

DAVID MORRISH

✻ *Nature Morte* ✻



Engraving by D. Morrish

macaca mulatta.

OB. 1581.

FROM THE ORIGINAL, IN THE COLLECTION OF
THE RIGHT HON^{BLE} THE EARL OF MORTON.

WORKS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

A few years ago, I was driving with my two daughters on Highway 102 towards Truro. As we crested a hill, I noticed in the distance a few small, dead animals on the shoulder, the unfortunate result of the nightly carnage on the highways during early autumn when many nocturnal 'critters' are drawn to the pavement's heat. Lucy, my youngest daughter who was 12 years old at the time, was with me in the front seats. Always horrified by these unfortunate accidents, I attempted to make her look at something in the opposite direction to distract her from the impending scene. It didn't work. As we flashed by, she plaintively stated, "Aw, it's a dead mother raccoon with her baby. That is so sad." Then, after a few moments of heavy silence, she perked up, "...but it is kind of cute since they died together."

It is hard to think of dead animals as cute. Was Lucy experiencing a 'Disney moment' where the harsh reality of crumpled carcasses on the highway was mitigated by something imported into her consciousness from *Bambi* or *Finding Nemo*? Or the treatment of death as represented in the old Bugs Bunny cartoons where intact, full-scale ghost silhouettes quietly drifted up from characters just blasted with Elmer Fudd's shotgun?

Contemporary popular culture is bursting with positive and negative representations of animals and their associative codes. They run the gamut of heroic paintings by notable wildlife artists of noble beasts and their fantastically conjectured habitats to Harley-Davidson lone wolf T-shirts, to silly advertising logos, sports mascots, National Geographic specials, Beatrix Potter books and children's stuffed toys. More often than not, mass-media representations of animals do not reflect a living creature from the natural world

but function as a prescriptive symbol for applied social or commercial purposes. Cartoon bears are always friendly 'salespersons' for grocery-store honey but never tear apart garbage bins or maul humans. Eagles represent the worldview of warrior football teams and nations. *My Little Pony* instills the values of good grooming for young girls. The list of examples is endless. These symbols and their semiotic usefulness place animals firmly in the realm of fabricated culture and not organic nature.

David Morrish has long been interested in Western culture's representation of animals and the meaning that is constructed through the process. About the name of his private press he offers:

DeadCat Press, established formally in 1998, is named in honour of a cat mummy that has been the inspiration for artworks since its discovery in an abandoned farmhouse in Alberta in 1984. Dubbed *Fluffy* by ironic University of Calgary art students, this dried out cat mummy has been with me longer than any of my live cats. Today it (she?) has a good home, a clean storage box protected from all forms of vermin, and a new life as a model, icon, muse and all-around beautiful artifact.

– www.davidmorrish.com

It is telling that a mummified cat is the centre of Morrish's intellectual and creative musings. Fixed in time and space, *Fluffy*, once a living creature, is now treated more respectfully in death than in life. *Fluffy* is truly 'nature morte', a still life object of iconic significance to the artist. Just as the 17th Century Dutch still life and *Vanitas* paintings, often bursting



frog sprint, 2001, from *Locomotive Torpor*



wool duckie, 2001, from *Locomotive Torpor*

with over-ripe fruit and dead game, reminded the emerging and wealthy Bourgeoisie of their mortality in spite of an abundance of new riches, so Morrish invites us to look deeper into our relationship with living creatures. But with a dark, gentle sense of humour that holds up a mirror to our cultural relationship with the natural world, one where death is always the corollary of life.

The key subject matter in Morrish's print suites titled *Bestiarum Excerptum* (1998) and *The Gallery: Portraits of Animal Aristocrats* (1999) are poorly executed taxidermy projects. Found at local second-hand markets and in the back rooms of university biology departments, the appearances of these unfortunate creatures have been seriously compromised by misuse or inept taxidermists. Morrish's resulting photogravure images are of comical looking creatures that do not always appear to be the animal that they are supposed to represent. Along with the

image, Morrish has letterpressed historical texts that awkwardly or mythically describe the creatures from outdated, cultural points of view. In a 1998 artist statement supporting *Bestiarum Excerptum*, Morrish states:

The Natural History collections of Ole Worm (*Museum Wormianum*), Tradescant and Ashmole and various compendia from the Medieval Bestiaries to Topsell's *History of Four-Footed Beasts* have provided the framework for these prints. Translations from the texts of Medieval Bestiaries describing common, exotic, and mythical creatures with allegorical and sometimes humorous overtones, are examined and edited to accompany my personal iconography of animal remains and new re-constructed animal forms. The moralizing allegories and anthropomorphic treatment of these animals and their behavior are the crux of my interest in these texts. These tales and

misinterpretations often surprise us in their naïveté while alluding to actual fact, albeit using a completely accidental or misguided methodology. It is this human tendency for making the world reflect our philosophies and beliefs that I find intriguing, especially in the context of a natural history bestiary.

His series *The Gallery: Portraits of Animal Aristocrats* takes his relationship to animals through taxidermy one step farther by layering fabricated narratives onto his pantheon of creatures. Not unlike Beatrix Potter's books in which social ranking was central to her children's stories, Morrish's 'aristocrats' are anthropomorphized to a point of absurdity but, as with *Bestiarum Excerptum*, function as a comment on human culture's impositions of social order and structure onto the animal kingdom. Indeed, the concept of an animal kingdom implies upper royalty and, like a deck of cards, diminishing ranks of feudal subjects or taxonomic layers in scientific ordering of families and species.

The 2001 suite titled *Locomotive Torpor* pays homage to the lower ranked creatures. Potentially the most provocative suite of his work, Morrish presents images of dead frogs, mice, birds, some squashed into flat silhouettes by speeding highway tires, others mummified, much like *Fluffy*, within house attics and walls of buildings. Unlike the taxidermy projects that were photographed in private or institutional holdings, Morrish has collected all of his tiny subjects; indeed friends began bringing found specimens to him for his artistic consideration. He, in effect, became the keeper of the dead and, though creating images such as *mouse aria* that appear to have animated narratives imposed onto them,

Morrish's gentle humour still imbues his deceased subjects with an air of dignity and purpose. As single, luscious and velvety photogravure images, the characters of *Locomotive Torpor* are truly still life figures acting on a sublime ground of pure white paper. Appearing to critique his own narrative constructions, Morrish has also added the wry image of *wool duckie*, a well-used and disemboweled cat toy. It is just another animal form in Morrish's reliquary; surely the *wool duckie*, too, is a lost soul on the highway of life.

DeadCat Press is a private press dedicated to the creation and dissemination of fine works of photogravure, photography, artistamps and artist's book works. The advance of digital technologies has eclipsed traditional works on paper made by classic and more involved processes as more artists use new, easier, faster, or cheaper methods. In this site, I promote the use of time-honoured processes such as hand-pulled copper plate photogravure, traditional wet photography, and the use of hand-set lead type.

- www.davidmorrish.com

Morrish is in the business of preserving things. As in *Locomotive Torpor*, he infers a frozen motion, the last gestured, preserved silhouette of a creature at point of death. Not only does he save mummified animals, he also champions studio practices from another era. Photogravure, a complex, five-step process, links early 19th Century photographic procedures with classic intaglio printmaking techniques, giving photo-based images all of the manipulative possibilities of the traditional intaglio process. As well, his love

of letterpress representations of anachronistic texts further underscores his pleasure with process-based and hand-worked studio craft. Traditional gold leaf also appears in certain images offering a medieval burnish. Each layer or application on paper implies a slow, calculated process of image construction, one aided by studio hand tools and presses but not dictated by the corporate, digital machinery of contemporary culture. The hand of the artist still controls the outcome of the final product.

Morrish's use of Latin phrases in titles of projects also quotes the construction of 19th Century taxonomies and Darwinian revolutions. He is, however, not a Luddite opposed to technological change. Instead, Morrish has made a conscious and respectful decision to work with intensely process-based materials to attain conceptually clear, contemporary images that have an optical depth and beauty to them not possible with other media. Indeed, photogravure is most suited to reveal detail and subtle, velvety nuances within subject matter covered in fur or feathers.

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.

– Ecclesiastes 1: 1-4, King James Version

The allegorical and moralizing 17th Century Dutch still life paintings hinged on the reading of the Ecclesiastical text. The *Vanitas* – still life images complete with skulls, hour clocks,

burning candles or banquets with overripe fruits and freshly-killed game – were intended to remind the viewer that the clock was ticking, the candle was burning, food was spoiling and life will end all too soon in a fast and fleeting blur.

Paul Virilio, the contemporary French theorist and urbanist, has spent his intellectual life probing the social, political, military and cultural significance of the increased speed of technology, vehicles and information systems in the late 20th Century. In effect, the faster the train line or steamship service, the more customers it would attract; the speedier the jets or missile systems, the more quickly the attacking military state should win the battle. As well, rapid-fire commercial campaigns would win the advertising wars and speed products to awaiting consumers. Virilio, however, asserts that the faster transportation and weapons systems are deployed, the greater the inevitable accident. Indeed, 19th Century train wrecks represented the early harbinger of other technological mega-disasters to come.

Although many of the images in Morrish's *Locomotive Torpor* represent the dehydrated remains of animals, a few are road-kill images of what remains after the mechanized accident where innocent creatures are crushed by the wheels of industry. As well, the speeding bullet fired from the rifled gun barrel kills the deer that then becomes a mere trophy head. Perhaps the hen-house raiding fox or marauding lynx was felled by a single bullet but the carcass is preserved in a taxidermy display as a signifier of that which could not escape the crosshairs.

Morrish's newer work investigates the power of slow, steady natural growth, a force quite



Tree Cobbles, NYC, 1991/2005
from *Arboreal Pertinacity*

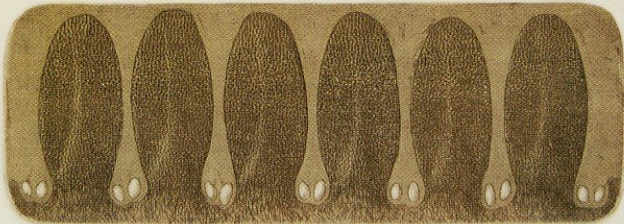
opposite of technologically induced mechanical speed. Photogravures from *Arboreal Pertinacity*, printed in 2005 from photographic negatives shot between 1991 and 2002, are Morrish's portraits of trees that survive in the most precarious of environments. *Tree Cobbles, NYC*, for example, reveals how an individual tree, severely gashed earlier in its life and then filled in with concrete, did not die but adapted to its new condition. *Penetration* images a tree growing through a chain-link fence. Slowly, tenaciously, the trees stay alive and win. Nature trumps culture. For now, the "earth abideth for ever."

With Morrish's work from the *Limestone Barrens Project*, we face the reality of slow, geologic time. Newfoundland, fondly nicknamed "The Rock", is testament to the scrubbed durability of limestone. These images reveal surfaces etched over thousands of years by wind, ice and water in Newfoundland and Ireland. In Morrish's work, hope for the earth is to be found in the rugged beauty of The Barrens. Not barren of meaning though: the scoured rock landscape speaks to the glacial movement of rock bodies and the erosive effects of time and weather on a temporal scale beyond our mere, mortal, human comprehension. We are the fleeting specks of human flesh in these landscapes, the cosmic road-kill, just another passing generation – our presence irrelevant to the long-term march of geologic time.

Peter Dykhuis
December 2007

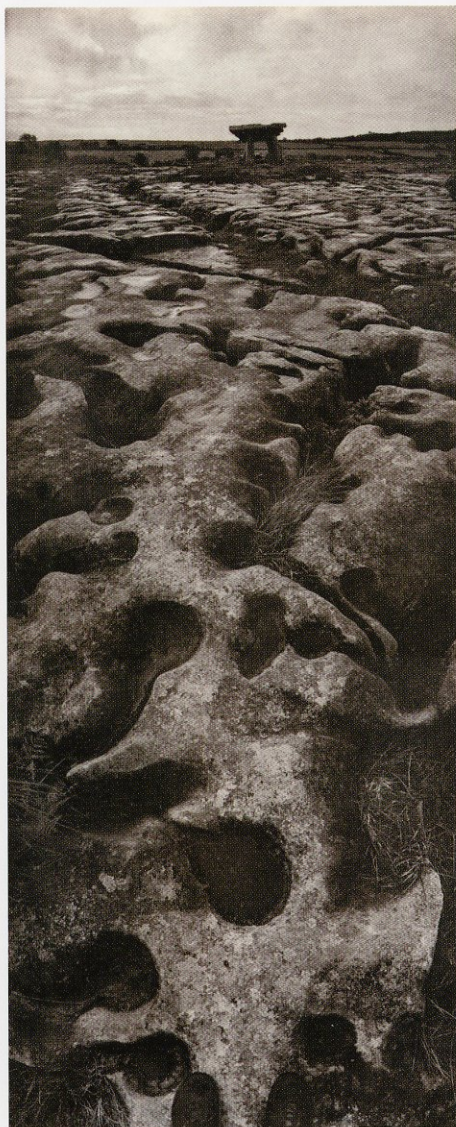


✠ There is an animal called CASTOR the beaver, none more gentle, and his testicles are helpful as medicine. For this reason, so Physiologus says, when he notices that he is being pursued by the hunter, he removes his own testicles with a bite, and casts them before the sportsman, and thus escapes by flight. What is more, if he should again happen to be chased by a second hunter, he throws himself on his back and shows himself to the hunter. And the latter, when he perceives the testicles to be missing, departs from him. The creature is called Castor because of the castration. —————



David Morrish is one of very few Canadian artists working in the medium of photogravure. He studied architecture at the University of Manitoba (1971-74) and obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons.) Degree from the same institution in 1981; he obtained an MFA from the University of Calgary in 1985. Since 1978 he has exhibited his photography and photogravures in group and solo exhibitions both nationally and internationally. In 1989, he began teaching at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College (Memorial University) Corner Brook, Newfoundland, where he set up a photogravure studio at home with his partner and fellow printmaker Marlene MacCallum. Together they have become recognized experts in the medium, publishing one of the few textbooks on the subject, *Copper Plate Photogravure: Demystifying the Process* (Focal Press, 2003). Morrish has received numerous grants and awards for his printmaking practice from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council, and his work is in public, corporate and private collections across Canada, including the Canada Council Art Bank, the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Edmonton Art Gallery, the Nickel Arts Museum, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and recently, our collection at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

Morrish currently lives in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, with his wife Marlene MacCallum and their two new live cats, Mort and Viv.



Dolmen, The Burren, County Clare, Ireland, 2004
from *The Limestone Barrens Project*



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Bestiarum Excerptum

Purchased with financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, 2007

Castor 1998

photogravure, intaglio, letterpress and 23k gold leaf on paper, edition of 6
35.0 x 17.1 (image) 56.1 x 36.6 (paper)

Mustela 1998

photogravure, intaglio, letterpress and 23k gold leaf on paper, edition of 6
35.3 x 17.0 (image) 56.1 x 36.7 (paper)

Perdix 1998

photogravure, intaglio, letterpress and 23k gold leaf on paper, edition of 6
29.5 x 17.5 (image) 56.1 x 36.4 (paper)

Upupa 1998

photogravure, intaglio, letterpress and 23k gold leaf on paper, edition of 6
34.5 x 18.2 (image) 56.1 x 36.6 (paper)

Vulpus 1998

photogravure, intaglio, letterpress and 23k gold leaf on paper, edition of 6
34.4 x 17.0 (image) 56.0 x 36.5 (paper)

The Gallery: Portraits of Animal Aristocrats

Gift of the artist, 2007

9-banded armadillo 1999

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
35.0 x 30.0 (image) 56.4 x 45.2 (paper)

Canadian lynx 1999

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
35.0 x 30.0 (image) 56.4 x 45.4 (paper)

Norway rat 1999

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
35.0 x 30.0 (image) 56.3 x 45.4 (paper)

red squirrel 1999

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
35.0 x 30.0 (image) 56.4 x 45.3 (paper)

rhesus monkey 1999

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
35.0 x 30.0 (image) 56.3 x 45.4 (paper)

river otter 1999

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
35.0 x 30.0 (image) 56.5 x 45.4 (paper)

Locomotive Torpor

Gift of the artist, 2007

aerial toad 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
30.5 x 37.5 (image) 46.7 x 55.6 (paper)

arrested flight 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
28.0 x 35.2 (image) 45.5 x 56.5 (paper)

flat chick 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
37.6 x 30.5 (image) 55.6 x 45.9 (paper)

frog sprint 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 2/8
30.3 x 37.0 (image) 46.8 x 55.5 (paper)

mouse aria 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
37.0 x 30.3 (image) 55.5 x 46.0 (paper)

robin arabesque 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
35.7 x 28.2 (image) 55.4 x 45.8 (paper)

shrew 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
30.3 x 37.1 (image) 46.6 x 55.4 (paper)

wool duckie 2001

photogravure on paper, edition 3/8
37.0 x 30.3 (image) 56.4 x 45.3 (paper)

From The Limestone Barrens Project

Gift of the artist, 2007

Erratic, The Burren, County Clare, Ireland 2003

IRIS print on paper
44.4 x 73.8 (image) 62.8 x 91.4 (paper)

Fingers, The Burren, County Clare, Ireland 2003

IRIS print on paper
44.4 x 73.8 (image) 62.5 x 91.5 (paper)

Grikes, The Burren, County Clare, Ireland 2003

IRIS print on paper
44.4 x 73.8 (image) 62.8 x 91.5 (paper)

Horizon, Cape Norman, NL 2003

photogravure on paper, edition 1/10
19.1 x 46.8 (image) 30.4 x 56.5 (paper)

Pavements, The Burren, County Clare, Ireland 2003

photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
18.7 x 46.3 (image) 30.4 x 56.5 (paper)

Thrombolites, Flowers Cove, NL 2003
photogravure on paper, edition 2/10
46.8 x 19.1 (image) 57.0 x 30.4 (paper)

Dolmen, The Burren, County Clare, Ireland 2004
photogravure on paper, edition 1/10
47.4 x 19.3 (image) 56.3 x 30.2 (paper)

Arboreal Pertinacity
Gift of the artist, 2007

Córdoba, ES 1999/2005
photogravure on paper, edition 2/8
38.7 x 15.9 (image) 50.9 x 27.8 (paper)

Penetration, NL 2002/2005
photogravure on paper, edition 1/10
21.2 x 16.0 (image) 37.8 x 28.3 (paper)

Perched, NL 2000/2005
photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
38.8 x 16.2 (image) 50.9 x 27.0 (paper)

Strangulation, FL 2005
photogravure on paper, edition 2/6
26.5 x 17.5 (image) 37.8 x 28.4 (paper)

Tree Cobbles, NYC 1991/2005
photogravure on paper, edition 3/10
39.2 x 16.2 (image) 50.8 x 27.8 (paper)

Singular Prints
Gift of the artist, 2007

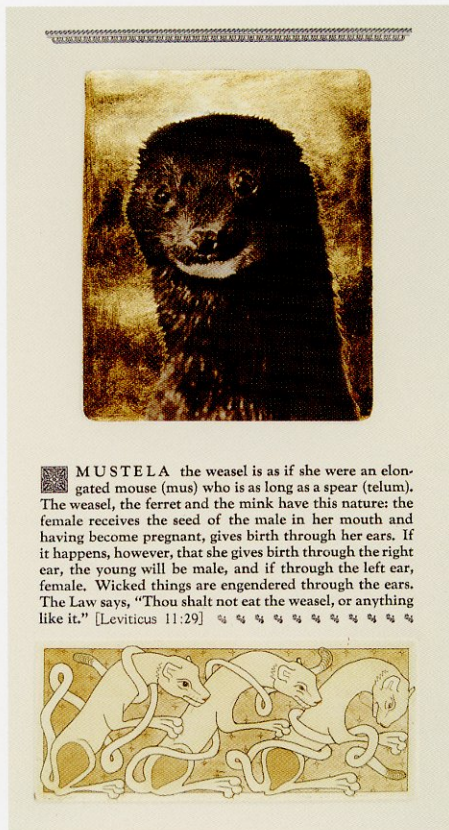
"Heron Trader" - Frederickton, NF 1998
photogravure on paper, edition 6/13
23.0 x 25.5 (image) 37.5 x 38.5 (paper)

Bird Box 2001
photogravure on paper, edition A/P 15
37.2 x 48.3 (image) 52.6 x 62.2 (paper)

Deer Door 2001
photogravure on paper, edition 6/12
25.0 x 18.3 (image) 38.3 x 29.9 (paper)

Fox Room 2001
photogravure on paper, edition 8/20
31.4 x 37.1 (image) 45.3 x 56.2 (paper)

Fox Row 2001
photogravure on paper, edition 6/12
15.2 x 23.8 (image) 30.0 x 35.8 (paper)



Mustela, 1998, from Bestiarum Excerptum

front cover: *rhesus monkey*, 1999
from *The Gallery: Portraits of Animal Aristocrats*
back cover: *Castor*, 1998, from *Bestiarum Excerptum*

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