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Brandon Ballengée at Ronald Feldman Fine arts



A couple of blocks down the street from The Evolution Store there is a remarkable exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, and I urge any of our customers or friends to make an effort to see it: The solo show of our friend Brandon Ballengee... It is a fascinating and unnerving series of works.

Balengee is both an artist and a practicing biologist, and his work deals foremost with ecological concerns. An earlier series of his entitled; "Frameworks of Absence" presents original John James Audobon prints, out of which images of now-extinct birds have been cut, framed in such a way that they appear as holes in the page, with only a few branches to indicate their environment. Another work involved the attempt to selectively breed back into existence (from commercially available longer-limbed specimens) a shorter-limbed frog that is severely threatened in the wild in the Republique Democratique du Congo. This quixotic project resulted in specimens similar in some respects to the native, wild populations, but obviously not the "same." The idea of being able to reverse the one-way street of extinction through breeding or gene-splicing is as yet a joke, and Balengee knows it, but the fact that so many of us are willing to put our faith in "science" – in the form of future technologies – to solve our mounting problems (and therefore willingly disregard them ourselves) is not a joke but a tragedy.

The exhibition at Feldman consists of several parts. Entering, one is presented with a video specifically aimed at the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and critiquing BP's attempts to suggest that the crisis there is "over." The crisis in the gulf is clearly not "over" and, though it has faded from public consciousness, Balengee brings it back memorably with this and another video, and a pyramid of preserved specimens in gallon jars representing a small portion of the Gulf's food chain. Part of an ongoing series of works, this pyramid is one of several that Balengee has displayed relating to the present crisis in the world's fisheries. Divided into seven levels, from Top Carnivores to Primary Producers at the base, it is interrupted with occasional empty jars representing species in decline or actual extinctions.

Another work is a series of photographs of baby birds, some found dead of unknown causes, others physically injured *in utero* (for research purposes) to prevent the development of their wings and other limbs. Each specimen has been cleared and stained, a chemical process that renders the flesh transparent, staining calcified bone a typically alizarin red and often counter-staining cartilage a cyan blue. The resulting photographs show the tiny creatures as if in X-Ray, creatures that – for one reason or another – could never have flown. Inasmuch as birds and their flight represent (in our popular culture) our hopes and dreams, these have been – quite literally – nipped in the bud.

Continuing the theme of injured or deformed creatures, Balengee presents photographs and actual specimens of cleared and stained frogs as part of "Malamp" an ongoing project he has been undertaking since 1996 cataloging the occurrence of deformities in amphibian limbs. The rise in such deformities has been an ongoing cause for concern among biologists worldwide for years. Nevertheless, this series results in some of the most disturbingly beautiful images on exhibit. The very large photographs magnify the tiny specimens and their bizarre beauty to a more-easily-relatable scale, but examination of the actual tiny, jewel-like cleared and stained frogs brings their reality into sharp focus. The crazy creativity of their miniscule bodies gone insane is simultaneously wondrous and horrific to behold and – like the strange wonders of the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia – it reminds us of our own fragility.