

Natural controversy

To name a thing was to know it, back when natural philosophers set up systems of classification that established the order of animals, plants, races, and cultures. The natural history museum became the repository of this knowledge. For its collections the unfortunate animal objects of study were stuffed, mounted, and labeled with names for display.

The natural history museum display was supposed to be the visual equivalent of scientific truth, but its authority was dangerous. These are the issues revealed and dealt with in Todd Murphy's show at Second Street Gallery. Murphy uses the visual orders of the natural history museum in his new paintings to comment on controversial social issues.

The paintings in the main gallery should—and have—stir controversy. On one wall, the viewer is confronted with a five panel painting composed of blown up photographs, behind painted glass, of stuffed, mounted, and labeled monkeys of various species, placed around the picture space as if on display in a museum exhibit. Scrawled in awkward handwriting across the top of the painting is the name Sally Hemings.

Hemings, Thomas Jefferson's slave, is believed to be the daughter of John Wayles, Martha Jefferson's father, and one of his slaves. It is now believed that Jefferson had children with Hemings.

On the adjacent wall hangs another painting, composed of a photograph of a group of zebras—mother and baby zebra, and perhaps a father—in a dark landscape. It seems that these two paintings purposefully evoke in our minds the racist names that are used to describe African-Americans and those of mixed heritage.

The method Murphy has employed to paint the pieces adds another layer to his work. Composed of blown-up photographs with painted glass riveted to them, the paintings have a distance and darkness to them. The closer one stands to the piece, the more obscure and blurry the image becomes. This is especially true for the final painting of the exhibition in which a young African-American woman in a white dress stares defiantly into the distance holding a hooded falcon on her upraised arm.

Frankly, the work is shocking. It does, in a way, hint at the destruction wrought by the imposition of such taxonomic orders on the world that were used to justify repressive, racist political systems. Murphy's interest in the Jefferson/Hemings relationship was sparked by Jefferson's own habit of collection and classification and because Hemings was caught in a system where such habits of classification had profoundly tragic effects.

I'm not sure that I agree with the manner in which Murphy has approached this subject. The subtler points of the paintings are obscured by the racist quality of the imagery. It would have been helpful if Murphy had provided some sort of mediating text or an artist's statement with the pieces. Instead, we are left wondering. —M.M.



**EYE
CANDY**

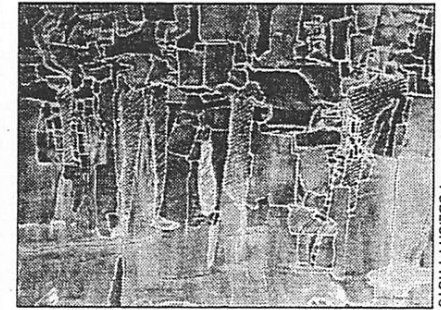
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Natural Histories will be on exhibit until August 13 at Second Street Gallery as part of the Hindsight/Fore-site: Art for the New Millennium exhibition. 201 Second St. N.W. 977-2784.

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The Hindsight/Fore-Site: Art for the New Millennium Exhibition

Charlottesville's most important show ever will open on Saturday June 17 at 11am with a public reception at the Albemarle County Building. The exhibition includes world-renowned artists such as Ann Hamilton, Dennis Oppenheim, Rosemarie Fiore, and Daniel Reeves. Please call the Bayly Art Museum for details. 924-3592.

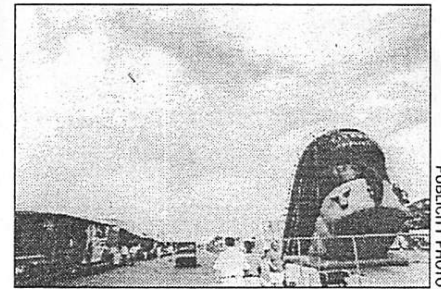


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Joan Cabell at The McGuffey Art Center

Watery chronicles

The Kluge-Ruhe Collection is showing "Chronicles of the Sea: Aboriginal Coastal Landscapes." The exhibition includes bark paintings, sculpture, and artifacts from Arnhem land. Also on exhibit are paintings by Rod Moss in an exhibition titled The Whitegate Mob. 400 Peter Jefferson Place. 244-0234.



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Aaron Farrington at Higher Grounds