

# *Biophilia*

*A senior thesis project by Samantha Levy*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Biophilia* is a series of screen-printed zines and prints surrounding various aspects of zoology and natural history. The project, which seeks to summon curiosity in the viewer, culminates into a “cabinet of curiosity” pop-up shop. Illustration and type is used in the zines and prints to communicate narratives found in the real history of the animal sciences, be they myth or truth. The goal of *Biophilia* is to gratify human nature’s fascination with the strange, humorous, unbelievable, or grotesque. It seeks to emulate feelings surrounding the Age of Exploration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when everyone rushed to expose the next great species, and reveal something to the public that they had never seen.<sup>1</sup> It’s not about shock value, but feeding curiosity.

<sup>1</sup>Coniff 2011

## **ZOOLOGY & CURIOSITY**

The conceptual component of *Biophilia* deals with the two intertwining subjects of zoology and natural history, and an overarching theme of curiosity. Zoology, the study of animals, has proved to be one of my most resilient inspirations for artwork, commonly borrowing from evolutionary theories, stories of naturalists, and animal mythologies. I have always obsessively studied zoology as a pastime, both as a science and as a subject of art. I would feel strange about this passion, but the study of animals and nature has captivated humans throughout history. Biologist, theorist and naturalist E.O. Wilson describes the term *biophilia*, after which this project is named, “as the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes. [...] We learn to distinguish life from the inanimate and move toward it like moths to a porch light.”<sup>2</sup> He continues to explain that new discoveries in the field of science have not diminished the sense of wonder, but heightened our interest. In the same way, I want combine the old exoticism of a cabinet of curiosities with contemporary understandings and examples of biology.

<sup>2</sup>Wilson 1984, p.1

The idea of creating a project that plays into human nature initially feels very abstract, but my intentions are simple: utilizing our natural appeal to stories or behaviors of animals. The anecdotes depicted are the result of lots of research about ‘real’ situations involving animals. Real doesn’t necessarily mean true or factual; it encompasses the blurred line of myth and belief systems. Curiosity has been lambasted in the past for being a vice and has also been cherished as a virtue.<sup>3</sup> While I don’t seek to argue whether or not it is moral to be curious, I do want to illustrate narratives and subjects that appeal to our desire to witness things that are taboo, or simply just strange.

<sup>3</sup>Harrison 2001

## POP-UP SHOP & CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

My interest in creating a pop-up shop began with a project brief while studying abroad in London, and unfortunately, it was around this time I was to return back to the United States. Pop-up shops, or temporary shops, are essentially installations focused on public exposure rather than profit. This is a fairly modern means of marketing.

Cabinets of curiosity, on the other hand, are an idea of the past. As precursor to museums, cabinets of curiosity were composed of collected rarities during Baroque period (footnote details). These ‘cabinets’, sometimes entire rooms, were unique in their choice of organization (systematic or not) of the privately collected items. Intentions for collecting varied among each patron, from prestige to knowledge. When speaking about the “cult of curiosity”, French author and art magazine editor Patrick Mauriès describes it as, “the knowledge of liminal objects that lay on the margins of charted territory, brought back from worlds unknown, defying any system of classification [...] and associated with the discovery of ‘new worlds’”.<sup>4</sup> These curiosities were initially private, but eventually translated into collections of public museums.

<sup>4</sup> Mauriès 2002, p.12

While the idea of a shop initially seems separate from a cabinet of curiosities, I want to create a fusion of the two that creates a shop that is as conceptually relevant as the product (zines and prints). The cabinet of curiosities taps into the goal of generating curiosity, and maintains similar characteristics of a pop-up shop. The way in which objects are arranged in a shop, in terms of hierarchy and display, is remarkably similar to the way in which they are ordered in museums and consequently some cabinets of curiosity. The brevity of temporary shops create the sense of exclusivity, as does a person viewing an intimate collection of objects.

In terms of executing the exhibition, I placed the zines and prints alongside collected specimens. I used various animal skulls, a liquor-preserved snake, bull horns and a large rare conch shell among other rarities. The exhibition took place in the intimate setting of an apartment, located in downtown Ann Arbor. The room has a lot of dark wood, and a very old-feel. My objects were around a room in the apartment, with special focus on an old apothecary cabinet and the mantle of the fireplace. My justification for an exhibition of this kind is the same as Mauriès’ explanation of the cabinets, “to conjure up images of the world, a miniature universe of textures, colours, materials and a multiplicity of forms”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mauriès 2002, p.12



figure 1 Look into the apartment setting of the exhibition.



figure 2 Cabinet of Curiosity installation created for the exhibition.



*figure 3* Mantle display at the exhibition.



*figure 4* Side table display at the exhibition.



*figure 5* Paintings alongside a ram's skull from the exhibition.

## ILLUSTRATION & STYLE

The artistic outlet I am most familiar with is illustration. I believe that illustration best serves the concept of *Biophilia* because of its historical familiarity with the subjects of natural history and zoology, as well as its very nature as a means of visual communication. Natural history utilized illustration as a means of purveying knowledge to the masses. Late-nineteenth century German biologist and illustrator Ernst Haeckel, in his *Kunstformen der Natur*, illustrated his postulations about evolution using the familiar style of Art Nouveau to communicate ideas that would have otherwise been incomprehensible to non-scientists.<sup>6</sup> (see fig 1) John James Audubon used his ornithological illustrations in *The Birds of North America* to create a template from which to identify and admire birds. (see fig 2)

<sup>6</sup> Haeckel 1998, p.14, Ball 2007 Haeckel's use of Art Nouveau or Jugendstil style has been a controversial topic of discussion, some arguing that it removes all objectivity from the illustrations, and others citing its ability to translate complex scientific theories into a comprehensible visual explanation.

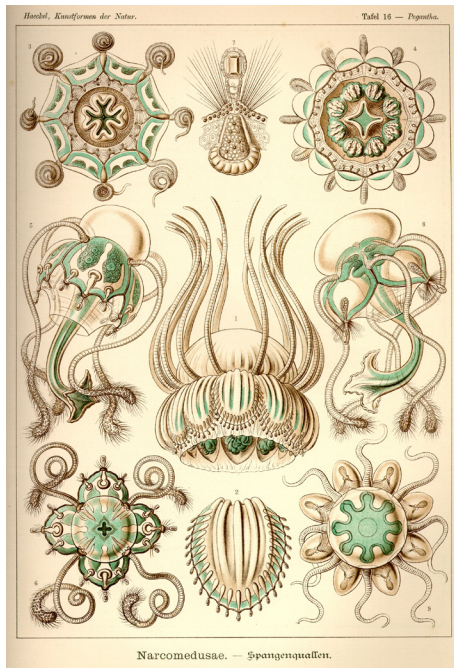


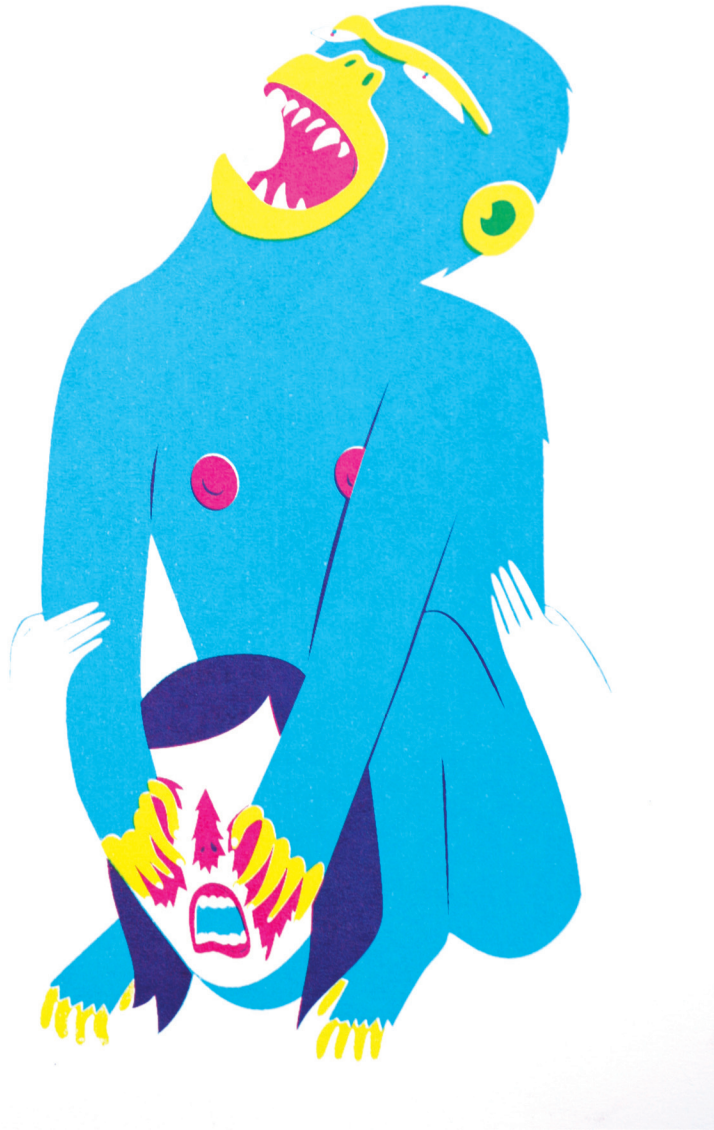
figure 6 Haeckel's stylized medusae are idealized forms, and use color to highlight his ideas about common structures to prove his theories of evolution.



figure 7 Audubon's flamingo from *The Birds of North America*.

An inherent feature of illustration is the presence of style. Evident in both Haeckel and Audubon's work, style is wielded as a tool to better serve the image. I considered this implication in my first zine, *The Most Mean*. I used simplified, bold images and bright colors to illustrate true stories of animal attacks (see fig 3). I hope this juxtaposition of bright and grotesque creates a strange, almost delayed reaction to the subject matter. My object is different from the artists of natural history in that I do not seek to portray the 'true form' of an animal.<sup>7</sup> I want the viewers to indulge in seeing the attacks illustrated, but also think about the imagery and text to process unconsidered humors or truths to each story.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobsen 2001, p. 16 The idea of monism, perpetuated by Johann von Goethe is the development of an archetype or "typus" which in the most basic sense is an idealistic form that illustrates the entity. Haeckel didn't entirely emulate this idea, but subjectively illustrated to explain his views.



*figure 8* Illustration of Charla Nash having her face torn off by Travis the chimpanzee.

## EXECUTION & PURPOSE

The zines and prints that are central to *Biophilia* are screen printed, a medium that allows me to edition the work as well as create a more substantial product. The desirability of most forms of printmaking is the ability to duplicate, and the photo-emulsion technique of creating screens allows my illustrations to retain their detail. I chose to take this route as opposed to digital printing both because of the gratification of making a hand-printed book, and because of the physical quality of prints. The more tangible layering of ink on a screen print is an appealing characteristic of the medium, something a viewer can see and touch. I am using a cyan, magenta, yellow and black palette throughout *Biophilia*, and the layering of ink also allows me to achieve new colors through overlay. In the same way I strive to achieve a standard of quality in my illustrations, I wish to make the zines and prints themselves of a certain quality that I appreciate in hand-pulled prints. In the curation of a cabinet of curiosities shop, these objects need to stand out among the collected objects, in color, technical execution and form. The zines were bound with a saddle stitch, or staple. The zines are a standard gathering, or quaternion, of four 8.5"x11" sheets and printed in three colors. Three large prints were also created from existing images in the zines on Arches 88 paper, in three colors.

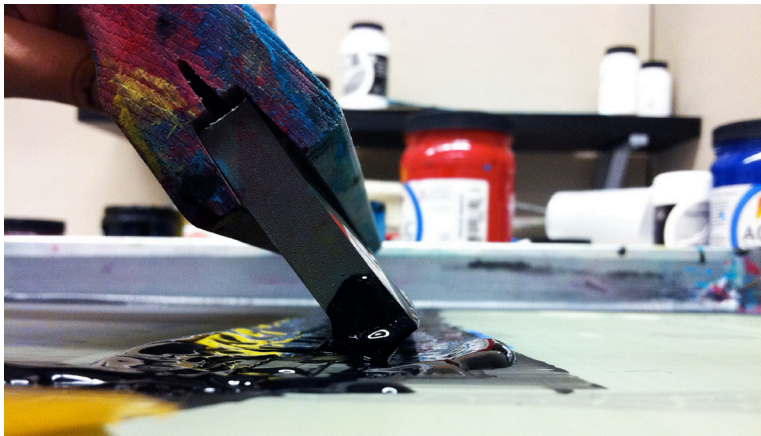


figure 9-11 Various stages of production: printing, drying of large prints, and binding of the zines.

## ZINE SUBJECTS

The subject for my first zine, called *The Most Mean*, illustrates tales of gruesome animal attacks. The examples range from the current day (October and November 2011) to a bull goring in 1920. For example, Marius Els owned a pet hippopotamus, named Humphrey, on his exotic farm in South Africa. In November 2011, he was found dead, bitten to death by Humphrey (see fig 4). On witnessing the image of a hippo dripping in blood and the remnants of a body impaled by its massive teeth, I would think that the viewer would see the risk Els took in adopting what is widely known to be one of the most aggressive animals in Africa. I don't wish *The Most Mean* to be about animal revenge necessarily, or be seen as a negative view towards humans, but just to serve as a catalog of interesting stories relating to animal attacks.



figure 12 Illustration of Marius Els and Humphrey the hippo.

My second zine is titled *Heavy Petting*, and illustrates how different species compete for and attract mates and how they mate. The reaction to what is happening in each image is slightly delayed, which I've achieved through a deceptively bright color palate and stylized forms. I've tried to explore different social behavior in animals, and explore that question, "how *do* they do it?"



figure 13 Photo of a spread from the *Most Mean*.

## CONCLUSION

Biophilia explores zoology in the way that I view it as an interested pupil, craving and processing information. This project aims to evoke the same feeling that the Age of Exploration spurred, where people explored the reaches of the earth fighting to discover species, and shipped them back home to inhabit cabinets of curiosity and capture the minds of their viewers. The real intent is to create images that say something or communicate a narrative, and create a space for these images to be housed. I know that the reactions to the images may be varied, some seeing the humor, others the morbid, and hopefully for some, both.



*figure 14* The desired reaction occurs in the wild!

See more photos documenting the work and the exhibition at  
**[samlevyillustration.com](http://samlevyillustration.com)**



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