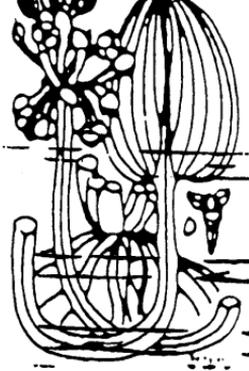




SUSAN GOLD:
Trophy Room

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Biography

Susan Gold

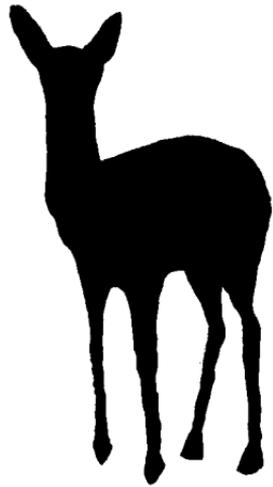
Susan Gold's solo exhibitions include, The Natural History Museum in London, England (2000); the Arts Cultural Center B.I.S. in Möchengladbach, Germany (1997); Upper Canada Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark (1996); the Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, ON (1993); Broadway Windows, New York City (1989); White Water Gallery, North Bay, ON (1987); Ace Art, Winnipeg, MB (1986); and Troy Art Gallery, Troy, Michigan (1984).

She has been included in numerous group exhibitions in Canada and the U.S., most recently in the Artists Access Gallery, Staten Island, New York (2002); Eastern Edge Gallery, St. John's, NF (2001); Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio (2001); Henry Street Settlement Gallery, New York, New York (2001); Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York (2000); Burlington Art Centre, Burlington, ON (2000); Spaces, Cleveland, Ohio (2000); Parry Sound District Museum, Parry Sound, ON (1999); Klein Gallery, Royal Oak, Michigan (annual); and earlier at Mercer Union, Toronto, ON (1993); and Franklin Furnace, New York, New York (1986).

Susan Gold studied at the Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, Maryland and Monteith College and Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

The artist lives in Windsor, ON, and is a Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Windsor. She maintains a studio north of Parry Sound, ON, in Nobel, which has supported much of her creative production.





SUSAN GOLD:
Trophy Room

TROPHY ROOM

Susan Gold's studio in northern Ontario is full of bird's nests, wood piled on cardboard, snowshoes lined up with rabbit lawn ornaments, skulls hung with sweet grass, science textbook illustrations, a profusion of test tubes, storage boxes and drawers, deer mounts looking at drawings of themselves, vernacular trophies and dead wildlife. What might appear as clutter is actually an organized and aligned inventory that, together with a massive image bank archive, await the artist's transfigurations. Susan Gold acknowledges that an important function of her studio practice is organizing these finds and that the activity of collecting is in itself a way of reckoning with the world. From this collection of personal trophies that speak of the ways in which Western culture tries to control and domesticate nature, evolved the exhibition *Trophy Room*.

Susan Gold has been working with nature as a subject of her art since the 1960s. In the past ten years, she has spent considerable time haunting museums of natural history that served as points of departure for art projects. Research forays led to investigations of the encyclopedic collections and behind-the-scenes practices of institutions like the museums of natural history in London and New York, as well as more idiosyncratic sites such as Walter Rothschild's Zoological Collection and the preserved homes of Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus.¹ She is interested as much in collections that represent the early scientist's processes of solitary reflection and experimentation in a domestic setting as the public spectacle of modern museums. Her hands-on approach to research has also involved working along side scientists at the Great Lakes Institute and Lake Baikal in Siberia. A safari collection temporarily stored in the Chatham-Kent Museum warehouse in Chatham served as inspiration for this exhibition that also incorporates research from several natural history collections.

Of particular fascination to Susan Gold are modes of presentation and the conventions of display. Since the nineteenth century, when image production and museum culture proliferated, exhibition display has become an increasingly public spectacle. She is also drawn to the



excesses and eccentricities of private collections that decorate Victorian studies and hunting lodges. Impressed by the ingenuity and bizarre associations of cheek-by-jowl arrangements of eclectic objects (imperialist trophies next to dressed-up fleas), she too adapts an aesthetics of analogy. *Trophy Room* reveals what the artist calls a "perceptible leakage" between signs of nature that blurs distinctions between observation, document and fable.² Representations of the natural world are returned to a complex web of associations. In the spirit of the allegorical universes displayed in early cabinets of curiosity called *Wunderkammer*, Susan Gold's skewed display of natural trophies also evokes a sense of "the marvelous, the bizarre and the uniqueness of the universe."³

An irrepressible collector herself, the artist easily adapts the guise of a natural scientist.⁴ She uses scientific methods to document and reframe the observable world through extensive fieldwork, resulting in the accumulation and ordering of data. As she has said, "All around me I see evidence of the similar practices of art and science – observing, handling, representing by analogy – similar ways of understanding through creative processes and, notably ending as many processes end, in naming, classifying, quantifying and creating hierarchies."⁵ In *Trophy Room* the visibility of methods of study – labels, storage systems, display technology – determines how we see the objects of study. Moreover, playing with the rhetoric of natural history display unravels the very notion of empirical evidence. By introducing an element of chaos and the irrational into scientific discourse, the uncertain outcomes and incoherence of its logic are exposed. Similarly, Susan Gold's pseudo-scientific installations, such as *A Natural History* (1993) and *Evidence Room* (2000), are crypto-laboratories where scientific inquiry has gone astray, perhaps even mad. These projects can be seen as a response to the expansion of natural science into increasingly artificial territories like biogenetic engineering, that makes questions of how our culture looks at and understands nature critical.

Undoubtedly informed by the critique of museums prevalent in contemporary art in the form of mock museums, interventions, museological systems of display and procedures that involve accumulation and collection,⁶ Susan Gold's approach to this subject emphasizes that

museum culture is a space of loss and cultural re-collection. Moreover, the very concept of natural history already carries a sense of loss in its articulation of the space between humans and the natural world. The artist's project is to bridge this gap, to bring the representation of living things and everything they mean to us together. After all, the popular lore and ancient fables associated with the plant and animal kingdoms still hold mystery and confound all reason, as *Trophy Room* reveals. The once reassuring taxonomies that confirmed an ordered universe here become reminders of the contradiction of portraying the living forces of nature through a display of inert, dead things – displaced, categorized and frozen in time and space. And of course, in order to become human possessions – as artifacts, game or data – they were already drained of life. Significantly, the dead creatures that inhabit this trophy room are presented in an enlivened state, often returning our scrutiny as if overcoming their circumstances as specimens under glass.

The installation is designed as a trajectory of gazes. The wary eyes of once wild animals look at one another or stare back at us. We are also confronted by the unforgiving, cotton-stuffed eyes of specimen rabbits and the imagined glares of phantom creatures under plastic. As with her exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London, *Looking at nature looking back* (2000), in which photographs of animal dioramas disrupt boundaries between viewer and viewed, *Trophy Room* is an unsettling space. Renderings of birds, fish, rabbits, rams and deer, regardless of the degree of realism, invite an encounter. As John Berger has noted, humans become uncomfortably aware of themselves returning the look of animals. Distances between people can be bridged by language, whereas with an animal, "its common lack of language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man."⁷ If animals are indeed sentient beings, messengers from nature, how can we reckon with this abyss? This sense of exclusion is evoked in the painting of a display case of *Artiodactyla*, entitled *Display of Muntjac* (2002). In this configuration of tiny, delicate creatures teetering on shelves, forever watching one another in their artificial container where the only allusion to a natural world is a floral background, animals seem vulnerable yet distant and unreachable. In Susan Gold's bestiary, as in this display case, a cultural reading of

animal lore (antlers that speak of the mercurial nature of the stag and cycles of life and death) is often rendered mute by the dominating rhetoric of display.

The montage of images comprising *Trophy Room* expresses the artist's preoccupation with visual play. She transforms visual material through various media and conversions. They are projected, photographed, drawn on, photocopied, faxed, mapped, digitized, reconstructed and painted on different surfaces – fabric, Mylar or paper. These permutations and variations test the limits of resemblance. At times, images deteriorate into abstract texture and, once laid over other distortions, become barely recognizable. In addition to computers, the artist's tools include discarded and faulty technology such as overhead projectors, Gestetner photocopiers and fax machines that transmit distorted information. Electronic transmission and reproduction therefore, is returned to a type of drawing that relates to early visual records of the natural world. In this way, the artist sets up a dance between hand and eye, machine and image, in a sequence of feedback loops that give credit to the potency of surprise and error. This can be a slow, contemplative dance over an extended period of time. (For example, she literally draws in the dark of night in



order to trace a projection, seeing the results only in daylight.) The artist's repetitive and obsessive processes are a way of talking back, a way of knowing things and perhaps a desire for reconciliation. Placing such value on chance encounters and participatory exchange is in keeping with her activities as a mail artist and producer of books, editions and multiples. She has called this form of communication with strangers around the world "cavorting", which also describes her playful engagement with visual materials in this exhibition. As is called for with mail art, *Trophy Room* celebrates the emancipatory aspects of reproduction and limitless possibilities and acknowledges the necessity of accepting a state of incompleteness. Susan Gold's assertion of presence through drawing, as a form of writing and thinking, in itself implies process and contingency.

Writing – also a way of "making present" – infiltrates the mute stillness of this exhibition with chatter. Scribbles, erasures, distorted type, backwards writing and the occasional legible phrase punctuate the images. The writing is excerpted from a Michel Foucault text that proposes that language should be studied as a thing in nature, "like animals, plants or stars, its elements have their laws of affinity and convenience, their necessary analogies."⁸ The interplay of sign and its likeness in Susan Gold's art is consonant with Foucault's idea that "...real language is not a totality of independent signs.... It is rather, an opaque, mysterious thing, closed in upon itself, a fragmented mass, its enigma renewed in every interval, which combines here and there with the forms of the world and becomes interwoven with them..."⁹ Such a living network of marks that interweaves language and image is manifest in *Trophy Room*. For example, *Deer Mounts: Three Views* (2001), a hieratic triptych of a long-dead taxidermy deer head, seems in a reawakened state. The stag, painted directly from "life", has an uncanny presence. "Its enigma renewed", the head emerges from an abstract network of language codes in a conflation of two unreadable sign systems. Throughout this exhibition, words and signs function as clues, as emblems of the cultural world. Text appears as an indecipherable calligraphy that mutates into a texture interwoven with the thing represented, as in *Writing Things* (2002), a drawing of a screaming rabbit head overlaid with illegible script. *Drawing out of Context* (2002) begins with a legible sentence, "real language is not a totality...", then quickly

morphs into squiggly lines, like a Morse code message that lost contact. The words that do pop out – “such has no letters into nature science here is field another” – merge into a poetic message. The fragmentary language in these artworks is, in a sense, held accountable as a necessary tool for knowledge.

Another visual sign system in *Trophy Room* is the *Systema Naturae* of Linnaeus, who also wanted to close the distance between natural things and language through name giving and classification that was the foundation of his natural history. He developed a system for classifying plants, minerals, animals and some diseases based on likeness and difference that forms the basis of our modern classification system. It is a living archive that still functions as a taxonomy and continues to expand. Susan Gold adds permutations and eccentric marks to Linnaeus’s strict system for measuring nature. Several oil on linen works in *Trophy Room* imitate a herbarium sample – a collage of names, numbers, seed packets, a measuring device, a flattened plant or animal, and occasionally, a flourish in a corner. Stained onto raw linen as if embedded in parchment paper, they are barely visible. They are treated as a form of text similar to a Linnaeus “calligram” – a visual representation of a natural object that is “emptied of resemblances”.¹⁰ This reduction of meaning to abstractions is taken further in *Mute Signs* (1999-2002), a long Mylar sheet printed with photocopies of botanical images, with graphite drawings of rabbit and deer heads along the sides. Here, an Enlightenment translation of Linnaeus’s sexual system for the universal organization of plants (based on the number of pistils and stamens) is layered with an Ikea wallpaper version of his botanical prints of North American plants. In all these translations, sign systems break down and information becomes garbled. This decorative patterning is suggestive of how popular science can domesticate natural history into consumable kitsch. The translucent Mylar sheets of *Mute Signs* reference the domestic in a similar way to *Curtain Calls* (1999), an installation of free-hanging georgette curtains printed with wild animals in display cases. *Mute Signs* curls on the floor as if transmitting an endless feed of data. The idea that this delicate scroll of wisdom might eventually reveal the “secrets of nature” is lost in the flurry of representations that distort any reading of the natural world.

Susan Gold's sustained reflections on the intersections of art, science and technology are critical to all aspects of her art production. In *Trophy Room*, she is as self-conscious about the effects of reproduction as about rendering directly from life models – museum specimens, roadkill and taxidermy. She fully exploits the irony of painting dead plants and animals realistically. For instance, the *Rabbit* series refers to the tradition of Western genre painting, specifically nineteenth-century *trompe l'oeil* still lifes of hunting bounty, which she copied as a child at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Rabbit corpses are delicately rendered in a way that makes their presence palpable, and some seem to emerge from the surrounding stain as if a living force. In the collage, *November* (2002), a xerox of a glowing white body of a snowshoe hare protrudes eerily from under a floral patterned veil of Mylar. In *Hanging* (2001), a cluster of partridges and hares displayed as hunting trophies is related to the cold rationality of natural science with its nametags and numbers, and precision. In *Rabbit (3)* (2002), the vague figure of a white rabbit merges with a milky glaze of botanical drawings. Softly blurred, this elegiac painting of a ghostly creature seems to be dissolving into nebulous tissue. Dead or alive is a question that surfaces throughout the exhibition. The elusiveness of such distinctions is expressed in the painting, *Fenrir* (2000), in which a dog lies as if close to death, his eyes glazed with a faraway look, its realism capturing that interregnum state. A haptic sense of animal presence is accentuated by the material quality of Susan Gold's wildlife paintings: unstretched tapestries of raw linen primed with rabbit skin glue that hang like skins.

The sense of looking through an opaque lens – the veils and fade-outs, concealments and effacements – that permeates this exhibition alludes to the contingencies of observation, of knowledge. Typical of her artworks, the desaturated colours, predominantly shades of grey produced by technologies of replication, distill the verbosity of realistic detail. This gesture of emptying out of meaning is typical of her approach to images. Once "cleansed of colour", as Linnaeus would say of a *calligram*, images are reduced to signs, to a diagrammatic text that closes the distance between living things and their representation. This sense that the natural world is slipping out of focus, floating in some in-between

space, can also be interpreted as a type of mourning, a release of our hold on lost objects. The ram heads in *How Do I Paint?* (2000) hover in mutable states of existence, through different translations of rendering. With *In Between* (2002), deer taxidermy seen through distorting folds of plastic appear as apparitions. The interplay of transparency and obscurity disrupts fixed categories of same and other. Enticed into an active deciphering, we find that classifications shift and merge, and occasionally become fantastical. How to translate our understanding of the natural world therefore remains an elusive question.

There is a discursive power to the fugitive images and disturbances that animate *Trophy Room*. Like the allegorical universes in *Wunderkammer* collections, it "incarnates a dream of connectedness, the encyclopedic will to comprehend remote or farfetched things by bringing them within the intimate grasp of our very being."¹¹ This recognition of the interconnectedness of fragments can be seen as a way to "rectify the vessels", to heal the world as suggested by Judaic legends of creation.¹² Gathering, indexing and classifying fragments is a ceaseless mapping process that in this exhibition is a way of thinking, a form of tracking relationships. Through a network of correspondences, the artist inscribes a space for a consideration of our relationship to the natural world. With a collector's desire to make sense, Susan Gold opens up a domain of possibilities through taxonomy, to connect mute signs back to the things themselves. The work reinforces the idea that collecting involves "...starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie."¹³ *Trophy Room* summons the visitor to make their own analogies, to find temporary coherence.

– *Helga Pakasaar*

Endnotes:

1. Born Carl von Linné in 1707, his common name that the artist uses, Carolus Linnaeus was also called the second Adam that indicates the relevance of his natural history classification system.

2. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* points out that natural history before Linnaeus placed a living being within the whole semantic network that connected it to the world and made no divisions between observation, document and fable.

3. See: Anthony Alan Shelton, "Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collection and the Incorporation of the New World", in *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.177-203.

4. As with Susan Gold, the persona of natural scientist adapted by contemporary artists, such as Joan Fontcuberta in *Fauna Secreta*, most of Mark Dion's projects and the biogenetic 'experiments' of Eduardo Gac, is not simply fictive but also involves enacting scientific inquiry.

5. Susan Gold, notes for "Drawing out of Context" lecture at Nordic Association for Canadian Studies Conference, University of Stockholm, Sweden, 2002.

6. I am thinking not only of institutional critique but also the taxonomical systems of conceptual art, unruly 'garage aesthetic' installations and diverse approaches to archival and collection projects.

7. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p.4.

8. Michel Foucault, "The Prose of the World", in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p.34.

9. *Ibid*, p.35.

10. In his treatise, "Philosophic Botanique" Linnaeus describes calligrams as: "emptied of all resemblances, cleansed even of their colours, visual representation will now at last provide natural history with what constitutes a proper object." Cited in Susan Gold, "The Texture of Knowledge: A Visual Artist Explores the Nature of Early Science Through the Collections of Linnaeus and Thunberg" in *Canada and the Nordic Countries in Times of Reorientation: Culture and Politics*, ed. Jørn Carlsen, Nordic Association of Canadian Studies, Vol.13, 1987, University of Aarhus, Denmark.

11. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), p.206.

12. As Susan Gold has said: "the activity of the artist making connections, for me, relates to the Kabbalistic description of creation where the vessels of creation exploded and fragments permeated the world. Our work on earth is to put the fragments together, one by one, healing the universe." From "Drawing out of Context" lecture notes.

13. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p.152.





TROPHY ROOM

List of Works:

Drawing out of Context, 2002
oil and graphite on photocopied mylar
129 x 91 cm.

Fenrir, 2000
oil on cotton
91 x 152 cm.

Gazelle, 2002, a/p,
photocopied paper, vellum
28 x 22 cm.

How Do I Paint? 2000
oil and graphite on linen
249 x 203 cm.

In Between, 2002
oil on linen
183 x 119 cm.

Mute Signs, 1999-2002
graphite on photocopied mylar
366 x 91 cm.

November, 2002, a/p,
photocopied paper, vellum
38 x 28 cm.

One by One, 2002
oil and graphite on photocopied mylar
366 x 91 cm.

Studio Encounter, 2002, a/p,
photocopied paper, vellum
28 x 22 cm.

Trophy Room: Deer Mounts, Three Views, 2001
oil on linen
3 panels: 213 x 89 cm. each

Trophy Room: Display of Muntjac, 2002
oil on linen
188 x 137 cm.

Trophy Room: Hanging, 2001
oil on linen
173 x 137 cm.

Trophy Room: Herbarium Sample, 2001
oil on linen
211 x 150 cm.

Trophy Room: Linné's Samples, 2001
oil on linen
211 x 150 cm.

Trophy Room: Linné's Fish, 2001
oil on linen
175 x 137 cm.

Trophy Room: Rabbit (1), 2001
oil on linen
213 x 145 cm.

Trophy Room: Rabbit (2), 2002
oil on linen
185 x 137 cm.

Trophy Room: Rabbit (3), 2002
oil on linen
185 x 137 cm.

Writing Things (1), 2002
oil and graphite on paper
96 x 127 cm.

Writing Things (2), 2002
oil and graphite on paper
96 x 127 cm.



TROPHY ROOM

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Guest Curator: Helga Pakasaar
Editor: Laura Wilkinson
Photography: Julie Sando
Design: MCL for Obscure
Printing: Windsor Print & Litho Ltd.

ISBN 1-894651-19-7



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The **Thames Art Gallery** gratefully acknowledges the financial support of The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Municipality of Chatham-Kent.



The **Thames Art Gallery** also acknowledges the following galleries for their involvement in and support of the touring exhibition *Trophy Room* and its accompanying publication:

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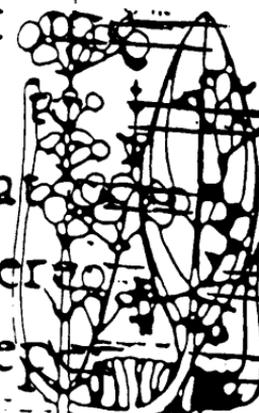
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