

In The Middle

Man is the Pasture of Being 3: Mandeville at Long Last

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(Excerpt. Read full article here: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2015/08/man-is-pasture-of-being-3-mandeville-in.html>)

The project that most closely matches my particular interest in sky burial is the work of Brooklyn artist Alex Branch (written about so well in Alison Kinney's "[Every Creeping Thing that Creepeth](#)"). Her video "[Nothing Left to Take Away](#)" (2011) records her feeding a swarm of seagulls on a snowy hillside until she runs - nearly - out of bread. She collapses herself into a nodule, while the seagulls refuse to leave: she has given them - nearly - all that she decided to bring them, and they remain unsatisfied (bad emotions on the nonhuman side too!). But there's more: Branch is wearing a helmet made of bread, which the seagulls go for, horribly rending chunks from it, as she continues to lie still, letting them take it until, presumably, they fall to complaining again.



Alex Branch, "Nothing left to Take Away," screenshot

We have generosity, bad feeling, bad *feeding*, and even grief, all at once; attachment to ourselves, which is also to the bodies that enable us to be, for a time; but also disattachment, an ironic displacement from our self-possession once we realize, too, that the stuff that lets us be can never be fully ours.

Where Branch does Mandeville still better, finally, is by being a woman. Her [bread armor](#) gets at this better, at the body given over as food to others, and at the traditional associations of women and kitchens and ovens. If the [paradigmatic verminous medieval corpse is a woman](#), a sign of the grotesque truth of feminine beauty so far as clerical misogyny was concerned, then the bird-eaten corpse of Tibet, with the body honored by being eaten, is a man, with all the public honor and dick-measuring that accompanies that. What Branch offers, however, is her own body, "armored" by food, harassed by gulls, hers and vulnerable and a gift all at once, wrapped in art's high culture, which never offers itself as just a "natural" gift to a fundamentally sensible world. This is a practice that collapses the distance between vulnerability and (a male fantasy of) permanence; Branch is turning herself into remains, but remaining here too as the artist. I can imagine, finally, that she and [Elaine Tin Nyo](#) might have something to say to one another. - See more at: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2015/08/man-is-pasture-of-being-3-mandeville-in.html#sthash.E1M1e92W.dpuf>