

Rosemarie Trockel:

A Cosmos

23 May - 24 September 2012

“Kosmos” was the title given by the great naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) to his culminating work, a book on the theme of discovery, more specifically, on the discovery of the Americas. In awarding the palm to Columbus, von Humboldt, who was well aware that the Spanish explorer was not the first European to discover the New World, made his decision on philosophical grounds. Since progress, he believed, comes from accumulated knowledge, the real discoverer is the one who opens up new frontiers of knowledge. In this exhibition the German artist Rosemarie Trockel, long admired for her highly independent, even intrepid, exploration of certain fundamental questions, places her work in the company of others whom she regards as kindred spirits.

For over thirty years Trockel has deflected any identifiable stylistic signature: films and videos, installations involving animals, projects for children, knit paintings, ceramics, drawings and collages, plus a panoply of sculptures in myriad materials, are among the extraordinarily varied forms that comprise her oeuvre. Certain constants – issues which have long troubled her thinking – underpin this diverse activity: contending notions of feminism; purported antagonisms between amateur and professional, celebrity and anonymity, and between the fine as opposed to the applied arts and crafts. More broadly, through her works she probes not only interrelations between humans and animals but also our impact, as a species, on the natural world.



Many of the artefacts chosen for this exhibition were not originally created as art objects. Among those that first belonged to the realm of natural history are watercolours by the pioneering botanist and entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717). By means of experiments she undertook while still an adolescent, Merian became one of the first to understand the metamorphic life cycles of such insects as moths and butterflies. Later, during a two year expedition to the jungles of Surinam, she hunted, bred, cultivated, studied, and recorded many insects and plants then unknown in Europe. Though her contribution to the advancement of scientific knowledge in the 17th century was considerable, it was later unjustifiably eclipsed. The Spanish physician and botanist José Celestino Mutis (1732-1808) closely supervised the discovery and then the detailed illustration of almost 7000 plants while heading an expedition to Latin America in the late 18th century. However, because these drawings were never published with the appropriate scholarly documentation during his lifetime, recognition of Mutis's achievement within his field has been both delayed and skewed. The Blaschka family established a thriving business outside Dresden in the later 19th century that specialized in the production of virtuoso replicas of marine invertebrates. Initially acquired as research tools by amateur and professional naturalists with no access to living specimen, once adequate methods of preserving the ephemeral organisms were developed, these fragile models became obsolete. Today, though little more than a footnote in the history of science, they are increasingly prized for their aesthetic qualities.

Also included in this exhibition are self taught artists, James Castle and Judith Scott, who, like both Morton Bartlett and Manuel Montalvo, worked in isolation and obscurity. Employing the most humble materials and economic of means, and intensely committed to the pursuit of a singular vision often at the expense of all other activity, these solitary artists sought few audiences beyond those they conjured in imagination. Also ec-centric are Ruth Franken and Günter Weseler: possibly too partisan for comfortable consumption, they similarly occupy positions on the margins of the contemporary art world. Trockel's appreciation of such variously under-recognized artists stems from her empathy both with the questions their work addresses, and the unself-conscious directness and inventiveness with which it is realized. Whether operating within the frame of a disciplinary field, like botany, or propelled by more autonomous internal directives, these mavericks provide models of disinterested dedication to their chosen vocations that, for Trockel, are exemplary and inspiring.

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Museum hours

Monday to Saturday

from 10:00 a.m.

to 9:00 p.m.

Sundays from

10:00 a.m.

to 2:30 p.m.

Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close

15 minutes

prior to Museum

closing

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