

Not Yeti

Cryptozoology at the Bates College Museum of Art
BY CHRIS THOMPSON

In his book *The Damned*, the great researcher of anomalous phenomena Charles Fort writes of the curious and sometimes acrobatic ends to which early modern science was prepared to go in order to explain the existence of meteorites. During an era in which it was generally inconceivable that material found on earth could have its origin elsewhere, the fact of the meteorite — seemingly proof positive of extraterrestrial input — had to be laboriously reframed by responsible scientists as a freakish accident: lightning striking a particular earthly metal under precisely the right conditions, that sort of thing.



'BIGFOOT & NIOKA VI,' by Ellen Lesperance and Jeanine Oleson, 2005.

Of course, evidence only exists in relation to the paradigm that makes it visible; over time enough maverick voices, combining empirical evidence with the theoretical frameworks in which to make it intelligible, produce a shift in scientific convention that lets the fact of the meteorite come to count as reality instead of speculation or outright invention.

This Fortean space at the margins of mainstream inquiry is where the fields of artistic research and cryptozoology, the study of and search for "hidden animals," encounter one another. These idiosyncratic endeavors, driven by the obsessive desire to find realities whose existence the world refuses to concede, share more than an ethos. Indeed it is at the level of methodology — the craft of research, the balance of imaginative speculation and rigor, the reliance on visual knowledge and the wariness of the ways in which we can be duped by it, and the necessity of inventing conceptual and technical tools for tinkering away at the edge of the unacceptable and the inexplicable — that they intersect most interestingly.

Last weekend's "Cryptozoology: Out of Time Place Scale" symposium at the Bates College Museum of Art was the forum for some of their leading practitioners to get to grips with one another, and begin building the dialogue that will culminate in next summer's exhibition (of the same title) which begins at Bates and travels to the Kansas City Art Institute.

After an introduction by Bates College Museum of Art director Mark Bessire, cryptozoology luminary and Portland resident Loren Coleman — founder of the first ever museum of cryptozoology and author of several texts that, if not

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canonical, are certainly legendary — kicked off Friday's proceedings with a lecture on the history of cryptozoology. This was followed by a presentation by artist and writer Jeffrey Vallance and his screening of the film *End of Extinction: Cloning of the Tasmanian Tiger*.

Saturday began with a panel investigating representations of monsters, spirits, and animality in art, with artist Sean Foley, Mass MoCA curator Nato Thompson, and Bowdoin College Museum of Art curator Mark Bessire; afterwards researcher J.P. O'Neill presented a masterful lecture on the history of giant sea serpent sightings throughout the Gulf of Maine since the early 17th century. Coleman, O'Neill, Vallance, and another unannounced cryptozoologist and Bigfoot expert then met in a panel to explore current research in cryptozoology. Then artist Mark Dion gave a presentation on his work in the history of natural history, followed by a final panel on the relation between cryptozoology, science, and the museum including Dion, Bessire, Coleman, Thompson, artist Rosamund Purcell, and curator Raechel Smith. The evening concluded with a presentation by artist Ellen Lesperance and her screening of *The Creature from Boggy Creek*.

In the discussion session following the "New Research in the Field of Cryptozoology," a probing question from Mass MOCA curator Thompson led three on a panel of four leading cryptozoologists to concede that they do not believe in the existence of aliens. It is intriguing that the field that has long borne the skepticism of mainstream science in order to bring us Bigfoot (although most of us know it not) and that might yet bring us Yeti and the Great New England Sea Serpent, doesn't have the time of day for the extraterrestrials among us? Thompson made them go through a list of cryptids (mermaid, Sasquatch, Jersey Devil, and others) and raise hands to show whether they were believers or no.

It is impossible to describe in a short column the strangeness of the discursive space that this event produced, or to begin to tap the wide range of themes that it covered — from the relationship between animality and humanity to the social psychology of witnessing (ghosts, aliens, cryptids). What was fascinating, and refreshing in relation to every other conceivable academic conference, was that the discussions and debates, however lively, always hovered at the edge of humor and never lost sight of the monstrosity of this artistic and epistemological undertaking.

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