

# antennae

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# Empire of Bones

*This folio of drawings is accompanied by an essay that recounts Lorraine Simms's process and experience working in the collections of the Mammalogy Department at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Here, the artist considers the afterlife of animal artifacts; like any obsessive practice her drawings demand to be considered in relation to time. Simultaneously present and absent these shadowy animal traces connect with key environmental issues, such as habitat loss and the extinction of animal species. They stand as poetic meditations on change and loss, appearing as silent witnesses to the gradual disappearance of the wild.*

text and images by **Lorraine Simms**

**B**etween the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow

T S Eliot<sup>1</sup>

When navigating the darkened halls of a natural history museum I am always aware of the cast shadows surrounding the animal forms. Fixed in their glass display cases and lit by multiple spotlights, the stillness or *deadness* of the specimens contrasts with the almost spiritual play of shadows dancing on the walls around them, shadows as elusive as the nature of the animals displayed.

My current drawings faithfully represent the cast shadows of a wide range of animal artifacts, including taxidermy specimens and the skins and bones of North American mammals considered vulnerable, endangered or iconic. In 2018, I was given privileged access to the collections in the Mammalogy Department of the American Museum of Natural History in New York where I worked with the bones and skins of many animals, including whales, bears, bison, hares, and wolves.<sup>2</sup> Conjuring immateriality and disappearance, these drawings bring to light the overlooked, or the unseen, as shadows in natural history display cases often are.

Founded in 1869, the extensive collections of the Mammalogy Department are among the oldest in the museum. Their storage areas, spread out across the museum, contain both fully documented animal specimens and those that have entered the collections with incomplete provenance or data. I was approved to work with the latter. These “no-data” specimens are often older, from an age of discovery when pertinent information was either not fully recorded or was somehow lost, making them unsuitable for comparative or analytical purposes.

While I expected comparable bones from different genera to be similar in morphology, I did not anticipate their tremendous differences in size and weight, their pungent smells and their discoloration, or more accurately, their *colouration* compared to the bleached white of commercially prepared bones and the plastic replicas I was accustomed to working with. Their tawny colours and waxy surfaces seemed to be the result of older methods of procurement and preservation. As well, older bones and skins, prepared using processes that include the use of chemicals such as arsenic, are exquisite but toxic. This toxicity would account for the smell.

There were other aspects of this research that I did not anticipate. Whether robust or fragile, the specimens felt vulnerable. I was not prepared for the feelings of love, sympathy, respect, or awe I experienced. Drawers of bones, classified according to species and body part (skulls, feet, hands, etc.), stood in for sizeable numbers of individual animals. Paradoxically, the slightest physical variations within these specimen groups prompted me to contemplate the individuality of these once-living animals. Like us, animals are born, live and die. No-data animal objects hold their stories close. Their collected bones remain, mute, relics of individual lives. Both records and harbingers, my shadow drawings call up the individual animal and its separation from its living, breathing counterparts in the wild. Caught “between the idea and the reality,”<sup>3</sup> my shadowy drawn forms occupy

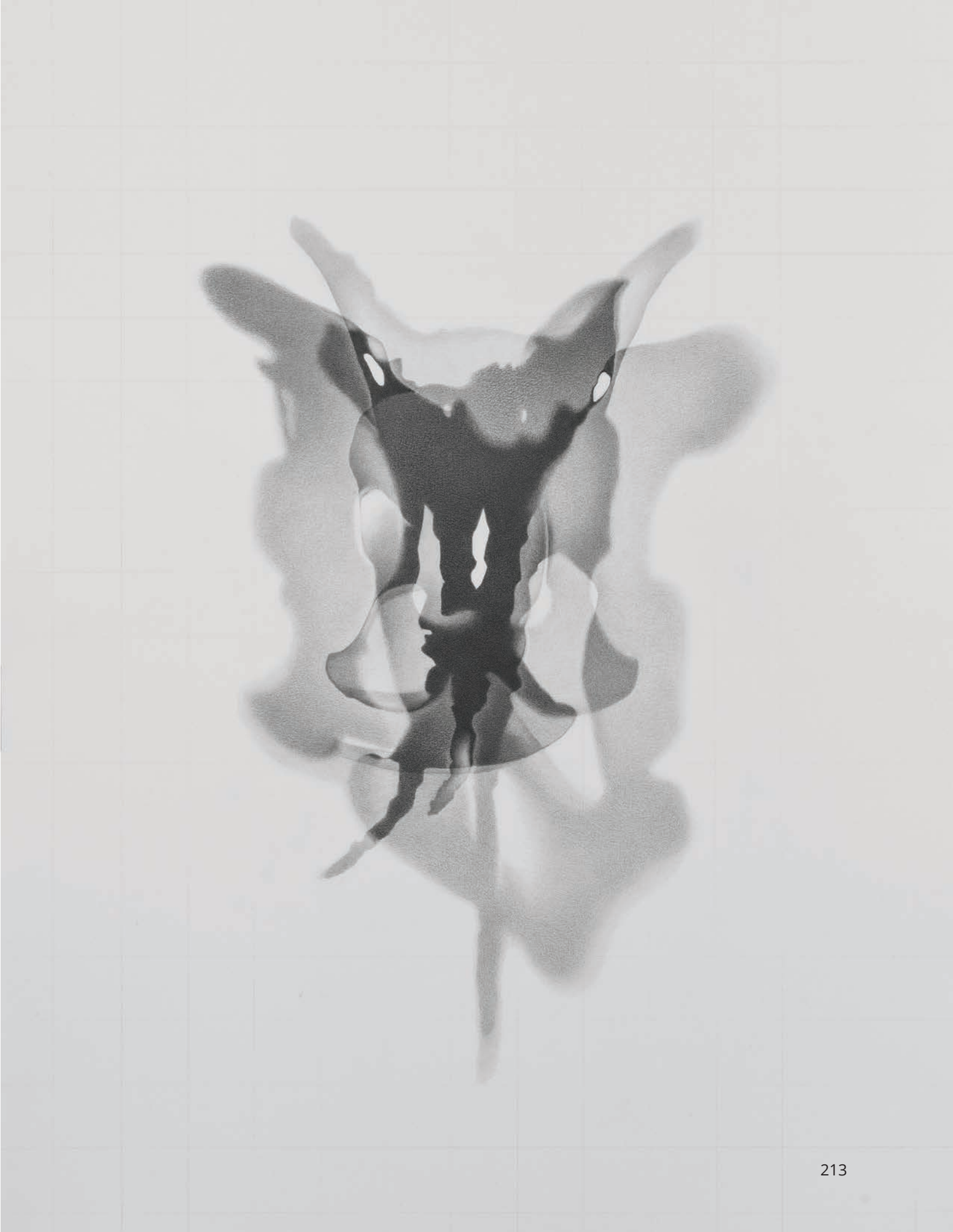
**Lorraine Simms**

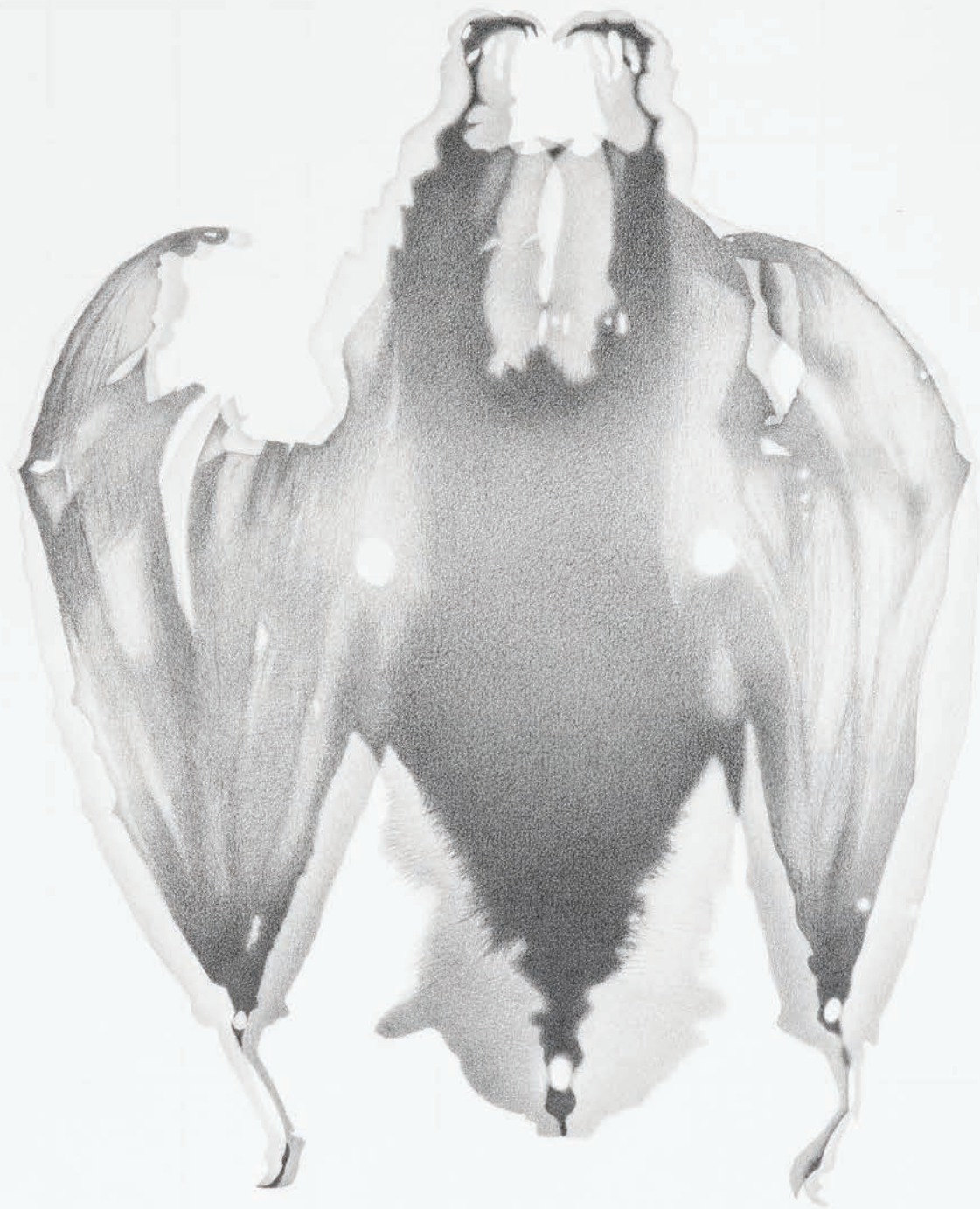
Right: *Ursus maritimus* (Pelvis & Tail, AMNH 14057) graphite on acid-free paper, 2019, 101 cm x 75 cm (40 x 29.5 inches)

Previous page: detail of above.

Photo: Paul Litherland

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**Lorraine Simms**

*Pteropus edulis, Manilla (Skin, AMNH 44280)*, graphite on acid-free paper, 2018, 76 cm x 56 cm (30 x 22 inches)  
Photo: Paul Litherland

© Lorraine Simms

an interstitial space, one that demarcates the psychological distance between humans and other animals, and the distance between the living and the dead. This ambiguity, this *in-betweenness*, allows them to speak metaphorically and poetically.

Each time I entered the museum I was reminded of the complicated and often contradictory ways we envision animals and nature. The transition between private and public areas is marked by a dramatic contrast in noise levels. Moving between the quiet corridors and hushed workrooms reserved for solitary contemplation and display halls teeming with raucous, enthusiastic visitors, I observed the complex coexistence of science and spectacle. My feelings of compassion, generated by close contact with remnant bones, gave way to feelings of wonder in the museum galleries where taxidermied animals are arranged in evocative tableaux. The marvelous dioramas created by Carl Akeley continue to beguile me with their theatrical realism, even as I question the underlying ideals that supported their creation. Akeley's process and attention to detail created new standards for the art of taxidermy and museum displays, one aspect of which was to fashion animals into poses relating their essential character, poses deemed *typical*. As such, these animals lose their individual histories to function as exemplars of their species. As Jane Desmond writes, "each individual mount becomes, if not a representative of an "ideal type" (tiger, duck, deer, et cetera), at least an idealized version of an individual."<sup>4</sup> Assembled into groups, these taxidermied animals dramatize familial and social relationships that have been fashioned through a human lens. These anthropomorphic interpretations are intended to foster a closer sense of kinship; however, they also reinforce species hierarchies.

The stories we weave around taxidermied animals are very different from the ones told by their bones. In her comprehensive investigation of taxidermy, Rachel Poliquin writes,

All taxidermy is a choreographed spectacle of what nature means to particular audiences at particular historical moments. The longing to capture an animal's aesthetic presence with taxidermy invariably exhibits not just beasts but particular ways of thinking about the natural world... Daydreams and animal skins blur together to create a spectacle that erases its own artificiality.<sup>5</sup>

The boisterous world of spectacle in the museum galleries relies on viewers to complete their narratives – but these narratives are changing. The amazement and curiosity surrounding the wondrous variety of animals and natural forms that spurred the creation of natural history museums is slowly being replaced by feelings of loss, such as those I experienced when handling animal bones or viewing the White Rhinoceros "family" diorama (a species teetering on extinction). Originally focused on presenting animals in orderly classifications (with implied hierarchies), these spaces now include reflections on endangered global ecosystems and social responsibility.

### **Shadow Theatre**

When teaching human anatomy to art students, I run my fingers over the contours of the human skeleton, delineating bones while explaining their functions. I am often surprised to see my students energetically mirroring my actions, enthusiastically tracing the contours on



**Lorraine Simms**

*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*  
(Skull, partial, AMNH 181411),

graphite on acid-free paper,

2019, 97 cm x 127 cm

(38 x 50 inches)

Photo: Paul Litherland

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**Lorraine Simms**

*Bison bison (Pelvis, AMNH 90301)*

graphite on acid-free paper,

2019, 112 cm x 76 cm

(44 x 30 inches)

Photo: Paul Litherland

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their own bodies. Deep in the storage vaults of the museum, working alone in the near dark, I was often reminded of this mirroring process. Tracing the multifaceted shadows cast by animal bones I could clearly observe similarities between these animal bones and my own, and yet, the more I discovered, the further the animals retreated into unknowability, into a mysterious silence outside language. In these intimate encounters the animals began to speak to me through their shadows.

The knowledge that my drawings are direct transcriptions of actual shadows, not scaled representations, expands their imaginative possibilities. The drawing process begins when I place an animal bone or skin directly on my drawing paper and arrange my portable lights around the specimen. The multiple cast shadows are meticulously traced and documented; it is an encounter that is physically engaging (almost gymnastic when working with larger specimens), as I must draw around and under the bones without moving them. Subsequently, I shade these overlapping penumbrae using graphite or conté crayon, relying on my references, my understanding of chiaroscuro and my imagination to complete the drawings. The demanding process of transforming traced outlines into shadowed drawings is one of distillation, whereby a fleeting moment becomes an uncanny form. During long periods of engagement, while no more than a few inches of paper are covered with even, overlapping marks, I reflect on the enigma of these silent figures and the distance between myself and other animals comes into focus.

Shadows are surprisingly three-dimensional – the closer an object is to the paper the clearer the focus and cleaner the drawn edge. They are also luminous. Light penetrates the shaded areas, it reflects, refracts and scatters, phenomena I convey by weaving even lines into loose or dense strata. This gradual accretion of lines creates textures that give the transparent shadows an unexpected physicality. Like photograms and frottages these drawings record impressions of a specific animal-artifact at a specific time. They are indexical signs that maintain an indelible link to the material world. As traces of an authentic experience these drawings underscore their (and my) direct contact with these relics of individual lives. Similarly, their titles are exact transcriptions of the information on their tags. These direct encounters brought me into close contact with skulls, teeth, hands, limbs... Animals I will never view from such close proximity in life became measures of my own body. My own smallness or bigness was amplified, creating a shifting sense of scale (like Alice) that strongly resonated. This somatic and reflective space has a direct parallel with the viewing space of art where both mind and body are engaged.

#### **Out of Time or Time Travel**

Time is embodied in different ways throughout the museum. In the public galleries, the taxidermied animals exist outside time, as symbols of the “timelessness of nature,” while the reconstructed dinosaurs occupy a distant past. In the Mammalogy Department, the animal bones and skins exist somewhere in between, as their continuous use in current academic studies brings them into an eternal present.

What my artworks share with scientific investigation is deep and persistent looking. Hours of concentrated focus and energy crystallize in finished drawings that evoke an expanded sense of time.





#### Lorraine Simms

Previous page: *Eubalaena glacialis* NY (AMNH 42752) - detail graphite on acid-free paper, 2018, 122 cm x 165 cm (48 x 65 inches)

Left: *Ursus maritimus* (Skull, Male, Version 1, AMNH 22885) conté on black acid-free paper, 2018, 76 cm x 56 cm (30 x 22 inches) Photo: Paul Litherland

© Lorraine Simms

ous shape-shifters, my drawings convey both the momentary and the Mysterious vast expanse of geologic time. The journey from presence to absence is marked by a fleeting shadow, fixed in place by the carbon dust that is the very stuff of life on our planet.

My drawings also articulate time in their relationship to art history. Representations of bones have a long history in Western art, often appearing in still life or *nature morte* and trompe l'oeil. Informed by these related pictorial traditions, my works interact dialectically with these genres to explore the deeper cultural and personal significance of animal artifacts. My drawings open a reflective space from which to consider the spiritual dimension of animals, our intertwined histories and future evolution.

Animals cast their shadows over us, just as we cast a shadow of a different kind over them. In my drawings, shadows remain as ethereal echoes of animal forms, beautiful and haunting. They evoke a shadowy land where animal archetypes seem to flicker and dance on the periphery of awareness, signaling the gradual disappearance of the wild.

#### Endnotes

[1] T. S. Elliot, "The Hollow Men," 1925.

[2] I wish to thank the following people for their assistance in the realization of this project: Ross MacPhee, Curator, Department of Mammalogy, Division of Vertebrate Zoology; Eleanor Hoeger, Senior Museum Specialist, Department of Mammalogy; Sara Ketelsen, Museum Specialist, Department of Mammalogy; and Marisa Surovy, Museum Specialist, Department of Mammalogy.

[3] Elliot, "The Hollow Men."

[4] Jane C. Desmond, *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 35.

[5] Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), 95.

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**Lorraine Simms** is a visual artist, educator and curator living in Montreal, Canada. Her drawings engage with concepts of temporality and disappearance to address the ongoing pressure on species and habitats taking place worldwide. Simms holds an MFA from Concordia University in Montreal and an AOCA from the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto. Her artwork has been exhibited across Canada and the United States, including the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (Québec), the Beaverbrook Art Gallery (Fredericton), and the Musée des beaux arts de Mont-Saint-Hilaire (Québec). Exhibitions of her work have frequently been reviewed in art magazines and journals, including *Canadian Art* and *Border Crossings*, and her work and practice was the subject of a Bravo TV documentary in the *Shaping Art* series. She has received numerous grants from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Canada Council for the Arts.