

Laura Youngson Coll

"Science has bestowed on man powers which may be called creative; which have enabled him to change and modify the beings surrounding him, and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments."

Sir Humphry Davy, 1802

Laura Youngson Coll's room-sized environments consist of dense constellations of sculptures, composed from artfully orchestrated flowers and miniature creatures. Each life-form represented, whether flora or fauna, initially seems to be highly cultivated, and overburdeningly artificial. The artist ensures that we are unable to recognise, or to properly classify what each species might be, and are instead left in imaginative limbo attempting to locate their origins and order.

Youngson Coll's installations are characterised by a cool, antiseptic ambience which we intuitively recognise as an unnatural habitat for any animal. These "dysfunctional ecosystems", as the artist calls them, are composed from a variety of pristine, clinical plinths, as well as the glutinous, vigorously modelled figurines and flowers which occupy them. Youngson Coll conjures an intensely airless atmosphere, where seemingly unnatural life-forms proliferate and flourish. The artist's Perspex pedestals recall not only museum displays but the hygienic precision of laboratories and high-tech factories. Unlike in an ordinary museum, we are not offered a logical or ordered sequence of development for our edification. Instead, Youngson Coll's dioramas present a surfeit of artefacts, arranged into luxuriantly ornamental compositions. "The decorative, almost pictorial patterns that the works create", the artist remarks, "believe their order." If we're initially seduced by a sense of comforting plenitude and symmetry, we soon notice that "the plants break out from the confines of their boxes, and refuse absolute conformity in their imprecise mirroring". Chaos and man-made order are held in tension; but we also soon begin to uncover more alarming, complex concepts at work.

The artist's elaborate orchestration of her installations seem to be simultaneously chilling and cloying – creating an alarming composite sensation. Wax flowers in particular appear both saccharine and necrophiliac. We oscillate between two different, contradictory readings of Youngson Coll's flora. Her flowers are charming appendages in what the artist calls "the decorative, almost pictorial patterns that the work creates". Yet their glutinous textures are strangely unalluring, brittle, even cold. Seen as if preserved in aspic, their awkward growth patterns and unsavoury surfaces make them seem disturbingly lifeless protuberances. Accordingly, they appear as much as parts of an experimental mythology as of part of 'natural history'. As the artist puts it: "these environments seem devoid of 'anima' – the word animal being derived from the Latin 'anima' meaning soul – and from which 'animate' is also derived. Yet we find a beauty in their sterility."

Youngson Coll's animals similarly wrong-foot us with contradictory signals and unresolvable problems; they are impossible to pin down to any single reading. We appear to confront the remains of an extinct species, recently unearthed. We initially register that the figures possess mammalian proportions, but they also appear to resemble birds or lizards. They stand upright like higher primates, but possess wing formations and long reptilian heads. They stand outside our existing schemes of classification, and whilst resembling several parts of the animal kingdom, are unable to be pigeonholed. We are also left unsure as to whether the creatures are from the past, present, or future. The figures seem one part archaeological specimen and one part science-fiction fantasy, originating from either an uncharted past or an unknown future. On the one hand, they resemble species which only exist in museums, like pterodactyls – flying lizards rather than birds. On the other hand, the sculptures' bipedal sophistication and their black, liquid surfaces recall futuristic fantasies, like HR Giger's 'Alien'. Being drawn between two imaginary temporal extremes, renders it impossible for us to position the creatures on an evolutionary spectrum. Rather, as she notes, "human mimicry of nature, and the artifice in which this results, is one of my primary concerns."

Closer inspection reveals further contradictions and difficulties. Whilst we read the animals' contours as being skeletal, their irregular, glistening, viscous black surfaces present us with a counter-intuitive suggestion. We begin to imagine that their bones are wrapped tightly in a skin envelope – that this is a petrified animal, rather than a skeletal structure. We cannot escape from imagining bones as clean, white and smooth: accordingly, the animals' sticky, waxy black patina forecloses seeing them simply as an armature. Yet the creatures' surfaces resemble tar more than skin, or flesh, or fur. Tactile, yet repellent, they combine an impossible range of characteristics – being glossy and glutinous, yet modelled with sharp encrustations. By frustrating any obvious narrative, the artist draws us into making "an attempt to understand, and perhaps possess the new and alien... through morphing the animal, human and plant worlds." It might be most productive to see Youngson Coll's approach as novelistic. Her works are 'history sculptures', to coin a phrase, densely packed with symbolic freight and focussing the ideological flashpoints of our time. We leave with the impression that her forms of animal life are all too thinkable, whilst being deliriously imaginative fantasies.

'Doppelganger' (detail of pair) 2004, sculpture, wire, wax, acrylic paint.