





CONSTANCE THALKEN

Eyes Open Slowly

*And it's useless to close your eyes in the shadows,
to sink them in sleep so they'll not keep seeing,
for in the hardening shadows, the cave of dreams,
the same nocturnal light will wake you again.*

– Xavier Villaurrutia,
"Nocturne: Fear," *Nostalgia for Death*

















UNRAVELING: THE ELEGIAC IN EYES OPEN SLOWLY

ESSAY BY FAITH MCCLURE

Peering into the eyes of a taxidermied animal is a startling, illusory encounter. Its appearance as both creature and object can trigger a kind of spiritual dissonance—as if witnessing the sudden collapsing of mortality with immortality, absence with presence. Much like that of a living animal, its gaze, attention and seeming self-awareness also stir an abiding sense that, somehow, this uncanny creature sees us, too.

In its earliest forms, taxidermy, from the Greek *taxis* and *dermis*, meaning “arrangement of skin,” evolved in tandem with the field of natural history in the 18th and 19th centuries. With the discovery of new species came the need for classification through preservation. Specimens were then illustrated for natural history books, or placed for public viewing in early museums.

Today, taxidermy’s role within our apparatus of knowing has evolved. Humankind’s reach for the conquerable world isn’t necessarily hinged on its practice. Yet its inexplicable subtleties remain. Perhaps these ineffable qualities are taxidermy’s deepest reward, affording the opportunity to intimately engage an otherwise unknowable creature. This intimacy yields a different kind of knowledge that can’t necessarily be replicated, written or explained, but rather potently arises in the silent spaces of our own interior realms.

Appropriately titled, Constance Thalken’s *Eyes Open Slowly* is a gradual awakening to this deeper way of seeing. The suite of color photographs depicts taxidermy as a way of unraveling the thin boundary between human beings and our animal counterparts, as if placing both along the same spectrum of power, vulnerability, integrity and survival. The result of two years spent in a local taxidermy studio just outside of Atlanta, *Eyes Open Slowly* probes the quiet interior lives of animals, making death a living phenomenon to behold and apprehend.

As an artistic or literary trope, the image of the animal has long served as a symbol for what lies behind the curtain of human civility. While acknowledging this well-worn parallel, Thalken unravels it further, leveling the hierarchy of species with sensitivity and nuance. Rather than reducing her subjects to mere stand-ins for human narratives, she does the inverse, placing herself within their experience as empathic observer. Her photographs, solemn and elegiac, evince a bending into her subjects, capturing them in the fragility of their half-assembled bodies, taped, pinned and stapled.

Many of Thalken’s photographs hone the tactility of each animal’s corporeality, illuminating them through the imagination of the senses. Hair follicles, swaths of silken fur, folds and tufts of skin make the inanimate animate, reminding the viewer of his or her own living body. The bristling tower of fur in *Eyes Open Slowly #10* (page 6) vibrates and pulsates. Similarly, a blanket of animal skin in *Eyes Open Slowly #14* (page 5) crumples and folds in on itself like aging, wrinkled flesh. Its surface is sprinkled with staples and other mechanical remnants, like the antiseptic trappings of a hospital room.

Many are shot in portrait format as well, and this verticality mirrors the viewer’s form when standing before the image. A tethered bird in *Eyes Open Slowly #1* (page 4) hangs like a crucifix before a dark void, its wings clipped by the narrow width of the frame. As a taxidermic object, its aura of sterility is punctured by a startling, solitary eye staring back at the viewer.

Like other creatures in the series, it is this bird’s eternal gaze that lodges it in a liminal state between the living and the dead. A small black coyote in *Eyes Open Slowly #13* (page 11) seems transfixed by such a daydream, standing before a stack of gilded frames that signals the human story of which he is now a part. Rather than appearing false or unnatural, his fixation locates him within some parallel dimension where time still passes, where his sentience is still penetrated by the waking world.

Death is an ongoing motif in Thalken’s work, having served as both object of grief and trepidation, but also as a harrowing passage to more conscious, deliberate living. That her photographs hold both these perspectives simultaneously reveal the breadth of her insights, evincing both longitudinal depth in her understanding of human frailty but also latitudinal expansion in its applicability beyond mere human narrative. Earlier works like *Fragments of an Elegy* (1992), for example, lay bare the shared yet dueling struggle for survival in both humans and animals, as photographed at an annual crocodile harvest in southwest Louisiana. *Purge* (2008) characterizes a photographic series of yard clippings as “small deaths on public display,” locating life cycles of the natural world within the same continuum of human life and death.

Eyes Open Slowly immediately follows Thalken’s 2013 exhibition, *1.2 cm =*, a photographic chronicling of the artist’s own encounter with breast cancer (her tumor was 1.2 cm in size). As described by Thalken, the latter was an attempt to navigate the realizations of her own mortality through controlled documentation, as she photographed the refuse of her own 14-month cancer treatment: tape, gauze and other detritus from biopsies, chemotherapy, echocardiograms, bone scans and radiation. Parallels between both series of photographs abound, as each hones transformation of the body as it endures repair. A pair of severed antlers dangling from a metal wire in *Eyes Open Slowly*, for example, mirrors *Haircut #1*, a photograph of Thalken’s own hair similarly severed during cancer treatment. (see next page)



While both series uphold a certain integrity amid the humiliation of illness or death, *Eyes Open Slowly* asserts an undeniable grasping for something long lost. But it seems the very nature of taxidermy exudes such qualities. Just as humans make the dead palatable as a means of taming our own fears of mortality, taxidermy, too, is a means of re-possessing nature. Rachel Poliquin, author of *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, explains similarly: “Taxidermy exists because of life’s inevitable trudge toward dissolution. Taxidermy wants to stop time... To cherish what is no longer as if it were immortally whole.”¹ That these animals reside just barely outside the sphere of the living makes them exquisite tempters and seducers. Like encountering the dead in a dream, they appear to us as if on the brink of vanishing.

The triumph of Thalken’s work, however, is not merely the potency of such realizations. While accepting such predilections for the possession of immortality, *Eyes Open Slowly* is a poignant and transformational reconciliation as well. If denying death requires a certain avoidance or shutting down of our deeper awareness—a denial of life, so to speak—then its admission points to something fuller, richer and expansive. This willingness to excavate what remains hidden at the very roots of living—and to have eyes for what lies even further beyond—is characteristic of Thalken’s entire oeuvre as a contemporary photographer.

¹ Poliquin, Rachel. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. 6.



BIO CONSTANCE THALKEN

Thalken's work has been featured in over 100 exhibitions both nationally and internationally, including at the San Diego Art Institute (CA), the New Orleans Museum of Art (LA), Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Municipal Cultural Center of Ioannia (Greece), the Huntsville Museum of Art (AL), the Harn Museum of Art (FL), the Foundation Charles-Leopold Mayer (France), InLight Richmond (VA), The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (GA), the House of Culture (Brazil), Photographic Center Northwest (WA), and the Torpedo Factory (VA). Her photographs are in the permanent collections of The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, The Birmingham Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, The Bunnen Collection, Yale University Library, and other private collections. Thalken lives and works in Atlanta where she is represented by Whitespace Gallery.

IMAGE LIST

All images are archival pigment prints on Hahnemuhle Fine Art Baryta mounted on Dibond.

PG 3 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #2</i> 2013, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 9 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #13</i> 2014, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 14 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #15</i> 2013, 43" x 28-1/2"
PG 4 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #1</i> 2013, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 10 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #5</i> 2013, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 15 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #9</i> 2013, 43" x 28-1/2"
PG 5 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #14</i> 2014, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 11 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #19</i> 2015, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 19 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #3</i> 2013, 43" x 28-1/2"
PG 6 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #10</i> 2014, 43" x 28-1/2"	FOLD-OUT <i>Eyes Open Slowly #12</i> 2013, 28-1/2" x 43"	COVER <i>Eyes Open Slowly #7</i> 2013, 28-1/2" x 43"
PG 7 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #4</i> 2014, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 12 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #17</i> 2015, 43" x 28-1/2"	INSIDE COVER <i>Eyes Open Slowly #11</i> 2013, 28-1/2" x 43"
PG 8 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #8</i> 2014, 43" x 28-1/2"	PG 13 <i>Eyes Open Slowly #16</i> 2015, 43" x 28-1/2"	

CONSTANCE THALKEN: EYES OPEN SLOWLY

December 4 . 2015 - January 29 . 2016

CO-CURATORS
Constance Thalken
Carolyn DeMeritt
Pinky/MM Bass

CATALOG DESIGN
Susan Walker



THE LIGHT FACTORY
1817 Central Avenue
Charlotte, NC 28205

lightfactory.org



