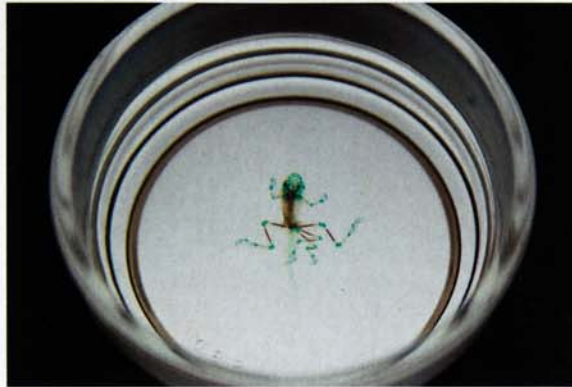


Brandon Ballengée: *Styx* (detail), 1996-2012, light-box installation with 13 treated specimens of deformed Pacific treefrogs from Aptos, Calif., 15 feet long, in scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions; at Ronald Feldman.



## BRANDON BALLENGÉE RONALD FELDMAN

In his debut New York solo show, Brandon Ballengée, an artist and research biologist in his late 30s, compellingly fused marine science and environmental activism to produce esthetically engaging art. The SoHo gallery's two darkened rooms held sculptural arrangements of preserved specimens, digital chromogenic prints of laboratory-treated frogs and birds, and a video. A mood of bereavement ran throughout Ballengée's exhibition, titled "Collapse: The Cry of Silent Forms."

The show referred most specifically to the ecological destruction caused by the 2010 explosion of a British Petroleum drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico. *Collapse* (2012), a quadrilateral pyramid (12 by 15 by 15 feet) of one-gallon glass jars containing over 370 species in clear preservative, was the most elaborate manifestation. Evoking a "trophic pyramid"—a representation of an ecosystem food chain—*Collapse* is sequenced from the simplest life-forms (such as purple barnacle) at the bottom to the more complex (such as a juvenile blackfish shark) at the top. The jars at the four bottom corners hold crude oil and Corexit, the toxic solvent used to break up the oil slick into subsurface globules, which hides them from view but also accelerates the oil's consumption by marine life. While the seven tiers of containers towering over the viewer counter a sense of disorder, empty jars interspersed throughout, increasing toward the top, indicate

extinct species destroyed by habitat degradation and overfishing.

These barren jars remind viewers that ancient Egyptian pyramids served as tombs. And the glistening vacant jar at the apex resembles the radiant "Eye of Providence" atop the unfinished pyramid on the dollar bill, linking the theme of death to commerce.

Ballengée also referenced mortality in his titling of other works. *Styx* (1996-2012), the name of the mythological river separating the living and the dead, is a light-box installation featuring 13 clear dishes that contain tiny treefrog skeletons with missing limbs or far too many legs. The series "Reliquaries" (2001-ongoing) consists of photos of these frog specimens, whose deadly deformations are attributed to ecological imbalances in the California wetlands where Ballengée found them. Accentuated by the removal of flesh and the addition of crimson and turquoise stain to the bones and cartilage, the amphibians' grotesquely malformed anatomy visually recalls the whimsical linearity in Paul Klee's watercolors but, even more, the twisted forms of crucified martyrs. Like the show as a whole, these images are impressive for both their ethical engagement and heartbreaking beauty.

The video *Committed* (2012) implies in its title both crimes committed and modernism's conflicts over political commitment versus autonomous formal innovation. It overlays BP marketing infomercials televised after the Gulf disaster with three bands of rolling quotations refuting the company's misleading statements. The gallery website supplies ample background information about the projects as well as the names of Ballengée's research collaborators. [*The exhibition travels to the Acadiana Center for the Arts, Lafayette, La., Nov. 10, 2012-Jan. 12, 2013*].

—Suzaan Boettger