A CONVERSATION WITH: DAVID HOFFOS

Collin Zipp

David Hoffos is widely recognized for his series of unique multimedia installations that draw inspiration from a variety of sources; archaic special effects, illusion, and cinematic techniques. In this new work titled *The Lost Minutes: Shadow of the Platypus*, he explores the relationships between Big History, personal recollections, and the natural world to create an imaginary Museum of the Monotreme. David Hoffos challenges and reinterprets the traditional representation of the lens-based image by using a no-glasses 3D display system that mixes cinematic presentation with Pepper’s Ghost video effects. Hoffos blends these experiential technologies with historical and museological representations to collapse both time and viewer expectation.

The following interview was conducted in August of 2015 and addresses themes central to the artist’s installation and practice.
Collin Zipp - *The Lost Minutes: Shadow of the Platypus* is the start of a new body of work, and comes shortly after a recently completed six-year-long project (*Scenes From the House Dream*). Can you talk about what it’s like to start fresh? How do you begin?

David Hoffos - Towards the end of the *Scenes from the House Dream* tour I had already begun taking stock, clearing the decks, and dealing with the fallout of such a long and complicated project – there were considerable storage issues, I moved house and studio, set up an office space and waited for the phone to ring. The phone was strangely silent, so I distracted myself with new challenges. I pursued some public art commissions and eventually completed two permanent sculpture projects in 2014 and 2015. I also began some experiments in collage and other low-pressure modes of object making. When I finally came back around to the question of “What’s next?” for my installation practice (the phone had started to ring again), it seemed natural and automatic to be conceptualizing another large, multi-year series of works. The early stage of the process was familiar – I collected some objects that would inspire me and become central props and symbols for each of the “scenes” (a platypus skeleton, an Apollo 11 lunar lander model, a large inflatable Earth model, a collection of salesman's samples, etc.). During the collecting and day dreaming phase of creation I’m running on intuition; there’s no defined intention, no narrative, just a nebulous impulse and a desire to allow that sense of mystery to survive the design process.

CZ - How far are you willing to let intuition guide you before you feel a need to tighten the reigns and take complete control of the work?

DH - When a project is in the earliest pre-visioning phase, all I’ve got is intuition and patience. It’s almost like fishing – I’ve got a line out, I’m trolling the depths, and eventually I catch something. I don’t know what it is right away, but if it stays with me for a while I pursue it. I’m careful to preserve its “wildness” and mystery as long as possible, but eventually it must be captured and subdued. During the design and construction phase, it is all about control – control of light, of space, of scale, of effects, of the viewer. “Complete control” is never the goal, though. I’ve learned to resist the temptation of trying to perfect a technique – when an effect is just barely working, when it is “good enough”, as long as it conveys the feeling of the original vision (and often something new and unexpected) then I am satisfied.

CZ - Is there something beneficial for you to work in a place free of expectation and rules?

DH - As far as rules and expectations go, I’m not sure that I am free of them. I think my way of working creates a new set of rules that is perhaps just as rigid – I need the gallery to be dark or even black, lighting is strictly controlled, false walls position the viewer, for example.

CZ – This new work is uniquely different from your previous installations. It appears more virtual and less sculptural. Can you speak to this?

DH - As I began to visualize how the pieces might loosely come together for *The Lost
Min<sub>utes</sub> series, I naturally thought of Scenes from the House Dream as a kind of template – and I immediately saw a warning there. There is an aspect of Scenes that is pretty impractical and materially wasteful – the large crates and shipments, the long install, the sheer volume of stuff, the gallons of black paint, the mountain of building materials that could end up in a dumpster – and I knew that I would have to at least begin to address these problems if I were to continue making installations. The first step was to eliminate shipping (and storage) altogether. The video and audio elements would be prepared in advance, and the piece would be built from scratch on site. This approach required the development of display strategies that I had already been trying out on some recent projects (Japanese Garden, Yukon Souvenir, Follower), basically a Cinerama/Pepper's Ghost combo that could allow for the insertion of varied content and provide a crude no-glasses 3-D effect. With this kind of changing display, the viewer is more stationary (but still ambulatory), eliminating the need for a giant labyrinth of false walls and windows and doorways. I can imagine getting closer – but not all the way - to a complete dematerialization of the work, as long as I can still make the illusions work.

CZ - There exists a feeling of uneasiness and anxiety in your installations. Do you invoke this intentionally? Is this an important part of the work?

DH - In my early installations, there was often a conscious effort to convey a sense of fear/dread/anxiety. I was attempting to construct and deconstruct the mechanics of cinematic suspense, to nudge the viewer into a state of alertness, tension and expectation. In later works, this kind of model became just a natural part of my vocabulary — and sometimes even became the unintentional major theme of the work. As I look back on Scenes from the House Dream, I can now see clearly that the entire series is about the conditions of the age we live in; it is about anxiety, melancholy, depression, addiction — but I had thought I was making something about childhood, wonder, domesticity, dreams, the night. I think it’s telling — and the key element of the work — that this undercurrent of dread would push itself to the surface, free of my conscious intentions.

CZ - Your work seems heavily rooted in storytelling. Do you consider yourself a storyteller?

DH - Well, perhaps I’m a frustrated (or frustrating) storyteller. I’m more interested in the story world than the story itself. My narratives are truncated — more like suspended moments — but I do like to play with a palette that includes stage craft, special effects, set design, cinematography, and visual and aural cues that reference certain genres of storytelling. I leave out some of the key elements like character and plot. My characters are more like “types”, anonymous, interchangeable and mute. The only character that I’m truly interested in is the viewer. They are special, unique, with a real back-story — and, ideally, they project a bit of their psyche into my story worlds. I set the stage, but I rely on the viewer to fill in the gaps.
David Hoffos was born in Montréal and grew up in a string of cities in Ontario, Alberta, and Australia. He began making experimental films at the age of 10. Hoffos attended the Department of Art at the University of Lethbridge in 1990 where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1994. Since 1992 Hoffos has maintained an active practice with over 50 group shows, hundreds of screenings, dozens of school and community collaborations, a few works for the stage and over 40 solo exhibitions, including a recent survey at the National Gallery of Canada. In 2010 his touring 5-year installation series, Scenes from the House Dream, was showcased at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, ACAD, and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. In 2014 Hoffos completed permanent public sculpture projects in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge. He has received awards including the Images Grand Prize, 2007, and a Sobey Art Award (2nd prize), 2002. Hoffos has been invited to many international residencies, including three at the Banff Centre and most recently in Detroit, Michigan. David Hoffos is represented by Trépanier Baer Gallery, Calgary.

Letch Kinloch, founder of Also As Well Too Artist Book Library & Shop, originally hails from Saskatoon.

Collin Zipp is a multidisciplinary artist and programmer/curator who is based in Winnipeg, MB. His visual practice includes video, photo, sculpture, painting and installation and is interested in exploring ideas of institutional critique and viewer expectation and experience. Zipp currently operates and programs the nomadic artist-run centre ONE NIGHT STAND. He has a BFA from the University of Manitoba and an MFA from the University of Lethbridge.

EXHIBITION
11 September - 24 October 2015

OPENING RECEPTION
Friday 11 September | 8 PM

ARTIST TALK
Sunday 27 September | 4 PM

IMAGE | David Hoffos, *The Lost Minutes: Shadow of the Platypus*, 3-channel video, audio and mixed media installation, detail, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Trépanier Baer

EXHIBITION | David Hoffos

WRITTEN RESPONSE | Letch Kinloch

CURATOR | Collin Zipp

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