a double death has taken place: the first and actual death memorialised by the taxidermist and the second, a moment of death similarly preserved in a photograph. The ultimate resurrection occurs through the manipulations of a digital reconstruction. The ten images that make up the landscape series *Still* all come from one medium-format image of an Alpine diorama shot in a museum of natural history in Darmstadt, Germany. Shifting between the micro and macrocosmic tactics already stated in the workings of such a museum, Sear has construed individual dramas and fixated on communicative exchanges among characters in the diorama by fracturing the original image and then reframing the fragments in new compositional arrangements. The results are scenes alive with activity where multiple acts unfold on a stage that never escapes being haunted by the shadow of a crime. Little if anything has happened to these images. Sear merely calls our attention to the content readily available within the source image – available that is to those able to look as well as to imagine what it is to be seen.

Not unlike photography, the master narrative of the diorama is realism. Sear's relationship with landscape in photography, while openly flirting with the music, moment, and mood suggested in Stieglitz's *Equivalents*, is never Transcendentalist. These landscapes, while exploiting the symbolic language inherent in the subject, return us to our material world and its lived relations. The symbolism of the landscape is put to use through allegory and Sear's target here is at once our present moment and, at the same time, a much earlier one in photography. This is most clearly stated in her two-screen, looped video *Light Seeking Transparency* (2002), which directly explores an image haunted by its source. The piece, made from three slides, a projector, and a small diorama of a tree that rotates on a childhood turntable, places a viewer in a position where the source of an image and the image itself are simultaneously exposed within the visual field. Sear has photographed the projected images of three taxidermy specimens: a fox, a hare, and an owl. She then focussed the video camera on the single 'eye' of the projector and the 'dead' eye of the animal – one blinds while the other is reanimated in the movement of the interrupted images. The screens shift between the colours red and blue and in so doing enact a Benjaminian return to the incunabula of photography in the 19th century and the crashing confluence of nature, culture, and technology unleashed in the jewel-like wonder of the stereoscopic daguerreotype. That was a moment – soon to pass and rarely if ever to return – when Benjamin surmises a photographer was on par with their instrument. Sear has tapped into this elusive moment again by vacating the camera and returning to the source of her images in their raw projected light.

Light Seeking Transparency forms a pendant to the series *Grounded and Still... a landscape in ten pieces* and, in doing so, defines these ethereal works as an ensemble that explores the interdependence of settings, players, and audience in relation to a photograph. The series handled here begin to intensely explore aspects of her already existing practice that have touched on landscape and memory, as well as the identitarian and psychical components of an image. Meaning does not so much reside within each of these series, or indeed individual images, as haunt them from without. Given their sculptural and painterly components, Helen Sear's work in these series can be positioned, perhaps surprisingly to some, between the gentle incursions in a landscape rendered by Hamish Fulton that pass without a trace and then the archaeological and sociological practices in the work of Mark Dion that investigate the social constructions of nature and our place in the world. Such a positioning places Sear's work in a critical space it has not entered before in writing, but these recent works undoubtedly lead there. Like the reanimated eyes of the animals looking back at us, these unnatural works seem to possess a beauty and knowledge we once knew and only learned to forget.



Installation view of *Light Seeking Transparency*, 2002



From the series *Still... a landscape in ten pieces*, 2002