



But Not Simpler

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These Frogs Are Nature's Mistakes...And They Are Beautiful

By Kyle Hill | April 8, 2014 10:30 am

Nature is a messy painter. Perhaps like a Jackson Pollock, nature fills its canvas with chaotic yet focused drips and smears and smudges. Most of the time, the paintings turn out marvelously—form and function for the sake of survival. Other times the chaos wins out, and nature makes a mistake. But mistakes can be beautiful.



Since 1996, visual artist and biologist **Brandon Ballengée** has been fascinated with the physical deformities of amphibians. As you can see, his interest goes beyond his extensive scientific research on the topic. In an ongoing art project entitled *Malamp: Reliquaries*, Ballengée uses the unique process of “clearing and staining” biological specimens to highlight the hidden beauty in terminally deformed frogs.



To see the exquisite morphology of the frogs, Ballengée first stains the specimens with a tissue dye. Which dye you use determines what the skeleton and other tissues will look like. The next step is to make the frog's outside tissue transparent. To do this, much of its unstained outer layer is removed with enzymes, leaving connective tissue and tendons in place. Lastly, the specimen is put into glycerin—which has the same effect on the light passing through it as the tissue still left on the specimen—and the whole thing becomes effectively transparent. The results are almost otherworldly.



The mistakes of life aren't easy to look at. An understandable twinge of revulsion comes along with seeing extra legs and other deformities in these animals. Those feelings are exactly why the amphibians were stained and cleared in the first place, says Ballengée:

[Clearing and staining] obscures direct representation—as I do not want to exhibit large images of “monsters”, which would be frightening and be exploitative to the organisms.

Ballengée doesn't want to simply display the fate of these deformed frogs as something to gawk at. But to fully appreciate nature, we have to be willing to understand the mistakes as we do the successes.



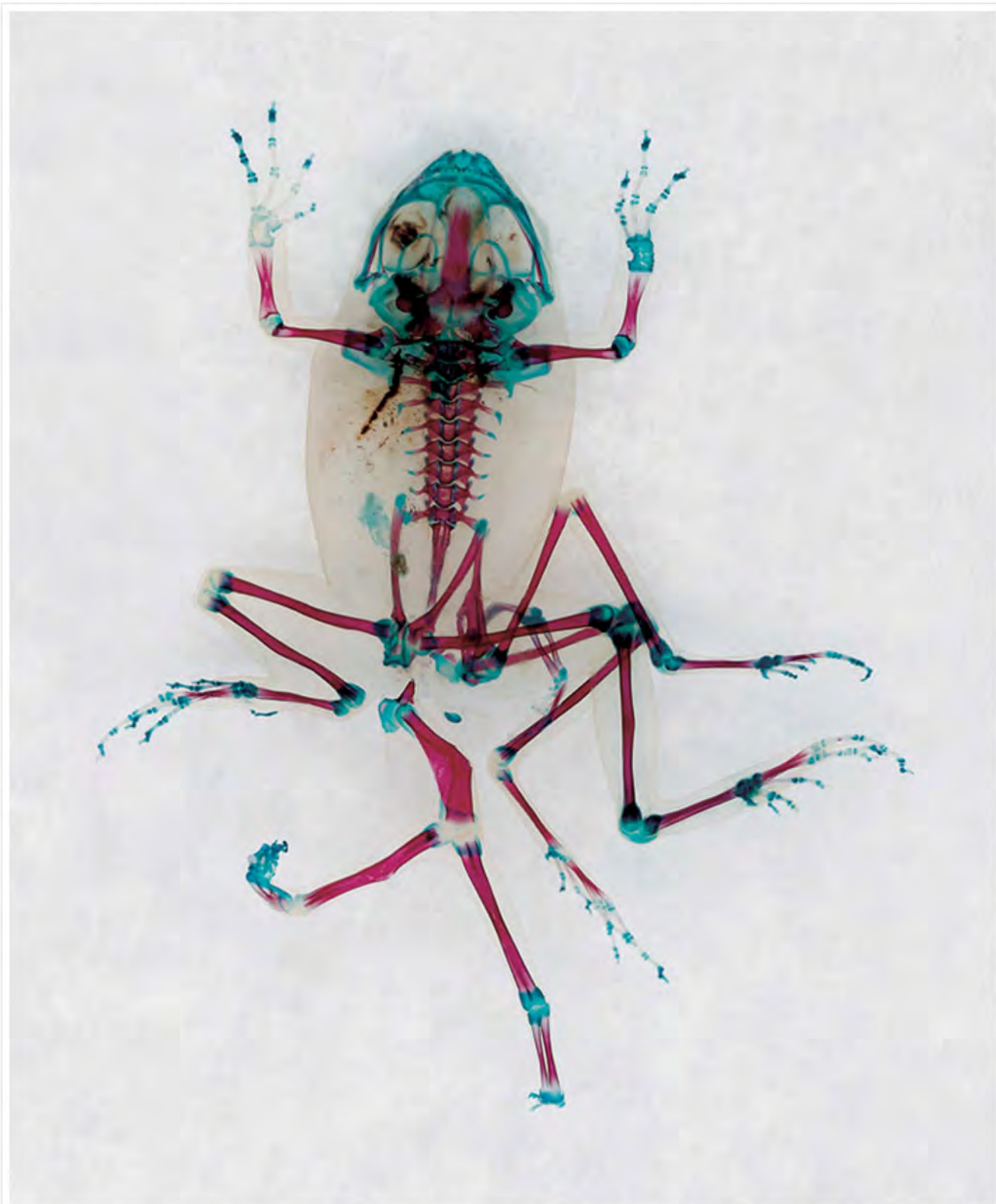
DFA117: Galatée. 2001/07. Unique digital-C print on watercolor paper. Cleared and stained Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California. In scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Title by the poet Kuy Delair.

Indeed, Ballengée takes many steps to ensure that his project doesn't amount to some kind of frog freak show. He explains:

They are scaled so the frogs appear approximately the size of a human toddler, in an attempt to invoke empathy in the viewer instead of detachment or fear: If they are too small they will

dismissed but if they are too large they will become monsters.

Symmetry, proportionality...we look for these qualities and find objects imbued with them beautiful. The importance of Ballengée's work is that it expands what we consider beautiful. Nature is messy—canvases full of splotchy, discarded artwork litter its studio. But the beauty of life is that it exists in the first place, mistakes and all.



DFA23: Khárôn. 2001/07. Unique digital-C print on watercolor paper. Cleared and stained Pacific tree frog collected in Aptos, California. In scientific collaboration with Stanley K. Sessions. Title by the poet Kuy Delair.

Some of the Malamp Reliquaries project is currently part of a retrospective exhibition of Ballengée's work at *Museum Het Domein in Sittard* in the Netherlands.

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