
Taxidermy often leaves a variety of impressions, from general uneasiness to great interest. Though the stuffing of animals originated as a safe means to encounter animals that were otherwise elusive, the migration of taxidermy from trophy to art is an interesting journey that should appeal to a wide range of scholars and researchers. Rachel Poliquin’s The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing unearths much of the rich history and technology of stretching and mounting skins, from seventeenth-century European explorers to contemporary collectors and practitioners, along the way packing in a large number of observations, making The Breathless Zoo a dense 259 pages.

Poliquin describes motivations to permanently preserve a once-living object as “incentives” or “narratives of longing” and presents them as individual chapters: wonder, beauty, spectacle, order, narrative, allegory, and remembrance. Each aspect highlights an animal that epitomizes a particular symbology and whose history of collection illustrates the ways culture constitutes nature through representation, and how these representations evolve. Fascinating photographs accompany each chapter, prompting readers to consider the concept of the still and majestic diorama and the craft required to create the illusion of life. Each chapter connects certain periods’ preferences for particular display techniques to an era’s advances in chemistry, anatomy, and taxonomy, including cultural fads, artistic movements, and political and economic shifts.

As taxidermy’s exposure increases in art galleries and museums, growing debate surrounds its display. Poliquin’s book encourages the reader to think about taxidermy as contemporary art, as witness to the progress of a new avant-garde. So often regarded as a sub-cultural art form, here taxidermy is elevated to high-art status, an apt medium for our postmodern era. Rachel Poliquin is an established writer and curator of taxidermy exhibits and the author of the blog Ravishing Beasts: Taxidermy (http:www.ravishingbeasts.com).

With a detailed index and ample notes, this examination of taxidermy is a useful resource that can support cross-disciplinary research in art, cultural studies, and animal studies.

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