

# SUSAN GOLD

DECORATING THE END OF THE WORLD

McIntosh Gallery

May 16 - June 29, 2013





Installation detail, photo courtesy of McIntosh Gallery

## Truth Re-packaged

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Row upon neat row of skulls, perched on wedges of sliced tree, antlers stretching upward into a canopy of dead bone. Empty sockets staring.

Cases of tuneless birds, floating on painted branches, twisted into life.

Breathless bodies, stitched in fur, emerging from invented veldt. Glass eyes focussed, seeing nothing.

To contemporary eyes steeped in environmental issues and modern exhibition techniques, outmoded taxidermy is horrific. To the nineteenth century museum visitor, however, these displays were a rich storehouse of knowledge awaiting an inquiring mind able to discern subtle nuances between the juxtaposed specimens. Born in the eighteenth century's "cabinets of curiosity", the natural history museum soon evolved during the Age of Enlightenment's devotion to scientific research and education. Although considered a public institution, it was nonetheless only accessible to the upper classes, the only stratum considered sufficiently civilised to comprehend its treasures.



*and one Elephant* 2011 Oil over inkjet photograph on mylar  
61.0 x 91.4 cm, photo courtesy of McIntosh Gallery.

London's Great Exhibition of 1851 overturned this attitude in its accessibility to the general public. A response to the highly successful French Industrial Exposition of 1844, organizers intended to establish the British Empire's superiority in manufactured goods and in raw materials imported from its global colonies. Curiously, their priorities created a template for later museum exhibition techniques in the understandable explanatory texts accompanying the modern inventions and intricate mechanical demonstrations. Even the building, specially designed for the event by Sir Joseph Paxton, was a technological wonder; the walls and roof of the aptly-named Crystal Palace were constructed using only heavy plate glass panes in a cast-iron frame. The resulting abundance of natural light and open space ensured that the 14,000 trade exhibits and six million visitors were highly visible. The exposition's contents continued to offer both education and entertainment following their transfer to three new museums funded entirely by Exhibition profits.

Emergent nation states in the nineteenth century later seized on the concept of public museums to advance their own changing political agendas. As collective repositories of official culture, the national collections were tangible proof to their new citizens of an imposed common and homogenous identity constructed on historical, artistic and scientific foundations. Rapidly expanding collections of exotic cultural products reflected hegemonic practices in colonial expansion. Accepted patriotic doctrines could be promoted while others were ignored or suppressed through these subtle propagandistic undertones. Instructing successive audiences on these past glories united them in a shared understanding of the nation's traditions and values within an acknowledged definition of civilisation. And it further defined the citizen as distinctive from, and with an implied superiority to, other cultures. In an increasingly disjunctive and unstable world, the museum offered continuity and authenticity. Natural history museums, in particular, developed in response to this new need to know one's place in a changing world.

One display genre serving this narrative was the hunting trophy. Ostensibly a specimen collection motivated by scientific inquiry, these souvenirs of a glamorous life experience also affirmed human supremacy over the natural world. Presented in attractive theatrical tableaux of painted backdrops and naturalistic vegetation, habitat groupings of exotic animals were momentarily frozen in their wandering. Less serious institutions might include depictions of visceral struggles between ferocious enemies—cheetahs pulling down a gazelle, lions battling hyenas—but the drive to collect, sort, compare and contrast led more often to single static arrangements. In more compact applications, only disembodied heads or pelts were used, ironically creating a visually-alive wall of dead things. And in so doing, the architecture became the medium on which nature was organized and manipulated into palatable information. Whether housed in a renovated or purpose-built edifice, a museum's infrastructure reflected its nation's political and cultural agenda, affirming boundaries, imposing layered meanings of authority and knowledge. Its constructed pseudo-reality created by and for particular consumers was designed to evoke awe, respect and implicit confirmation of a hegemonic legacy— visible, knowable and homogenous.

Today's highly-mediated information has altered and accelerated the processes by which people connect to their community and heritage. Yet, however global communications may commodify local cultural identity it is still unique compared to other regions of the world. The search for that identity and, by extension, understanding of other cultures resides in the intrinsic truths embodied in the display of objects. At the complex and temporal intersections of contemporary life, the question now becomes: are those truths revealed or merely constructed?

Catherine Elliot Shaw  
Curator

## *Decorating the End of the World*

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Bears fly. Elephants wail. Rabbits and quail tremble in corners. Walls reflect a broken nature and a broken culture.

The McIntosh Gallery installation, *Decorating the End of the World*, engages the architectural space of decoration. That shallow space that includes the “just above” and “just below” the physical reality of the flat wall - pushing and pulling Nature into Culture.

Travelling in Norway with the support of a Royal Norwegian Embassy Travel Grant, I was impressed by the ubiquitous and power-laden object/symbol of the Isbjørn, the Ice Bear, in many of its observed permutations: on walls, on floors, suspended from ceilings, in narrative dioramas, in souvenir shops, and represented in historical oil paintings.

In the Tromsø Art Museum I came across the historic Françoise Auguste Biard painting, *Kamp med Isbjørner* (*Fighting Polar Bears*, c1839). Françoise Biard was a traveler in the North as I was. The painting's composition and subject matter reminded me of John Singleton Copley's painting, *Watson and the Shark* (1778), a painting that I grew up seeing in the Detroit Institute of Art. Man and Nature engaged in some ultimate struggle. Grand oil paintings that are part of my deep consciousness.



*Isbjørn (with Iris) 2012*  
Oil on linen, 137.0 x 290.0 cm, photo courtesy of McIntosh Gallery

The Biard painting, the natural history displays, decorative rosemaling—all aspects of my creative research—became part of the studio process, creating paintings and mixed media works over the past several years. I also included favourite decorative tropes of artist and designer, William Morris' wallpaper patterns and Swedish botanist (c1700) Carl von Linné's botanical interiors, as I struggled with an interior space in the context of Nature.

When I placed a plastic embedded reproduction of *Fighting Polar Bears* in proximity to the unframed oil on linen *Ice Bear with Iris* painting, a shift occurred in the way a historic oil painting "projects value". There was a certain hubris that I performed in the studio paintings of large polar bears and the manipulation of the golden framed oil paintings. The historic oil paintings, the polar bears, the classic William Morris patterns and IKEA (Sweden) wallpaper of historical botanicals are all subjects overloaded with cultural values.

In the corners of the gallery I have placed taxidermy of animal objects, stuffed rabbits and quail (lent by Western University's Biology collection). Vulnerable creatures. These add another re-presentation of Nature, parallel to drawing, painting, and photography—all ways of knowing our Nature.

Susan Gold



*Isbjørn (with Strawberry Thief)* 2011  
Oil on linen, 137.0 x 290.0 cm, photo A. Herrera

## About the Artist

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For the past two decades, Windsor artist Susan Gold has researched and photographed natural history collections to develop imagery for her paintings and mixed media projects. Her current investigation explores animal specimens as objects of decoration in relation to architecture. Inspired by Norwegian natural history museum displays, she has layered images of the iconic *Isbjørn* (ice bear), old master paintings and William Morris wallpapers within architectural spaces to evoke the longstanding relationship of decoration to nature.

Gold has exhibited in Canada, the United States, England, Germany, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. She is Professor Emerita of visual arts at the University of Windsor and a frequent lecturer at international symposia. Her work is represented in public and private collections including the Burnaby Art Gallery, British Columbia, the Art Gallery of Windsor and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



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## List of Works

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*Isbjørn (with needlework)* 2010  
Oil on linen, 290.0 x 137.0 cm

*Isbjørn (with Strawberry Thief)*  
2011  
Oil on linen, 137.0 x 290.0 cm

*Isbjørn (with Iris)* 2012  
Oil on linen, 137.0 x 290.0 cm

*Botanical panels* 2013  
Inkjet photograph on mylar,  
10 panels, 3 with graphite  
each 365.8 x 91.4 cm

*Hundreds of Reindeer* 2012  
Inkjet photograph on mylar,  
365.8 x 91.4 cm

*Polar Bear with Botanicals* 2010  
Oil over inkjet photograph on  
mylar, 274.3 x 91.4 cm

*Hundreds of Reindeer* 2012  
Oil over inkjet photograph on  
mylar, 61.0 x 91.4 cm

*and one Elephant* 2011  
Oil over inkjet photograph on  
mylar, 61.0 x 91.4 cm

*Biard Re Framed 1* 2013  
inkjet photograph mounted on  
Claybord, acrylic, wood  
24.1 x 31.8 cm

*Biard Re Framed 2* 2013  
inkjet photograph mounted on  
Claybord, acrylic, wood  
24.1 x 29.2 cm

*Biard Re Framed 3* 2013  
inkjet photograph mounted on  
Claybord, acrylic, wood  
24.1 x 29.2 cm

*François Biard Fighting Polar Bears*  
*c1839 in situ* 2013  
Ink in polycarbonate,  
59.1 x 79.4 cm  
(with permission of the Art  
Museum of Northern Norway,  
Tromsø)

Five trophy mounts of Gemsbok  
and Reebok Gazelles, c1960

Taxidermied rabbits, quail,  
groundhog, great horned owl,  
tundra swan, courtesy of Zoological  
Specimen Collections, Department  
of Biology, Western University



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photo courtesy of McIntosh Gallery

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