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GALLERIES

At the zoo

BY DAVID BALZER   May 12, 2010 21:05

NATURAL HISTORY ***

To May 29. Mon-Sat noon-5pm.

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 7 Hart

House. 416-978-8398.

www.jmbgallery.ca.

THE BROTHEL WITHOUT WALLS

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To May 29. Tue-Fri noon-5pm; Sat

noon-4pm. University of Toronto

Art Centre, 15 King's College.

416-978-1838.

www.utac.utoronto.ca.

Mere steps away from each other, University of Toronto Art Centre and Justina M. Barnicke Gallery are currently hosting complementary shows about the entrapment and exploitation of living things. At Barnicke, "Natural History," in some measure inspired, according to curator Jennifer Rudder, by the mesmerizing dioramas at New York's American Museum of Natural History (and, presumably, by others, such as those at Vienna's Naturhistorisches Museum), looks at the display culture surrounding animals and, occasionally and by association, humans. UTAC hosts one of CONTACT's feature exhibitions, "The Brothel Without Walls," its title taken from the subtitle of the "Photography" chapter in Marshall McLuhan's Understanding Media, which is in part about how "the camera tends to turn people into things."

While worth seeing, both shows suffer from anticlimax. Given its topic, "Natural History" should boast more terror and sublimity — indeed, the show is about concepts both spectacular and horrific — but has its glorious moment with its first work (which, then, you may want to save for last, pace the exhibition map). Mircea Cantor's Deeparture is a two-and-a-half-minute video of a wolf and a deer confined within a gallery. The riff appears to be on Joseph Beuys, whose I Like America and America Likes Me performance had him confined in a gallery for three days with a coyote. Cantor's piece eradicates the ego of Beuys' idea and, while

predator and prey do not go at each other, creates a chilling tension both visceral and metaphysical (note also Cantor's play with angles and editing). Other works in the show — the best of them by Trevor Gould, who contributes both sculpture and paintings — have staler, simpler views of animal captivity as a metaphor for colonialism and historical injustice.

"The Brothel Without Walls" at UTAC is perplexing on many levels. One is grateful for a McLuhan primer in the ante-gallery, an exhibition brochure and brief panel text inside, but all of them still don't quite get at the nuances of the theorist's phrase. Germany's Joachim Schmid, who was specifically influenced by Understanding Media, is responsible for some of the show's most trite, flat work — spaces of online sex workers vacated of bodies that the brochure tells us are supposed to read as "bare and sad."

Susan Anderson's shiny, pink portraits of American child beauty pageants (pictured) seem passé and too-easy in their messaging; the same can be said of Evan Baden's portraits of amateur online porn models. Christopher Wahl's photos of the prep work that goes into news broadcasting are good (they provide a counterpoint for, and are smarter than, fellow contributor Jessica Dimmock's photos of paparazzi), but the whole enterprise would've been much better serviced through less didactic work. Indeed, McLuhan's hallmark as a public intellectual was eschewing didacticism, and lessons he taught about media wariness (only part of his gospel of media literacy) young children can now recite in their sleep.

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