

CHARLOTTEVIEWPOINT

ARTS & CULTURE

December 13, 2015

Thalken Photos Capture Artistic Side of Taxidermy

by Joshua Peters



Photos: Constance Thalken photos #13 (above) and #1 from Eyes Open Slowly exhibit at The Light Factory.

Taxidermy is one of those artistic practices that is often overlooked, forgotten, or sometimes intentionally passed by for its perceived capacity for cruelty. But taxidermy carries with it a lot of innately powerful conceptual baggage—even the idea that humans preserve dead animals in order to display them is a loaded syllabus.

Those concepts are front and center as The Light Factory hosts Constance Thalken's photographic exhibit, *Eyes Open Slowly* (running through Jan. 29), which tackles the solemn conceptual underpinnings of taxidermy and how it creates totemic commonality between humans and animals. They both are, after all, joined in the end by inevitable death.

Thalken is an internationally exhibited photographic and mixed media artist, a Yale Fine Arts Alum, and an Associate Professor of Photography at Georgia State University. She's known for taking a somber romp through ideas of



naturalism, death, life and transformation. In the past, with series like *Fragments of an Elegy*, Thalken has tackled the ideas of animal mortality and the role we humans have to play in the cycles of nature around us—life, death and specifically the practice of hunting for meat. *Eyes Open Slowly* takes a more accusatory approach.

The imminence of death is a theme *Eyes Open Slowly* attempts to parse in a couple ways. Thalken does an excellent job building on mood and atmosphere. Her works share subject matter but their unity goes much deeper. Thalken's aesthetic decision-making across the 17-work show contributes a near tangible mood more than anything: A shared color scheme of dark browns, blacks, greys, natural tones found in dark fur and feathers; the colors found in old shed workshops and shop floors. The first thing that you notice upon entering the Light Factory's small bisectonal gallery is not really any particular *Eyes Open Slowly* offerings, it's the feeling that they generate together of musk, of workshop dust, formaldehyde and paint fumes. "Driving home the aesthetic unity further, it's clear all the works, titled simply by their number in the series, were photographed in the same place, the large glossy prints evoking strong associative tactile, olfactory, and place-specific senses.

In *Eyes Open Slowly* #7 & #8 specifically, it easy to see where Thalken is pushing the audience focus—not on the furry subjects but on the uneasiness that she knows the subject makes us feel. Animals that have gone through the taxidermy process are treasure troves of visual texture, a tool Thalken uses to great extent, highlighting the textures of fur, hide, feathers and

the shop floor. And it's the layering of color and texture that eventually brings us into the compositions of *Eyes Open Slowly* in earnest, where we are confronted with the stark reality of taxidermy, an ugly reality even for the most callous hunter. Compositions like #8 do a great job highlighting those interesting moments of visual texture, but also of capturing the uneasiness associated with the practice. The piece's ursine subjects pose in a particularly candid manner as if the subjects were frozen in time, lifted from their habitat and placed in frame. As dark and demure as the grisly reality of the practice it highlights, *Eyes Open Slowly* shows us the awesome power of aesthetics creating emotional context. While *Eyes Open Slowly* doesn't exactly leave the audience with a happy feeling, it's simple aesthetic and conceptual unity, deft compositional construction, and powerful command over color and mood leaves us thinking about art in ways we might not have otherwise.