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an independent arts journal / summer 2015 / collaborations

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Constance Thalken: *Eyes Open Slowly*
Whitespace Gallery
Atlanta, Georgia
May 15-June 20, 2015

With delicious wit, Elwyn Brooks White wrote, “I have occasionally had the thrill of putting my finger on a little capsule of truth, and heard it give the faint squeak of mortality under my pressure.” White’s wry humor serves as a welcome leaven to that underlying and very pressing constant in human existence: Death. Offering an echo of White’s “faint squeak of mortality,” Constance Thalken’s exhibition of photographs taken in a taxidermy shop explores transience — not only that of animals — but, by implication, that of us all.

When organizing field trips for a university class titled, “The Animal,” an investigation of human-animal relationships, Thalken discovered Bud Jones’ state-of-the-art taxidermy shop, including a small museum filled with dioramas, in rural Tallapoosa, Georgia. Visiting this establishment founded by Jones over six decades ago, and still managed by him and his wife Jackie, was for Thalken “jaw- dropping.” Experiencing the curious interplay of life-in-death/ death-in-life in images of realistically restored animals served to echo her own recent struggle with breast cancer.

Skillful cropping lends many of Thalken’s shots their dramatic edge. Taken in the shop’s museum, *Eyes Open*

Slowly #3 (2013) shows the belly, crouching leg, and front paw of a black wolf, set against a green patch of artificial turf — simulating landscape. The animal’s hair gleams in the light, and the limbs — bent as though running, intimate the mobility of life. Also shot in the museum, *Eyes Open Slowly #8* (2013) reveals only the head of a baby bear, snuggling up to its mother and nuzzling its chin against her dark body with an aching tenderness. Similarly cropped, *Eyes Open Slowly #10* (2013) shows the hair of an Indian black buck: dark wavy strands that revert to white below. One sees the painterly markings akin to those of a raccoon on this antelope-like creature.

The impact of other photos derives from their uncanny interplay of life and death. A black coyote stands in front of a stack of empty picture frames in *Eyes Open Slowly #13* (2013). Turning his head slightly, the animal seems to squint his eyes while lifting his right paw; all indications of life, but without animation, symbolizes the animal’s now hollowness. Although he looks alive, the coyote is only a Styrofoam shell covered with skin.

Taken during the process of restoration, the blue heron in *Eyes Open Slowly #1* (2013) is suspended by a wire and “bandaged” like an injured patient: a rectangle of thick cardboard is over the right wing and strips of heavy white paper wrap the tail feathers. Almost human-like, the talons of one leg suggest an emaciated

hand, bent plaintively. *Eyes Open Slowly #9* (2013) is a stately African kudu, seemingly alive, whose curious horns lend the animal an exotic dignity. He looks into the distance as though he is disdainful of the viewer. His alert stance is undercut, however, by the fact that his torso is truncated at the shoulders, like a bust. He rests on a mounting board with a measuring tape draped around his neck.

Several of the photographs become intriguing abstractions due to how they are framed. Revealing the scratch marks of the many dogs who have lived at the shop, *Eyes Open Slowly #5* (2013) shows the gray metal door; its surface is etched with reiterated canine markings both rhythmical and random. *Eyes Open Slowly #14* (2013) is the unfolded skin of an ostrich with a few feathers, together with the bird’s characteristic markings and distinctive gray-blue and tan coloration. *Eyes Open Slowly #11* (2013) shows the mottled surface of the salt floor used in the curing process for hides. Embedded in the surface is the unordered debris of decades, which includes a nail.

Thalken has happened upon an absorbing subject — taxidermy — as a springboard to explore mortality, that illusive yet compelling interplay between life and death, or what the Aenied calls, “the tears of things.” In doing so, she simultaneously offers a meditation on the sometimes ambiguous, often mysterious, relationships between man and creature.



Constance Thalken, *Eyes Open Slowly #1*, 2013, 43”x 28 1/2” , Archival pigment print, Photo courtesy of the artist.



Constance Thalken, *Eyes Open Slowly #10*, 2013, 43”x 28 1/2” , Archival pigment print, Photo courtesy of the artist.



Constance Thalken, *Eyes Open Slowly #9*, 2013, 43”x28 1/2” , Archival pigment print, Photo courtesy of the artist.