

Cecelia Condit ponders extinction in video fable at Lynden Sculpture Garden

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel *March 27, 2017*

Cecelia Condit has transformed the language of fables and fairy tales into a pointed, poignant elegy. Using toy masks and a sparse theatricality, she has created a contemporary, visceral reflection on species extinction and the lonely, silent world that will ensue from it.

Condit's current exhibit at the Lynden Sculpture Garden, 2145 W. Brown Deer Rd., highlights two large film projections set side-by-side entitled "Tales of a Future Past."

What is most remarkable to me about Condit's film is her ability to utilize almost comical props – rubber animal masks and taxidermy models – and transform them into a fully realized dramatic vocabulary. The film requires an exquisitely minimal amount of production to obtain its power. Condit has created a modern fable that lingered deeply in my mind.

We see a lone woman in a giraffe mask walking in the forest. She is in a simple dress and carries a small creature, some cross between a newborn animal and a desiccated corpse. In her travels she comes across another of these creatures and also claims it as her own. The scene is filmed in stark black and white and is quiet, perhaps even serene at first.

The narrative is interspersed with color footage of an actual giraffe, with close-up images of its fur pattern and loping gait, its dark eyes eliciting empathy and sorrow. At one point a woman's voice speaks. "Vibrations. Extinctions. Who do you see when you look at me?"

The film is enveloped in a soundscape of entropic music and animal noise composed by Renato Umali. The two projections cut sharply back and forth between the giraffe's nomadic wandering and a second female character, that of a looming and baleful zebra who appears to jealously stalk the giraffe. A close-up of the zebra's head shows a detail of blood red within its eye that flashes startlingly in the black and white scene.

The giraffe finds shelter in the forest and huddles with her foundling children, falling into a deep sleep. Her ensuing dream breaks over the viewer in lurid color. The giraffe dreams of calamity – storms, flood and fire. She startles in a panic, her waking world now also in full color. Her dreams of disaster seem to follow her as she continues to walk into the forest.

The giraffe encounters the zebra and offers up one of her children. A strange mix of human and animalistic struggle ensues. The zebra knocks the giraffe to the ground and steals her child, moving off into the forest. The end of the film shows the zebra spray painting black stripes onto the child creature, transforming it into a familiar, her own. Footage of zebras stampeding endlessly emerge from the center edge of both screens and fill our view. The woman speaks again. "Who will remember me?"

The narrative of this film is oblique and mysterious, but it speaks clearly, and ominously, of our relationship to nature and of our worst inclinations. Condit's moral is not didactic. She does not suppose to know how to engage more positively with the natural world. Her animal characters, like other fairytale animals, are of course archetypes for humanity. They attack, nurture and devour as they always have, as is their nature, perhaps.

Condit's film ends with a view of a starry night sky above the wilderness. Perhaps this view of heaven itself can bring salvation. We cannot know, and Cecilia Condit doesn't say.

"Tales of Future Past" includes the titular film among accompanying prints and film in the entry of the interior galleries. The exhibit is part of the Lynden Sculpture Garden's "Women, Nature, Science" series and is on view through June 25. For more information visit lydensculpturegarden.org.

Rafael Francisco Salas is an artist, an associate professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor.



An image from Cecelia Condit's video "Tales of a Future Past" (2017).
(Photo: Cecelia Condit)