The Symbolic and Actual Order of Things

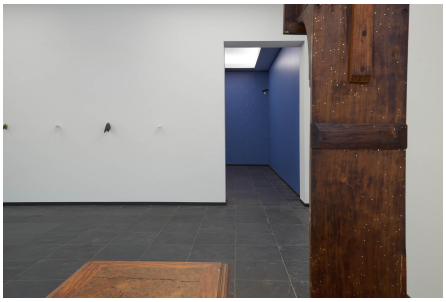
Zac Langdon-Pole at S.M.A.K.

by Carter Imrie-Milne

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Zac Langdon-Pole, *Paradise Blueprint*, 2018. Non-woven wallpaper based on a cyanotype photogram of the removed legs of a bird of paradise. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



Zac Langdon-Pole, exhibition view of *ARS VIVA prize 2017/18* at S.M.A.K. Ghent, 2018. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



Zac Langdon-Pole, *Assimilation Study*, 2017. Right wing Mallard Duck, left human scapula model, left wing Ringneck Parrot, right human scapula model, right wing Pigeon, left human scapula model, left wing Mallard Duck, right human scapula model, right wing Ringneck Parrot, left human scapula model, left wing Pigeon, right human scapula model. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



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It's been a busy year for Auckland-born artist Zac Langdon-Pole. He's exhibited in five countries on three continents and garnered a great deal of international attention in the process. On the strengths of work shown during this time, he's received the Charlotte Prinz Scholarship in Darmstadt, Germany, been shortlisted for the soon to be announced BMW Art Journey Prize and won the prestigious ARS VIVA prize.

The latter is an accolade bestowed annually upon 'young artists living in Germany whose works are distinguished by their pioneering potential.'[01] Langdon-Pole was selected from a group of 57 nominees, alongside compatriot Oscar Engberg and Anna-Sophie Berger of Austria. It's worth noting that the selection of two New Zealanders is unprecedented and bespeaks the high calibre of our young artists abroad. The three winners received individual prize money, residencies at Fogo Island Arts in Canada

and the opportunity to exhibit in Germany and abroad. Kunstverein Munich hosted the first exhibition in 2017. This year, the artists restaged their exhibition in slightly augmented form at S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Belgium. I was promptly dispatched when it opened in February.



Zac Langdon-Pole, *emic etic*, 2018. Aluminum tool travel case, cast iron calf weaner, Buckingham Palace Pearl Tiara. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



Zac Langdon-Pole, *Paradise Blueprint*, 2018. Non-woven wallpaper based on a cyanotype photogram of the removed legs of a bird of paradise. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

The exhibition is divided into three parts, with two rooms allocated to each artist. In the first room of Langdon-Pole's exhibition, I find a throng of chuckling children regarding something that has been placed on the floor. They're helmed by a rose-cheeked woman who is cheerfully (but unsuccessfully) attempting to bring order to the proceedings. The children clear out, still giggling, revealing a tool travel case that contains two objects: a well worn antique calf-weaning tool and a pearl tiara from the Buckingham Palace Royal Collections Jewellery Shop.

Calf weaners were developed during and subsequently facilitated the industrialisation of farming practices. The ring and it's radiating spikes are affixed to a calf's nose so that any attempt to feed will violently prick the mother's tender underbelly, imposing a physical and psychological separation that expedites the farming process: the successfully weaned calf is sold on faster so more milk may be harvested from the mother. The brute economy of the object is determined by its profitable role in torture. Its aesthetic inverse sits timidly in proximity. Luminous and fragile, the tiara would be beautiful if its companion didn't make it look so frivolous. Combine these radically different forms of cranial adornment and you get something like a crown of thorns. Both objects originate in

the 19th century. The modern tiara is a neo-classical revival, fancifully adopted by the royal families of colonial powers expanding their territories across the globe. The industrialisation of farming during this period is entwined with the history of this expansion - it's hardly incidental that these objects have been brought together in a tool travel case.

The title of the work, *emic etic* 2018, contrasts two methods of anthropological investigation. The emic approach emphasises perspectives from within the culture itself while the etic gives precedence to the opinion of the anthropologist. There are long-standing debates within the field about the relative weight of these perspectives - should we credit local categories, explanations and interpretations, or those of their 'impartial' observer? Langdon-Pole proposes a synthesis. Presented alongside each other, we're able to make our individual determinations as to which better reveals the essence of colonial empire: delicate ornamentation or savage farming equipment. Later, in response to my query, the rosy-cheeked woman tells me that the kids were laughing in response to a precocious suggestion from within their midst that we ought to put the tiara on the calf and the weaning tool on the queen.



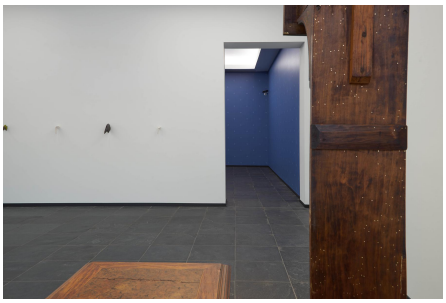
Zac Langond-Pole, *Punctatum (longcase clock)*, 2017; *Punctatum (music shelf)*, 2017; *Punctatum (letter desk)*, 2017. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



Zac Langond-Pole, *Punctatum (longcase clock)*, 2017. Anobium Punctatum (woodworm) ridden longcase clock from New Zealand, restored with 24ct. gold. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



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I encounter a handsome assembly of antique furniture in the second room of Langdon-Pole's exhibition. Standing back to back, a longcase clock, a music shelf and a letter desk:, *Punctatum (longcase clock)* 2017, *Punctatum (music shelf)* 2017, and *Punctatum (letter desk)* 2017. These stately characters have been shipped to Europe from Langdon-Pole’s parental home in New Zealand to provide testimony concerning the unintended consequences of human migration.

It was as accidental stowaways in wooden furniture that the much-maligned 'borer beetles' made their way to our remote islands in the 19th century. Female borers lay their eggs in cracks and crevices, end-grain timbers and old borer holes. Upon hatching, the larvae proceed to eat the surrounding timber, indiscriminately drilling unsightly tunnels, transforming even the loveliest wooden furnishing into the domestic equivalent of a termites nest. These holes are ubiquitous in New Zealand, where the soft sap-wood of our native tree species perfectly accommodates the appetites of these imported pests.

These items were acquired from second-hand shops in the 1980's to furnish the artist's childhood home. Though they were not spared infestation, no holes remain now: Langdon-Pole fumigated them and inlaid the borer holes with 24ct pure gold. His alchemical restoration is an intriguing response to the damage wrought by the invasive species, invoking a nuanced reading of our own migration as well as that of our unwitting passengers. Langdon-Pole highlights our role in introducing the borer beetles to these virgin lands while also disclosing overlooked similarities. Gold motivated many of the people who originally bought their furniture (and the borer beetles) to New Zealand. Once here, they dug and drilled, turned our rivers inside out in pursuit of the precious substance. We are also an invasive species, we are also borers.

In any case, the simple fact of these items being in Europe provokes interesting considerations - a 're-presencing' of a different nature. The journey here simulates a colonial return, a 'migration' that evokes the continuous movements of people and their chattels around the world. Considering the great effort and expense lavished upon the predecessors of the items that stand before me, I wonder why people in the 19th century went to such great lengths to bring their furniture halfway around the world. Wood for carpentry was in abundant supply at their destination - as these native productions attest. Why didn't settlers simply commission a set like this upon arrival? I suspect the furniture in which the borer beetles travelled to New Zealand was brought less to furnish homes than to furnish the memory of home. These works serve a parallel function, originating as they did in the artist's familial home in Grey Lynn, Auckland.



Zac Langdon-Pole, *Assimilation Study*, 2017. Right wing Mallard Duck, left human scapula model, left wing Ringneck Parrot, right human scapula model, right wing Pigeon, left human scapula model, left wing Mallard Duck, right human scapula model, right wing Ringneck Parrot, left human scapula model, left wing Pigeon, right human scapula model. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



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In a conversation with the artist over Skype, he tells me he has lived in Europe for nearly five years. Having completed his Bachelors at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland, he moved to Frankfurt, Germany, to undertake further study at the highly regarded Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. He graduated in 2015 and moved to Berlin, where he is currently based. Living and working in Europe has broadened his perspective, allowing him to "become more alert to how histories, ideologies and people are interrelated across vast distances and cultures. [Relocating to Europe] has been a generative charge for the work that is being produced now."[02]

But Langdon-Pole's work is not confined to the investigation of cultural difference and exchange, nor is it limited to exclusively human affairs. *Assimilation Study* 2017 runs the breadth of two perpendicular walls. The severed wings of a mallard duck, a ring-necked parrot and a pigeon, interspersed with casts of the human scapula, are lined up in a single row at shoulder-height. The alternating human-bird arrangement establishes a sort of equality, enabling a consideration of our inter-species similarities. Removed from their respective contexts, the forms of wing and scapular are not so dissimilar as one might expect.

The similarities extend beyond the morphological. As humans have become exponentially more mobile, we've come to share a transcontinental tendency with our feathered counterparts.

However, our expansive inclinations and their corollaries - urban development and climate-change - have disrupted ancient patterns of avian migration. An illustrative example: for thousands of years white storks have made the journey from Europe to Southern Africa for the winter. Now, many of them prefer to travel to Madrid, Spain or Rabat, Morocco where they feast on junk food in our landfills. Half of the world's human population lives in cities, and animals - not just birds - are increasingly joining them. Sometimes they're motivated by McDonald's. In many cases, it's because their natural habitats are no longer capable of supporting them or have simply ceased to exist.

The birds selected for *Assimilation Study* 2017 populate various human environs. Mallard ducks often make their homes in lakes and parks (including Citadel Park, where the S.M.A.K. museum is located) as opposed to their natural wetland habitats in which they're often hunted for sport. Pigeons scavenge in the streets of countless cities - perhaps the most successful of urbanised animal populations. Parrots are a staple pet, admitted to our homes (usually at a caged remove) and set to task mimicking the human voice for our entertainment. These birds, willingly or otherwise, partake in complicated and contingent relationships with humans.

Take a moment to imagine this arrangement in the British Natural History Museum. Though the work reports a literal phenomenon, I find it impossible to envision it within those walls - institutions of that nature are too well wedded to delineation. Their exhibitions are bent towards the prosaic by rigorous categorisation in service of anthropocentrism. Birds remain in the avian section in perpetuity. The BNHM and its ilk are by no means wrong-minded or irrelevant - these are places full of valuable scholarship and enchanted children. Their legions of curators, conservators, scientists and writers bring encyclopedic knowledge, sophisticated methodologies and honest passion to their analyses and exhibitions. But Langdon-Pole makes a strong case for the auxiliary role that art has to play in enlarging our understanding of the natural world.

Some might scoff at this idea (Dürer's rhinoceros, for all its artistic merit, is marvellously wrong), but the natural world is not a series of facts. Or not just a series of facts - much as we might

pretend it is. Although the denizens of this planet are endlessly subjectable to categorisation, their essence emerges truly only in relation. And we can only understand ourselves truly in relation to those we share our environment with. The curatorial approach deployed by the artist ameliorates a certain narrowness of perspective, disclosing the multifaceted associations buried beneath our systematisation of ecology. Elsewhere - in *emic etic*, for example - his interrogation of the symbolic provenance of a diverse array of objects problematises our defining civilisational narratives. Langdon-Pole's works confound in part because they do not seek to resolve our understanding but to unresolve it.



Zac Langdon-Pole, *Argonaut (Arrested Star)*, 2017. Iron barbwire-fence stretching tool, part replaced with Seymchan meteorite (iron pallasite, found: Seymchan, Russia). Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



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Within the context of this exhibition, this tendency towards 'unresolving' is perhaps best represented by *Argonaut (Arrested Star)* 2017. The work features a sturdy tool for stretching barbed-wire fences. Its robust body and muted cast-iron pallor cut a strange contrast with its cohabitants - taxidermied wings and gold-studded furniture. But its commonness is illusory; the artist has replaced an integral component with a hand-carved meteorite.

I imagine using a meteorite that has travelled unimpeded from the distant reaches of space to stretch a barbed wire fence and find the fence-stretching enterprise cast in a somewhat farcical light. Recalibrating our perspective to a cosmic scale undermines the justifications we make for dividing our world into parcels of property, fenced off and adorned with grave warnings: 'Trespassers Beware'. Safe to say that the concept of trespassing is an exclusively earthly phenomenon and that the meteorite didn't get it's passport checked on the way here.

Like the calf weaner, barbed wire has its origins in the industrialisation of farming. It was invented in 1867 in Illinois as a cheap alternative to the costly, lumber-intensive fences then in-use. In the intervening 150 years, barbed wire has been deployed in trench warfare and concentration camps. Now it rings the perimeters of refugee camps and runs thousands of kilometres along the border zones between the Middle East and Europe.

What are we to make of this implement? It is an object with a heavy history, retired from its functional role dividing space, enclosing property and prohibiting free movement. Now it serves as a philosophical and political provocateur. The title of the work aptly recalls Theseus' Ship (the Argos), which was the protagonist in one of the many mystifying thought experiments to come out of ancient Greece. The famous ship is said to have had all of its parts replaced, one by one. May we still call it Theseus' Ship after this renovation, or is it a new entity? This question forms the foundation of a whole branch of philosophy concerning definition and identity. Appropriately, this artistic intervention calls the identity of the object into question: the implement's cosmic makeover somehow un-defines it. If a retired fence-stretcher is hung in a museum and augmented such that it serves to undermine the rationale for stretching fences, may we still call it a fence-stretcher?

In this work, the insertion of the meteorite fragment is a simple action that generates effects of disproportionate magnitude, disrupting our preconceptions and stimulating their reevaluation. Judicious interpositions such as these are typical of Langdon-Pole's approach to artmaking. Though the artist's projects emerge from intensive research, the final works themselves seem almost

effortless, close cousins of the ready-made. It is with a subtle touch that he coaxes objects into revealing - and vexing - the histories and ideas that they embody.



Zac Langdon-Pole, *and soon the landscape lost all variety*, 2018. The work involved a 10 min walk from the museum to a designated location. Photo: Dirk Pauwels. Works courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.



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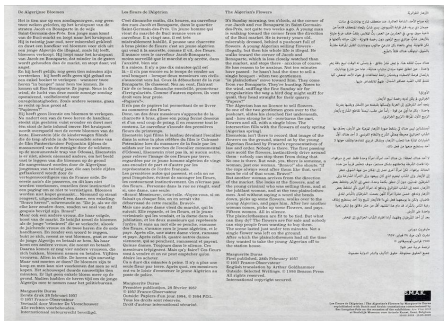
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Returning to the front desk of S.M.A.K. I'm given a leaflet of instructions for Langdon-Pole's last work, *and soon the landscape lost all variety* 2018 - a site-specific, choreographed walk that

passes through time as well as space. Starting at the S.M.A.K. museum, visitors are threaded between monuments whose salience becomes clear only in retrospect: two lions tearing apart their unfortunate prey and a goddess upon a dais setting forth a cascade of flowers. The walk concludes on a street corner adorned by a florist.

Inside the florist visitors are handed a newspaper. It features the date 09/02/2018 but, sitting quietly opposite the heading “Club Brugge gaat rascistische fans zelf vervolgen”[03], is an item from many decades ago that Langdon-Pole has printed in coordination with the newspaper. ‘The Algerian’s Flowers’, penned by novelist, screenwriter and journalist Marguerite Duras in 1957, is here translated to Arabic, French, Dutch and English. Her journalistic account concerns another florist, in another time, on another street corner.

A "miserably dressed"[04] Algerian man of twenty years is anxiously attending a pushcart of flowers at the intersection of rue Jacob and rue Bonaparte in Paris. He is accosted by plainclothes police officers. “Papers?” No. The plainclothes knock over his cart, spilling his flowers across the road. Before he can be taken away, a succession of women pick up a flower each, paying the young man.

The walk is retrospectively rendered in the strange, familiar hues of déjà vu. The past is revealed within the present, statues emerge from memory endowed with new feeling. There and then, here and now: the plaincloth lions and their prey, flowers bequeathed by a marble goddess piled all around. *and soon the landscape lost all variety* 2018 draws visitors into the world beyond the museum, making them self-conscious bodies in public space. It is only beyond the confines of the art-institution, enveloped in the inharmonious thrum of the ‘real world’ that they can participate in this elaborate act of remembrance.[05]

Where is the artwork located within this constellation of objects, events, perceptions and memories? Might it be this sheaf of newsprint in your hand, the walk itself, or the directives that led you through it? I don’t think the artwork is distilled within any discrete element, nor do I feel it is the sum total of all these parts. As is so often the case in Langdon-Pole’s work, something remains

undefined and irretrievable, embedded, as we are, in a matrix of relations.

How did the young Algerian feel about the actions of those women? Would it have provided any solace to know his mistreatment was to be memorialised in this way by one of France's famous femmes de lettres? He'd be in his eighties now. What would the old Algerian think of Langdon-Pole's work? Would it amuse, bewilder or elate him to know his story was printed in 200,000 copies of Belgium's De Gentenaar newspaper 60 years after his flowers were knocked across the street? How would he feel about the international, intergenerational network of solidarity and collaboration that retrieved and restaged his past - the translators, the museum, the paper, Duras' publishers, the smiling florists, the artist, the writer herself, the women and their gentle resistance?

I ask the artist what value one can attribute the poetic gesture of the women, because the redemption they offer is the same as that offered by art - symbolic. Langdon-Pole responds, "The fact that the Algerian is still incarcerated reflects the truth of the matter, that no single event, artwork, or set of gestures will bring closure to systemic injustice. Only multiple and unending actions can dismantle systemic injustices within both the symbolic and actual order of things. Like a chronic illness, the work should embed itself inside the body of a system, and transform it recurrently in multiple directions at once."[06]

Langdon-Pole explores varied and complex relationships: man and animal, property and freedom, authority and 'other', past and present. Through these prisms we glimpse an ambiguous, multivalent reality. The work both exposes and responds to this reality, articulating a polyphonic politics of responsibility: to ourselves, to others, to the environment and those we share it with. The artist advances his moral agenda without resorting to didacticism - the efficacy of these works relies upon *our* powers of observation, *our* capacity to discern the symbolic and actual order of things.

Footnotes

01. The prize was inaugurated in 1953 and is awarded annually by a jury appointed by Kulturkreis der deutschen Wirtschaft im BDI e. V (the Association of Arts and Culture of the German Economy at the Federation of German Industries). More here.

02. Conversation with the artist, March 2018.

03. “Club Brugge will prosecute racist fans”.

04. *The Algerian’s Flowers*, Marguerite Duras (1957).

05. The artist paid for an advertising space (half a page) for the edition of the paper printed the day before the opening of the exhibition. This edition was stockpiled and kept at the florists for dissemination to visitors from the museum. In this sense, the piece technically unfolded in two stages: first to the public (many of whom were reported as being somewhat startled to find Arabic in their local newspaper) and later to the museum audience.

06. Conversation with the artist, April 2018.

Biographies



Zac Langdon-Pole was born in Auckland, New Zealand, 1988 and lives and works in Berlin, Germany. In 2010 he graduated with a BFA (Hons) from Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts. From 2014-15 he studied and graduated from the class of Willem de Rooij at Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. In 2016 he was awarded the Charlotte Prinz Scholarship in Darmstadt, in 2017 was awarded the Ars Viva prize, an internationally acclaimed achievement that celebrates the work of leading emerging artists living in Germany, and in 2018 was awarded the prestigious BMW Art Journey.

Recent exhibitions include: *Loose ends don’t tie*, PS120, Berlin, Germany (2018); *emic etic*, Between Bridges, Berlin, Germany (2018); *Ars Viva* 2018, S.M.A.K, Ghent, Belgium (2018) and Kunstverein Munich (2017); *Sleeping Arrangements*, The Dowse, Lower Hutt, New Zealand (2018); *Trappings*, Station, Melbourne, Australia (2017); *Le Grand Balcon*, La Biennale de Montréal, Canada (2016); *Oratory Index*, Michael Lett, Auckland, New Zealand (2016); *grammars*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand (2016); *On the Shoulders of Giants*, Kunsthalle Mainz, Germany (2016); *Four Practices*, CCA, Singapore (2016); and *Ecologies of the Everyday*, Triennale Kleinplastik, Fellbach, Germany (2016).



Carter Imrie-Milne was born in Wellington, New Zealand in 1996. He currently lives in Granada, Spain.

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