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- > Edward Burtynsky
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- > Joseph Beuys
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- > Lemn Sissay
- > Lucy+Jorge Orta
- > Mark Dion
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« What is Nature – well, that depends. The work of Kyle Zeto

Henri Rousseau for The Year of the Tiger »

Amazonia – Lucy + Jorge Orta at the Natural History Museum, London

11 November 2010, 1:06 pm

One of the most exciting things about this exhibition is that the Natural History Museum (MNH) has established a contemporary arts programme – of which this exhibition is a part. It is both encouraging and exciting that the NHM, traditionally focused on science, didactic education and on its collections, is leading the way – supplementing its work by bringing to bear the power of art to change people's views, feelings and perceptions. Long may this programme flourish.

Amazonia is an exhibit of work commissioned by the museum and shown as part of the Year of Biodiversity – 2010. The artists, Lucy + Jorge Orta have put together an eclectic collection of work based on a trip to the Amazon organized by Cape Farewell. The exhibit contains sculpture, photography, video and installation.



For me, the most interesting pieces were some of the sculptures and the video. The sculptures used bones and an extinct 'elephant bird' egg to prepare casts in iridescent aluminium (above) and Limoges porcelain (below). Viewing the decorated porcelain sculptures in particular, I wondered what they might say about our relationship with nature. Is this a reflection of natural beauty cast in a material that we also consider culturally beautiful? Or do they highlight our 'use' of nature – our appreciation of nature only in so much as we can turn it into a fetish object, a mere decoration or amusement? Do we appreciate nature for its own sake or only for its utility – one utility being its transformation into to a beautiful cultural artifact?



The twin, large scale video screens were also mesmerizing. The videos themselves were atmospheric, a feeling enhanced by the poetic narrative of Mario Petrucci (see short extract of the video [here](#)). It's a shame that the video could not seem to avoid lapsing occasionally into spewing facts and figures and into the idolization of science.

The exhibit was an ambitious project. It's breadth was such that it is would put strain on any one pair of artists to deliver the expected span of content across many media. In my opinion, this strain started to show in some of the pieces. The photographs of amazonian plants, were well executed and brought a glossy juxtaposition to the coarser feel generated by the plant 'sculptures' rendered in sewn cloth. But the photographs did not really bring us an approach that we have not seen before in many, many photographs of exotic plants. The Madre de Dios ark (below) was, for my taste, a little too obvious. A Noah's Ark of animals with life preservers piled underneath does not leave much to the imagination. The use of plastic animal models in the ark tended to give it all a bit of a down market, toy-like feel. But maybe my reaction was conditioned by comparison to some work by Félix Reyes that I have recently seen and that, while also using the idea of massed figures, had a quality of execution that left you breathless.



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Amazonia is an ambitious project well-executed. The artists successfully managed to produce a large scale exhibit that spanned many media and that brought to life the varied wonders of the amazon. They did so in an eclectic form that is far from usual and that represents a refreshing change from yet another nature documentary (yawn). The museum must be congratulated on commissioning this work and on having the vision to create a contemporary arts programme to sit alongside its more didactic, scientific work. I hope that other museums of natural history might take a lead from this programme and start something similar - though I suspect that we may have to wait for improved economic conditions to see that happening.

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