How the Dead Can Dance: 
Rosamond Purcell’s Nature Stands Aside

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Nature Stands Aside, the grand retrospective of Rosamond Purcell’s work at the Addison Gallery of American Art, began with a provocative question: “What kind of a genius is Rosamond Purcell?” It is a credit both to Purcell and the exhibition’s curator, Gordon Wilkins, that this question remained unanswered or, instead, supplemented by a series of new questions. Wilkins’s exhibition, although it did confirm that Purcell is, by any measure, a genius, kept the visitor guessing about the details: Is she an artist? A writer? Or both? Or is she, a lifelong collector of wonders, herself “a living cabinet of wonders”? Attributed to novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, the exhibit’s guiding question and its follow-ups appeared prominently on a large panel greeting visitors at the entrance of the second-floor gallery, next to an oversized reproduction of one of Purcell’s most gorgeous photographs, a great egret (fig. 1) from the collections of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology. Purcell’s egret is unambiguously dead—what we can see of its large body, skin sans bones, is folded into a position both appealingly elegant and shockingly unnatural, its empty eye socket stuffed with cotton. But then again it also seems somehow alive, the thin, pristine-white feathers, intricate filigree floating weightless against a dark background, kept aloft by some invisible breeze. Placed at the gallery’s entrance, as the exhibit’s guardian spirit, Purcell’s egret offered a perfect preview of her artistic preoccupations, which, for several decades now, have focused on the shifting boundaries between things living and nonliving, natural and fabricated, mundane and bizarre.

Nestled into the tree-filled campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, adorned with a neoclassical facade designed by the firm of Charles Platt, the Addison Gallery is home to an impressively eclectic permanent collection of American art, from

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John Singleton Copley to Frank Stella. It is the perfect venue for the work of an artist who has relished contradictions all her life. To a wider public, Rosamond Purcell is known chiefly as a photographer, so it’s interesting to have learned from this exhibition that she came to that medium almost accidentally. “I had not intended to be a photographer,” Purcell informed the visitor on one of the wall labels included in the exhibition. “Polaroid turned me into one.” (For the record, treating Purcell as mostly a photographer would be like saying that the polymath Stephen Jay Gould, one of her treasured collaborators, was mostly a paleontologist.) Even though Purcell later transitioned

Fig. 1. Rosamond Purcell, *Great Egret, Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Camarillo, California, 2007–2008.*

Inkjet print, dimensions variable.

Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
to conventional film and, eventually, digital images, she never shed her fondness for the single print—the one image that, compared to others she had taken, was perfect. Her method did not, she explained in the “Technical Note” included in her second book, *Half-Life* (1980), “allow for wishful thinking”: each print to her became an “established fact,” to be accepted or, for the sake of another, better one yet to be taken, rejected.

*Nature Stands Aside* began, as retrospectives should, with Purcell’s early work. The Polaroids from *A Matter of Time* (1975) already exemplify the main characteristics of Purcell’s mature work—
especially her obsession with *hybridity*, a term that, to her, applies to everything or everybody, since, in the stream of time, all that was once solid finally melts and, in varying degrees, becomes something it wasn’t. Purcell’s eye constantly fuses what everyday perception keeps distinct. Consider *Mermaid #1* (fig. 2), a portrait of a large papier-mâché figure Purcell discovered in the window of an antiques shop in the Boston neighborhood of Jamaica Plain. Purcell remembers that the mermaid was one of a pair, its twin (reversed, face on the right, fishtail on the left) having been sold already. In Purcell’s Polaroid, the mermaid, the classic example of a fantastically mixed creature (just think of P. T. Barnum’s infamous “Fejee mermaids,” sewn-together fakes made from monkey torsos with the shriveled tails of codfish) blends in with the facades of a row of typical Boston townhouses as they are reflected in the shop window.

To the viewer’s right, disorienting to the eye, a white bird made of paper or fabric and attached to a string, another prop in that shop window, appears to be tumbling down headfirst toward the picture’s lower frame. Note how the bay windows in the upper left corner blur into the mermaid’s hair or vice versa. It’s hard to tell what is being photographed here, the houses, the mermaid, the bird, or the photographer’s dreamy perception of all of them. As outside and inside merge, background becomes foreground and foreground background, while the photographer has vanished from the image, leaving us only her record of that one exceptional moment in which all of this seemed to come together. In Purcell’s photograph, this mermaid, yanked out of its element, is allowed to swim again, in a manner that does justice to its hybrid identity (Purcell told me that she went back later and purchased the mermaid).

As *Nature Stands Aside* demonstrated, Purcell would continue to experiment, over the next decades, with different compositional arrangements, complicating how we think of the ways that living and nonliving things are presented and prepared for human consumption. This is true especially of natural history museums, those “kingdoms of death” that had appalled Purcell since she first visited them as a child, stumbling through “galleries of silent, yawning, grimacing sewed-up
pelts” (from an interview with fellow artist Mark Dion, included in
the exhibition’s catalogue as well as on a wall label at the Addison). In
these museums, nature truly stands aside, as Purcell concludes in a
brilliant essay from 1999 with that title. As an adult, Purcell got per-
mission to carry her tripod into the same collections that frightened
her as a child—though now she had her art to transform what she
saw: “But how these dead can dance!”

In Purcell’s earliest works, represented in the exhibition’s first
two rooms, we already see the stirrings of what would become one of
her most sustained themes—the insults and injuries inflicted, for the
purposes of display, on the bodies of nonhuman creatures. There are
portraits of earnest-faced curators clutching bleached animal bones;

Fig. 3. Rosamond Purcell, *Bats*,
*Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, 1984.*
Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 inches.
Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
a negative print of a pickled bat, white as the bird from the shop window, its spectral beauty reminiscent, to Purcell, of “medieval carvings of souls in hell”—and, to this reviewer at least, of Indonesian stick puppets (fig. 3).

In his Systema naturae, Linnaeus joked that Descartes, convinced that mind trumps matter and thinking humans are superior to instinct-fettered animals, had clearly never seen an ape. Purcell’s universe is populated by primates challenging the neat divisions of Cartesian dualism. The most memorable of these, Gorilla on Display,
has a deeply unsettling effect on the viewer: all you see is a leg and a hand hanging limply in the corner of a glass case, conjuring thoughts of a body that has been strung up, with the greenish light adding to the garishness. In another instance, a howler monkey, eyes turned upward, lingers in the foreground while a monkey of a different species, a Uakari from the Amazon, looks on in the background (fig. 4), a deeply humanized scene, except that both of them are, of course, only mounts in a museum case, posed for the picture. Purcell’s image is a transfer print, a Polaroid image lifted and pasted on paper, a process that gives an antique sheen to the final product, as if this were a page ripped out of an old album, but of the kinds of ancestors humans wouldn’t want to claim for themselves. But should they?

For then there are also portraits of people in the process of becoming animals—manipulated ambrotypes of grim-faced Victorians growing hairs on their backs or sprouting animal parts: a grandmother turning into an orangutan, a man with the face of an owl, a spinster with tadpole legs coming out of her face. The pinnacle of Purcell’s museum monkeys is the wall of screaming primates she photographed in the 1980s (fig. 5). Her photograph took advantage of new Polaroid technology that allowed her to produce negatives along with black-and-white positive prints. In the negative, the white cotton in the mouths of the primates appears black, open as if in perpetual lament, which adds to the dramatic effect created by the animals’ extended arms. Collectively they appear to be advancing on the viewer, separated only—by what? By an invisible wall of glass? By the fact that they’re in the picture and we’re not?

Purcell’s works from this period are, given their genesis, small; the largest were taken with an 8 x 10 Polaroid camera. But Wilkins afforded them generous wall space anyway, running them along the middle of the wall, in sequences, groups of three or pairs, or sometimes by themselves, as if to counteract the way specimens would appear in natural history museums, piled on top of or wedged in next to one another. As Purcell transitioned from Polaroid to Kodachrome, she expanded both her format and emphasis, supplementing the drama happening between spectator and specimen with stories unfolding
within the photographs themselves. Take the three barn owls photographed in 1980 from the collection of the blind Dutch ornithologist Jan Pieter van Wickevoort-Crommelin (1830–1891) (fig. 6). Posing against a drab plaster wall, the owls coyly cock their heads so that they can keep one eye trained on the viewer, in a manner that makes seeing the theme of the image. They seem overly staged, arranged for our pleasure. Except that they’re blind, too, their eyes made of glass—so that the only seeing that really happens here is ours, a guilty, complicit seeing, not unlike the kind John James Audubon addresses in his essays when he reminds his readers that he has killed the birds they admire for their sake.

Fig. 5. Rosamond Purcell, Primate Specimens, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University (Positive), early 1980s. Gelatin silver print, 18 × 23 ¾ inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
The discovery of color—accidental, by her own account on one of the wall labels, the result of leaving an underdeveloped black-and-white Polaroid exposed to the light—marked another shift in Purcell’s work. From this point on, the walls of the exhibition were luminous: an amber bat drifting in silver liquid, its skeletal limbs shining through its dissolving body (fig. 7); a grinning almond-colored angler fish drifting into the camera’s lens from somewhere above, looking almost human, though the viewer soon realizes that is the result of its being dead; a fiery red, half-liquified night monkey cowering in its glycerin jar, as if it were wistfully contemplating its own progressive deterioration.

Purcell unleashed a veritable symphony of colors on the walls featuring her photographs of dice from the collection of her friend,
the master magician Ricky Jay and published in his *Dice: Deception, Fate & Rotten Luck* (2002). Dice, which used to be made from cellulophane (regenerated cellulose), are the human attempt to make an artifact out of chance, to domesticate it, since we can’t control it. In the gambler’s hand, they make sense; broken and deteriorating, now subjected to chance themselves, they look absurd. Yet for Purcell, who arranges and stacks them so that they form multicolored landscapes or buildings, they become glorious in their decay, forming weird towers, spikes, and crumbling walls, pseudoarchitectural forms that seem beautiful precisely because they can’t last. Not coincidentally, a slang term for dice is “bones,” reflecting the fact that the earliest dice were made from the anklebones of animals.

Fig. 7. Rosamond Purcell, *Bat*, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, early 1990s. Cibachrome print, 16 × 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
Dice are, of course, a human invention. At the same time, they are also an art that nature makes, to use a phrase from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, which figures prominently in *Landscapes of the Passing Strange*, Purcell’s 2010 collaboration with the Shakespeare scholar Michael Whitmore (*An Art That Nature Makes* is also the title of Molly Bernstein’s 2015 Purcell documentary). Purcell’s photograph with that title appeared prominently in the exhibition, its warm colors blending beautifully with the rich dark gray of the walls of the exhibition room. In *The Winter’s Tale* (4.4), Perdita, a shepherdess who is in fact a princess, extols the beauties of unadulterated nature, rejecting “Nature’s bastards,” such as carnations and “streaked gillyvors,” only to be contradicted by King Polixenes, in a classic defense of grafting:

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Nature is made better by no mean
But Nature makes that mean: so over that art
Which you say adds to Nature is an art
That Nature makes.
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The scene is very funny, given that the defender of nature—pure, “low-born lass,” Perdita—is really a princess and Polixenes the ruler of “Bohemia,” a country invented by Shakespeare, who infamously equipped it with a “seacoast.”

Is Purcell’s art one that nature makes? This photograph, like others in the series, was taken with Purcell’s camera pointed at discarded, double-walled apothecary bottles she had placed in some New Hampshire meadow, with the landscape, the sun, and sometimes the figure of the photographer herself reflected in the mottled surface of the glass (fig. 8)—a more sophisticated version of the approach that, decades before, produced Purcell’s mermaid. The resulting view—the undulating brown of waves of earth in the foreground, giving way to a tangle of green and then a patch of silvery sky, with something undefined hanging over it, reminiscent of the sinuous New Mexico landscapes of Georgia O’Keeffe—is neither nature nor not-nature, an image of an image, a copy of a copy. And that’s precisely the principle of Purcell’s “art that nature makes”: it’s not an improvement on
nature, made with nature’s tacit approval, the way grafting works, but the paradoxical attempt, through art, to return to nature, or something like nature, what was taken away from it. In Purcell’s photographs, the supposedly dead specimen in the jar sparkles again, and the discarded bottle, placed in the grass, is given the chance to shine. All animate things will die, while inanimate things can’t—but both must decay, which, in Purcell’s universe, is good news, since decay, to her, is a new or continued form of life. Decay happens whether we’re there to witness it or not, but in Purcell’s work it is made visible, rendered alive, because the photographer is present to view it for us, a fact she both acknowledges and ironically downplays in An Art That Nature Makes,

Fig. 8. Rosamond Purcell, An Art That Nature Makes, 2010.
Inkjet print, dimensions variable.
 Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
where her own reflection in the bottle appears as a strange pinkish UFO drifting in the sky.

The apotheosis of color happened in what may be regarded as the centerpiece of the exhibition, a room that offered a partial reconstruction of Purcell’s studio in Somerville, Massachusetts, a twenty-foot-long wall she fashioned out of scrap metal and painted copper sheathing, all salvaged from the Maine property of William Buckminster, ruler over eleven acres of discarded things and a continuing inspiration for Purcell (fig. 9). Also present are Buckminster’s waterlogged books, swollen beyond their original size, though still book-like enough to be recognizable, crammed into rickety shelves that fade into the wall, which features a selection of all manner of other
things normally considered broken, such as rusty wires hanging from hooks, a giant mallet held together by chains, fragments of rope, and two moldy suitcases topped by a satchel with a front flap petrified into a permanent wave. This is Purcell's answer to the Danish Renaissance naturalist Ole Worm's cabinet of curiosities, which she, as part of the same project, rebuilt in painstaking detail. Curator Wilkins's decision to incorporate Purcell's wall and other objects from her studio allowed the visitor to step right into and, in a sense, become part of a Purcell photograph.

As a photographer, Purcell is a purist. She never uses flash and disdains alterations through Photoshop. Her photographs retain their obligation to what they're attempting to depict. Her adamant insistence on natural light presents the perfect antidote to the traditional dimness of the halls of natural history museums. Her photographs are transcripts of lucky moments in which the perfect confluence of gesture, light, and shadow revivifies what has long lain dormant. Sometimes her quest for those moments has put her at odds with museum staff, who see a mastodon tooth where Purcell's camera reveals a mountain range or fear that the lens will cause their preserved toad to “blanch” (*Owls Head*, 2003). The wall label accompanying the portrait of the curator holding a lion jaw repeated a story Purcell has shared elsewhere, about how she once slipped a visually distracting tag off the wrist of one of her subjects and then promptly lost it. The stern-faced professional told her: “a tag without a monkey has value. A monkey without a tag is worthless.” Listening to the curator was, adds Purcell, like “studying with Yoda,” a deliberately absurd and subversive comparison, since the curator's intention was to put the annoying meddler in her place, not to give her life advice.

Purcell's photographs always come with their own tags, too: from the captions she attaches to them to the stories she tells about how and when they were taken. Purcell remembers clearly when and under what circumstances a visual impression suggested itself to her, the light, the shadows, the gesture she wanted to catch—a description that puts me in mind of Charles Darwin, who in his autobiography wrote that while his brain couldn’t retain a single line of poetry,
he could still remember, fifty years after the fact, “the exact appearance of certain posts, old trees and banks where I made a good capture.” For the true artist-collector, the hunt has nothing to do with the hunter’s self-affirmation; it’s always about finding the right specimen at the right time so that it can be given a new lease on life in a work of art. Remember that Purcell hasn’t herself killed or stuffed or displayed the specimens she photographs. Her model is not the bird-killer Audubon but the early nineteenth-century paleontologist Mary Anning, who was—as Purcell describes her in Finders, Keepers (1992), her second collaboration with Stephen Jay Gould—always on the move “to seek fresh treasure.” But unlike Anning, who stumbled through her descriptions, Purcell is a highly literate expositor of her objects, known especially for Owls Head, her now-classic account of
her dealings with Buckminster. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of *Nature Stands Aside* was that it let us experience Purcell’s writing, too, which has the same epigrammatic clarity, the same caustic wit, as so many of her photographs.

Yet writing in Purcell’s work is always bounded by the visual, which, for her, remains the primary form of investigation. *Nature Stands Aside* allowed us also to track the emergence of writing within Purcell’s photographs, beginning with pictures of books in various stages of disintegration, eaten by mice, charred by fire, dissolved by water (fig. 10). In other images, as if that museum curator’s hectoring still resonated, she includes actual museum labels, leading, for example, to the complex conversation showcased in *Reddish Egret Collected by John James Audubon in Florida* (fig. 11), a photograph of an object held by the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, where Audubon’s own handwriting, along with some random scribbles, appears on the broken egg, supplemented by the corresponding museum label, words meant to preserve what’s already disintegrating. Purcell has moved the egg so that it rests slightly on the edge of the box, as if eager to escape from its confinement without being able to—for that bird won’t ever fly.

Yet, in a sense it did. In her wall label (a label added to the label labeling the egg), Purcell explained that she took that egret egg high up to the tar roof of the Academy to be photographed, a “foreign country” to her (according to the wall label), where she worked surrounded by even taller buildings, asking herself how many guests or office workers could see those “figures far below bent over trunks of animal skulls or the bones of extinct birds,” wondering at the “weird rites” they saw being performed there.

There’s indeed something magical, sleight of hand about Purcell’s work, evident also in the skill with which she, with the help of her husband, the photographer Dennis Purcell, extracts the calligraphic marks from preserved murre eggs. Stitching together a series of photographs into a mural or scroll of abstract signs, the Purcells make the dead birds speak to us again, revealing minds abuzz with all sorts of mysterious shapes, among which an imperfect human eye may
Fig. 11. Rosamond Purcell, *Reddish Egret Collected by John James Audubon in Florida, Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, Philadelphia, 2009–2010.* Inkjet print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
want to discern (as the wall label suggested) the outlines of familiar shapes—some monkeys swinging from vines, perhaps even, Picasso-style, a bull (fig. 12).

Just as Purcell questions the dividing lines humans have drawn between themselves and the nonhuman world, animate beings and inanimate objects, she also blends modes of artistic representation in her work. Her sustained critique, in image and word, of ingrained ways of Western thought makes Purcell the consummate artist of the anthropocene, a term designed to reflect the indelible imprint wasteful humans have left, and are leaving, on the life on this planet. But the force of our impact has also unleashed a new awareness, reinforced by each new natural disaster and embodied in Purcell’s photographs and installations, of the ways the world evades our attempts to grasp it. Purcell reminds us that we are part of what we have sought to set ourselves apart from, that the things we have sought to discard

Fig. 12. Rosamond and Dennis Purcell, Egg of the Common Murre, Unrolled, Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Camarillo, California, 2007–2008. Inkjet print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. © Rosamond Purcell.
or displace into museums inevitably tell, even in the process of their disintegration, our own story.

The Addison’s *Nature Stands Aside* was a feast for the senses. As an exhibit, it turned out to be more than the sum of its parts, the source of multiple epiphanies as the visitor progressed from room to room. There was, of course, a rich irony in honoring, with a lavish display of her work, an artist who has pursued her career with a pronounced antipathy to, or skepticism of, museum displays. “The collection manager is always rustling in the wings,” Purcell once groused, referring to the difficulties she encountered working in natural history collections. In *Nature Stands Aside*, curator Wilkins, equipped with a fine eye for shades of tone and color, didn’t do too much of that rustling. In point of fact, the curator, and not nature, stood aside, so that Purcell’s works and her words could, from their respective walls, shine and talk to one another, embarking on an endless colloquy of shapes, colors, and themes. Which was, precisely, what, driving back from Andover to my hotel in Cambridge, my eyes weary from seeing, I imagined them doing now that the visitors had left. Oh, how the dead will dance!