

Two separate pieces of moss grow on the same piece of fallen branch on the forest floor: one pale, brittle and spidery, the other lush and like velvet. They have been brought into being by the same conditions, in the same location, at the same time. Removed from the forest, one dies and the other survives.

Divergence such as this runs like a thread through Steven Claydon's exhibition *The Archipelago of Contented Peoples: Endurance Groups* — the group of works made for The Common Guild — and the stories that permeate its making. There are the Swiss twins, Auguste and Jean Piccard (b.1884), both high-altitude balloonists, who each invented innovative exploratory devices, one for deep water, the other for deep space, resulting in their respective reputations as hydronaut and aeronaut.¹ Then the remarkable stories of Michael C. Rockefeller (1938–1961) and Tobias Schneebaum (1922–2005); two men, both from New York, whose histories are entwined through their separate expeditions to the other side of the world — to the island of New Guinea, where both sought to study the Asmat people. That same place is the point of origin of many of the objects that appear in Claydon's new works, such as the squat figures duplicated in *Double Jeopardy — Twin Studies* and the ornamental heads reproduced in *Zoetrope — The Earth Becoming World* (all works 2017).

Rockefeller disappeared in New Guinea in 1961, said to have died trying to swim ashore after his motor-canoe broke down, but his remains were never found and there was a suspicion that he had in fact been the victim of a cannibalistic revenge

killing. Objects he gathered there became part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where a wing bearing his name was opened in 1982.²

Schneebaum, also known as an artist and AIDS activist, lived and travelled among various groups of remote tribes, including both the Asmat people of New Guinea (Indonesia), and the Harakmbut people of Peru, where he once joined the tribe in cannibalism. He wrote several books, *Keep the River on Your Right* (1969) and *Asmat: Life with the Ancestors* (1981) and was the subject of the film *Keep the River on Your Right: A Modern Cannibal Tale* (2000). In *Wild Man* (1979), he wrote about Rockefeller, who thought himself to be perceived as "the rich young man who just walked into the village and was able to buy and do everything he wanted".³

Images of the Piccard twins, of Rockefeller and Schneebaum, along with several other explorers, adventurers and innovators, are reproduced in *Double Jeopardy — Consuming Without Digesting*, a two-panel wall piece, comprised of resin sheets embedded with shredded banknotes that lend an amber-like tone to the resin, the notes transitioning from life as exchangeable currency, to waste (and ultimately here, to art).⁴ On one panel, a cluster of these archive images is printed, overlapping each other as if on a messy desk, and peppered with pill packets. It is an indexical work that fuses multiple ideas: of risk, research, endurance, waste, value and consumption, and sits firmly at the heart of Claydon's exhibition.

Rockefeller and Schneebaum are mirrored in Claydon's citation elsewhere in the exhibition of the crocodile and the pink panther, a reference gleaned from a text by Deleuze and Guattari on mimicry that contrasts the crocodile's 'disguise' as a log with the pink panther who, in the cartoon, makes no attempt to blend in, but "paints the world in its own colour, pink on pink".⁵ If Schneebaum is the crocodile, going to extremes to blend into his environment, to be at one with his subject, Rockefeller is, by analogy, the pink panther.

However questionable their methods and motivations, whether laudable or damnable in intent, the interlinked tales of these two men echo the interplay between jeopardy and endurance that interests Claydon. Throughout the exhibition at The Common Guild, objects appear at risk: individual works include structures that replicate devices or tactics of protection and preservation, Gym mats lie beneath steel frameworks, while others include various controlling devices, such as PVC curtaining and hydroponic lights.

Alongside these allusions to protection and preservation is the related zone of analysis. Objects, materials and images are brought together in structures that take their forms from various scientific research devices: a radial arm maze, designed in the 1970s to study rats and their ability to learn; a vacuum chamber, used to create a low pressure environment in which things destined for use in outer space can be tested. *Double Jeopardy — Crocodiles and Canoes* — with its large, wooden beams (in fact evidently painted, cast resin) and small, sharp, focused lights — fuses the function of a laboratory bench with the language of a contemporary museum display.

Several objects included in the sculptures are gold-plated (a camera lens, a small figure, a piece of chewing gum, blister packs of pills), a process that does not just provoke considerations of value, whether cultural or financial, but that alludes to the process of electron microscopy (in which gold-plating is used to fix an object for scanning). This one technique, as deployed by Claydon, provides an example of how the impetus of preservation (through analysis) can precisely mean the death of an object, just as the 'museumification' of an artefact brings about a loss of agency. He has described "the curious life of the artefact", which, when held in a museum collection is "often locked away in huge, darkened storage facilities where didactic agency (was) replaced by mysterious hibernation".⁶

In the exhibition, as in the world beyond, things appear to be at risk. They are in a state of jeopardy, demanding active protection — intervention — to allow them to endure. From debates around the preservation and ethics of museum holdings to threats to cultural heritage around the world (think, for example, of the destruction of Palmyra in Syria), these ideas have particular contemporary currency. Some objects endure; others demand active protection or preservation; others still succumb to decay or destruction. The processes that are enacted are where the placing of value is effected.

These objects, materials and references are bound together by Claydon in nothing as benign as balance, but are held in the same space. Claydon insists on that space as one of collision, rather than the gentler juxtaposition, or collage. It recalls poet Ezra Pound's use of 'parataxis', in which starkly dissimilar fragments are brought together, and is a reflection of the artist's ability to "dispense with certain aspects of scientific rigour, and allow spurious narrative, as well as empirical veracity, to accrue around objects and to positively charge them, enhancing their social agency".⁷ That desire for dynamic charge is nowhere more explicit than in the use of powerful rare-earth magnets in recent works which, for example hold a piece of bark cloth in place in *Arafura — the Earth Becoming World*.

Writing about the work of Steven Claydon is full of opposing pairs: old and new, made and unmade, real and fake, typically forced into equivalent co-existence, in which neither is dominant, or posited as the more valid. With the projects for Mount Stuart and The Common Guild in 2017, there are undoubtedly some such pairings: the seemingly authentic but replica ethnographic objects; the waste / value dichotomy in the shredded money, for example. There are, however, also more complementary companions, equivalent alternatives and relationships rather than diametrical opposites: divergences.

1 Auguste invented the first 'bathyscaphe' for deep sea exploration, while Jean reached a record altitude in 1931.

2 "The Met collection is particularly strong in sculpture from the island of New Guinea, both from the Sepik River region in the northeast and from the Asmat people in the southwest. The works

on view range from elegant, relatively naturalistic figures from Polynesia and Island Southeast Asia; to angular, minimalist sculpture and decorative arts from Micronesia; to fantastic, otherworldly images of Melanesian ancestors and spirits; and the graceful figures and vibrant geometric compositions of Australian Aboriginal art." Met website.

3 Tobias Schneebaum, *Wild Man*, Viking Press, 1979, p.227

4 Claydon procured the shredded notes from the Royal Mint, which used to shred notes being taken out of circulation due to degradation or age.

5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *On the Line*, trans. John Johnson, Semiotext(e), MIT Press, 1983), p.22

6 From a conversation with Andrea Bellini and James Cahill in *Steven Claydon* (Ed. Andrea Bellini, Mousse Publishing, 2017), p.106.

7 Ibid., p.105