

FANTASTIC FAUNA

CHIMERIC CREATURES BY BEAUVAIS LYONS

July 18, 2019 — January 26, 2020

Thomas E. Cabaniss Gallery at the Historic Residence

Hand printed lithographs and taxidermy

Reception Room

Clockwise around room, beginning at entry

1. Lemur darwinus
2. Ornithological Quadrupeds: Moroccan Mouse Parrot
3. Mazosorbedae
4. Trichopiscidae
5. Chiropteridae
6. Micropterus trichopilaris

Mr. and Mrs. Robert F. Andrews III Garden Hall

Clockwise around room, beginning at entry

7. Raccoon-Crow [taxidermy]
8. Groundhog-Fish [taxidermy]
9. Flying Squirrel [taxidermy]
10. Ornithological Quadrupeds: Burmese Lion Hawk
11. Raccoon Crow

Dr. Lynn Jones Ennis Room

Clockwise around room, beginning at entry

12. Ornithological Quadrupeds: Amazonian Lizard Hawk
13. Ex Libris Kasterlee Zoo: Vos Arend
14. *Macropus potentimuris* and *Macropus claroscurus*
15. *Coluber jeremi*
16. Ex Libris Kasterlee Zoo: Eend Muskusrat
17. *Vulpes vicugna*
18. *Austrolapithecus simiacentaurensis*
19. Ornithological Quadrupeds: Nordic Hare Falcon
20. Ornithological Quadrupeds: American Badger Swallow
21. Ornithological Quadrupeds: Asian Lark Lemmings

Hybrids, Hoaxes, and Holy Scripture: Beauvais Lyons's Bodacious Bestiary

By Tom Patterson

More than one hundred and fifty years after Charles Darwin first published his theory of evolution, the concept remains controversial. Although it gained international acceptance long ago as standard science, evolution remains the subject of contentious debate in the United States, especially in the context of public education. Recent polls indicate that roughly half the U.S. population still refuses to believe in it.

Enter Beauvais Lyons, a contemporary artist who has long been fascinated by the uneasy relationship between public awareness and specialized, research-driven knowledge. His ongoing exploration of that relationship has taken various forms over a career spanning forty years.

Beginning in 1979 and continuing through the 1990s, Lyons focused his attention on archaeology. Adopting the parodic approach that became his creative signature, he produced several bodies of work that he presented as evidence of excavations in remote places. He typically began these projects by making faux artifacts from clay or plaster. After breaking, reconstructing, and photographing them, he produced a series of related print illustrations. He exhibited these objects and images as evidence of long-vanished cultures with unfamiliar, exotic-sounding names – the Arenot, the Apashti, and the Aazudians. These purportedly ancient civilizations were, of course, the products of Lyons’s own mischievously fertile imagination. His most ambitious group of works in this vein centers on a reconstructed Aazudian temple that includes frescoes, ceramics, and a Styrofoam facsimile wall.

Formally trained in printmaking and ceramics, Lyons came of age in an era when performance art was an emerging conceptual discipline. He developed his own distinctive approach to this postmodern, trans-disciplinary genre by creating a multi-media presentation around his faux artifacts, print illustrations, and related materials. Assuming the persona of a respected archaeologist with expert knowledge of these supposedly long-buried civilizations, he gave lectures and exhibition tours.

In more recent bodies of work Lyons has extended this approach into other specialized fields, including outsider art (the George and Helen Spelvin Folk Art Collection, 2001), medicine (Hokes Medical Arts, 2005), and, in the series represented here, zoology. The nominal umbrella under which he has pursued his projects since 1983 is the Hokes Archives. As its self-appointed curator and director, Lyons informs us that this entity was founded in 1908 by one Everitt Ormsby Hokes to undertake the “fabrication and documentation of rare and unusual cultural artifacts.” Most members of Lyons’s audience probably recognize the name Hokes as a homonym. Others who presumably missed the cue have been known to take his efforts quite seriously.

The present exhibition, “Fantastic Fauna,” consists of lithographs and taxidermy specimens from the Association for Creative Zoology (ACZ) in cooperation with the Hokes Archives, which produced the lithographs. The association – whose founder not only has three names, but also a lofty title (the Reverend James Randolph Denton) – was established to promote “the beauty and complexity of God’s creation,” according to its mission statement.

Slyly playing to supporters of “intelligent design,” the favored fundamentalist counterpoint to evolutionary theory, the ACZ statement presents God as an artist – one “whose design principles are reflected in the unity and variety of all things in our infinite universe” including “new kinds of flora and fauna that have appeared successively in the fossil record.”

Repeating a cliché often employed by self-defined creationists, the statement declares, “The creation is far too complex and beautiful to result from a random process of natural selection.” Instead, according to the ACZ, “species variation has resulted from the direct hand of our God, who not only creates flora and fauna whole cloth, but uses previously existing creative works as the building blocks for creating new species.”

This exhibition introduces some of the new species identified (and/or invented) by the ACZ, as depicted in lithographs produced by the Hokes Archives. The creatures pictured, and in some cases physically reconstructed, exemplify a principle the ACZ calls “zoomorphic juncture” – the combination of parts and features from different types of fauna, in each case yielding a single “new” species.

These examples and the larger series were inspired by “The Centaur Excavations at Volos,” a faux-archaeological/zoological display contrived in the 1980s by William Willers, a biology professor at the University of Wisconsin. Willers made what appears to be the skeleton of a human/horse hybrid by strategically combining human bones with those of a Shetland pony, then staining the composite skeleton with tea to make it appear aged. He set it up like a

standard museum display, complete with an explanatory text describing it as one of three centaur burials discovered in 1980 near Volos, Greece.

This was right up Lyons's alley. In the early 1990s he joined colleagues from the humanities and natural sciences in campaigning to acquire Willers's display for the University of Tennessee, where he has taught printmaking since 1985. Prominently showcased in the university's Hodges Library since 1994, the "Centaur Excavations" exemplifies the value of a skeptical stance toward authority. Lyons sees it as a vital object lesson for students: just because it looks or sounds authoritative and appears to have an institutional imprimatur doesn't necessarily mean it's legit.

Think critically and question authority – that's the message.

Lyons has carried Willers's concept several steps further and put his own spin on it. Like the "Centaur Excavations", the ACZ project pokes some fun at academic expertise, in keeping with Lyons's previous serial bodies of work, but its primary target is religious authority, particularly in its authoritarian, fundamentalist form.

The seed for the project was sown at a symposium occasioned by the "Centaur Excavations" unveiling at UT. For a panel on "centaur scholarship," he made a series of collages illustrating his argument that centaurs and other animal hybrids are examples of "divine collage," a technique he declared was central to God's creative process.

Lyons returned to this satirical idea in 2006, prompted by a Reuters news survey indicating that vast numbers of people in the United States didn't accept evolutionary theory. To draw attention to this issue – and to parody the anti-rationalist, science-phobic "creationist" viewpoint apparently shared by about half the population – he began work on the zoological hybrids represented in "Fantastic Fauna." He unveiled the first pieces in the series on July 21, 2007 at a thematically appropriate venue not generally known as a forum for contemporary art – the annual Scopes Trial reenactment in Dayton, Tennessee. Dayton's claim to fame is its status as

the site of the 1925 trial in which high school science teacher John Scopes was convicted of teaching evolution in violation of a newly passed state law. Reenacted each summer in the Rhea County Courthouse, the trial famously opposed two of the era's celebrity attorneys, William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow, with Darrow arguing unsuccessfully for the defense. When it was all over, Scopes was ordered to pay a \$100 penalty for his infraction against the laws of God and man. (The decision was later rescinded on a technicality; meanwhile the law remained on the books, albeit unenforced, for another forty-two years.)

To showcase the lithographs and related materials outdoors on the Rhea County courthouse square, Lyons built a portable kiosk, that he claimed was a facsimile of one the Association for Creative Zoology brought to the original 1925 trial. Dressed as an old-fashioned parson, he appeared alongside the kiosk to talk about the ACZ's mission and engage with attendees at the reenactment. He also read aloud selected Bible verses mentioning animals he cited as examples of zoomorphic juncture, including leviathans and dragons.

By 2015, when he declared it complete, the series had grown to include thirty lithographs, six taxidermy specimens, and a prehistoric fossil skeleton, along with several smaller specimen models and supporting evidence. About half of this material is showcased in the Gregg Museum's current exhibition. Most of the lithographs are based on fossil records, says Lyons, with his tongue conspicuously in his cheek. His quaint kiosk may have been appropriate for the courthouse-square setting, but the work is shown to much better advantage in a professionally lighted gallery, as it is here.

Referencing aspects of nineteenth century naturalist prints by the likes of John James Audubon and John Gould, the Hokes lithographs depict such wondrous creatures as the Moroccan Mouse Parrot, the Nordic Hare Falcon, and the American Badger Swallow, whose names indicate the specific zoological combinations involved. Others are identified by their Latin names (e.g., *Australopithecus simiacentaurensis*, *Micropterus trichopilaris*, *Vulpes vicugna*).

Attentive viewers of all religious or intellectual persuasions should have no doubt whether to take this enterprise seriously. The first lithograph in the series – Exhibit A, as it were – is a dead giveaway. It depicts a creature identified as *Lemur darwinus*, a ringed-tail lemur with the head of a man. Those familiar with photo portraits of Charles Darwin will immediately recognize the likeness.

Hybrid animals have played important roles in art and belief since prehistoric times. Beauvais Lyons has found new relevance for such imagery. While his approach is humorous, his “zoological junctures” provocatively engage an ongoing struggle in American culture about a range of scientific issues including evolution, global warming, stem-cell research, and genetic engineering. The latter is the subject of the Gregg’s concurrent exhibition, “Art’s Work in the Age of Biotechnology.”

Tom Patterson is an author, art writer, and independent curator in Winston-Salem, NC.

BEAUVAIS LYONS is a Chancellor’s Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he has taught printmaking since 1985. Lyons received his MFA degree from Arizona State University in 1983.

As Director of the Hokes Archives, he has originated traveling exhibitions that have been presented at over eighty galleries and museums across the United States. His prints are in numerous public collections including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Lyons’s work has been cited by Linda Hutcheon in *Irony’s Edge: A Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994) and in Lawrence Weschler’s *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder* (1995). In 2002 he received

a Fulbright Fellowship to teach at the Fine Arts Academy in Poznan, Poland. He is a 2014 recipient of the Santo Foundation Artist Award.