

Degrees Of Extinction



DEBORAH FORBES 1999

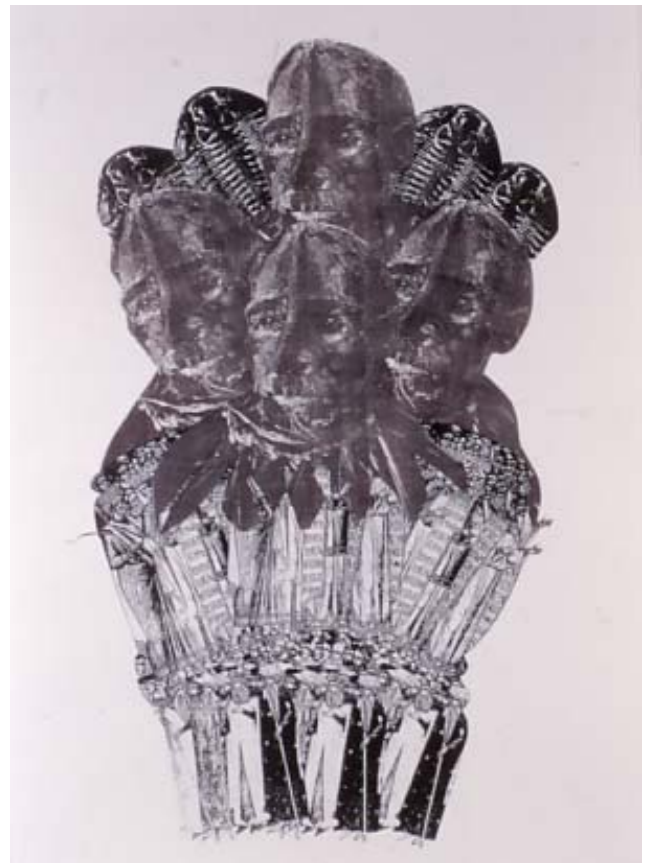
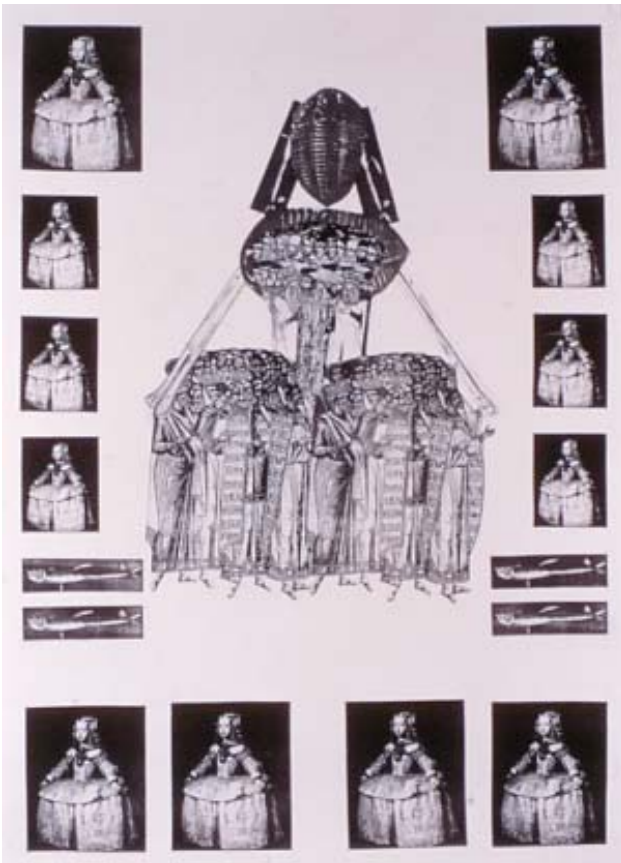
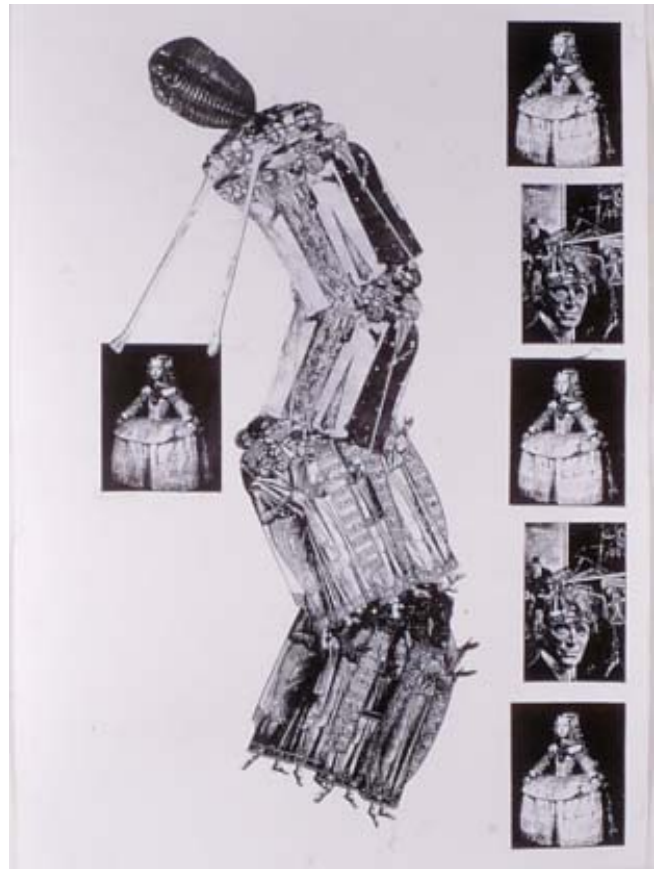
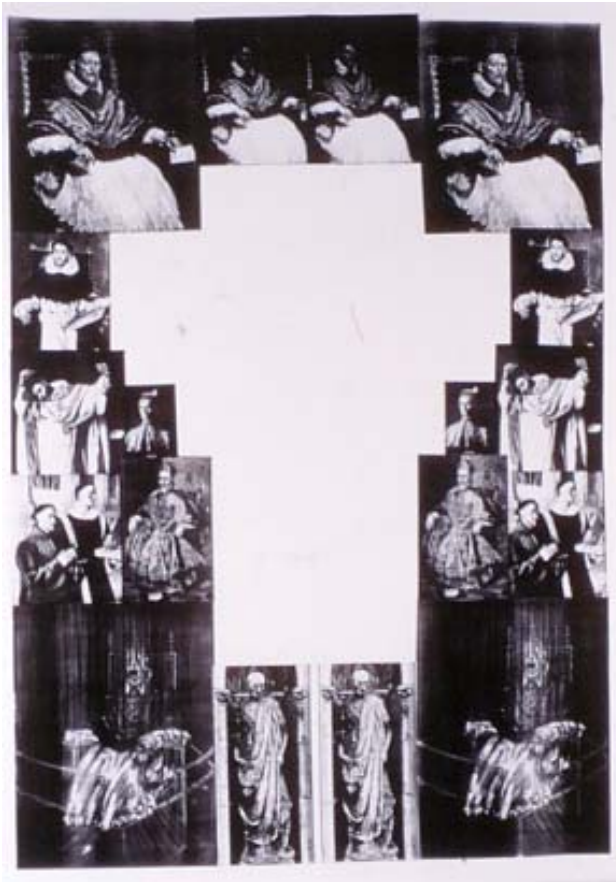
Questions asked by Joanne Marion, Curator of Art, Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery for DOE exhibition, October – December 1999.

JM Much of the imagery that you use in paintings, prints and assemblages is derived from Christian iconography, from historical or mythological figures – is this a postmodern anthology or is there a more personal resonance for you with the particular figures?

DF Did I intentionally set out to make a postmodern anthology? No, but I see the work as unavoidably coming out of that context. Is it possible to speak only in the language of one's own time? I suspect so, especially if one considers the present as a product of all time. Images have been lifted out of the work of past artists and have been combined with other elements to make different works of art but the draw is intuitive, It's very much a question of "look now; ask questions later." An image will strike a true cord of recognition; the work leads, I follow. I work from my own memory bank or perhaps a cultural memory bank, reworking historical antecedents primarily from the history of art and from the world of physical matter. Within the process of working I will encounter a particular curve, for instance. The curve will trigger an image from my memory bank; that image will trigger another one.
I read the work in the process.



Installation shot MHMAG 1999. Plotter prints on vellum; collages on Stonehenge.



JM Is there an ethical, political or philosophical question for you with regard to this appropriation of images from other cultures or times?

DF I am, at heart, a visual opportunist but occasionally an image to which I am drawn gives me problems. In a December 1970 *Vogue Magazine* I came across some Irving Penn photographs of 20th century stoneage tribes-people from New Guinea. It was a photo spread with meagre information about the subject. Amongst them was a portrait of the Birdman, from the village of Oltokane in New Guinea: he stopped me cold. In some of the photos the people look as if they are collections of novel figurines arranged on a mantelpiece. The figures had utility as a subject for photography. The figures, however, were living human beings. The manner of the photography creates a thorough objectification and dislocation of the people; Penn seems to be trying to keep them at a distance from the segment of humanity that would look at *Vogue Magazine* in 1970. The exploitative relationship between photographer and subject seems intentional, or perhaps just crushingly insensitive. In spite of this, a long suffering dignity and benevolence looked out at me through the eyes of Birdman. I have to give Penn credit; he caught this, but given the context, it seems inadvertent.

Simple copyright questions aside, I felt deeply ambivalent about using a photograph that was so obviously exploitative of an actual living human being. The photograph was taken 30 years ago and as he looks old in the photo, I expect he is no longer with us. I spent time wondering about his life – about the destruction of his way of life through destruction of habitat that has taken place in the rainforests of New Guinea. I wonder what he thought was happening when Penn flew in with his studio backdrops and shot the photos. I wonder if Birdman ever saw them. I wonder what he thought about them if he did. I wonder how and when he died.

My relationship with Birdman grew out of the work I had already started on *Degrees of Extinction*. I decided to use the photo. Perhaps my work with him holds some humanity.

Irving Penn photographs. *Vogue Magazine*, 1970.





Collage, acrylic, pastel on Stonehenge. From Birdman series, 1999.







Birdman Feels the Squeeze of Space and Time. Collage, acrylic, pastel on Stonehenge. 1999

The image of Birdman was constantly reminding me of another visage in much the same way as it takes a while to place the bank teller who used to work at the grocery store. It was Pope Innocent X from the Diego de Silva Velasquez portrait. The faces are similar in the relationship of features, both reflect a kind of dignity but where in Birdman I see humanity, in Innocent X I see a self-conscious vanity with a few flecks of cruelty. It interests me to follow the daisy chains of connection from one image to another, from one time to another.



With striking regularity, an image will trigger a Velasquez painting in my mind. Everything may remind Jane Siberry of her dog but everything reminds me of Velasquez. I can't look at Rodin's Balzac without seeing Velasquez' Aesop; I can't look at JonBenet Ramsay without seeing the Infanta Margarita.

JM Often your working method (such as adding, erasing and overlaying in the *Fossil Figures series*) produces an awareness of the time of its making, and of the work as evidence of a process which has occurred in time – of excavation as you say. Frequently the result is also a sense of presence through absence, as in the *Birdman series*. Can you talk about this important component of your work?

DF All of the subjects in this exhibition are connected to time (fossils, art historical antecedents) and the contradiction/ambiguity I find in the whole notion of extinction. A phrase in the O.E.D. definition of extinction is "without progressive succession." In some way, my work is progressive succession. By excavating the eventual image through the process of working, by often subtracting more than adding, it's sometimes the noticeable absence of an element that draws attention to its presence in an ongoing present. I'm confused by time as a linear construct. The cross-fertilization of events and periods but also the transformation of physical matter across time, seem more inter-connected than stacked. Time has a more web-like structure for me. Consanguinity (the condition of being of the same blood; relationship by descent from a common ancestor) comes frequently into my mind giving a reassuring feeling of connection with all things in all times. Inside the human mind is the reptile mind is the fish mind









JM You often work in a series, and have described your approach as ‘obsessive.’ What does this intensely physical engagement with your work offer you? Is this connected to your move from tapestry-making to the multiple versions possible in print-making?



DF My working process is not a thinking mind process, it is physical and intuitive. I like it that way. I work in groupings usually four to six pieces at one time. In learning my working process through trial and error, I found that I was incapable of focussing on one piece at a time. I need many to be laid out so that as soon as I think, “what if that was here instead of there?” I can try it and see it.

I am fascinated with looking at things that are in some way related – families, plants, objects. I like to organize them according to certain characteristics then reorganize them again selecting for other characteristics. I love to sort things. I love to see variations on a theme. As soon as another organization or variation comes to mind, I want to be able to see a visual representation of it. This was simply not possible with tapestry weaving in one lifetime. I am interested in seeing the variations that are very closely-queued – depth not breadth.

The late 20th century mind is stuffed full of mass produced images. There is seldom ‘one of’ anything anymore. A unique work of art or a human being can be photographed, printed, videoed, scanned. This multiple image context has certainly been added to the cultural memory bank by now. It’s hard for me to think of something without alterations, adaptations and multiples – or something that exists only in a single moment of time.

JM Another recent development in your practice seems to be a shift from two-dimensional works using paint or drawing materials to cast reliefs using real objects as well as objects in boxes, frames and artefact tables. Are these directions you will be pursuing in the future?



Knock-kneed artefact table #1, #2. 1999, fabricated steel and glass, 28" x 15" x 15"

DF The objects that I have used in the casts all have memory. They have a memory of their specific utility whether they were supporting a giant reptile or acting as an industrial connector. By casting them, I am embedding that memory in the cast. Again, casting seems to be a process that allows for variations on narrow themes. I can have my fossil and use it, too – again and again. – in as many different relationships with other objects as I can devise. The cast pieces are really just collages in relief. The use of fossils and natural objects that have been used as connectors (e.g. ropes, wire, chains, metal strips), is a relationship that I wanted to see manifest. I like to think about the First Law of Thermal Dynamics: *Energy cannot be created or destroyed, only changed from one form to another.* I like to think about fossil fuels.

At a certain point I also wanted more than a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional object. There just seemed to be so much more substance to a bit of fossil, feather or cable than two dimensions could discuss. When one renders an object by drawing or painting, the object touches the paper or canvas through the eye, mind, heart and hand of the artist. The actual object is never really in contact with the image that represents it. In a cast, there is a direct transference of visual and tactile information from the object to the artwork. It's not a simulation; it is not illusional.

The future? I'm thinking about Russian Constructivist, Vladimir Tatlin's term FAKURA, meaning, "speech of materials." But I really won't know where I'm going until I begin to work again.