

## Ma Yongfeng: The Cretaceous Period

by Dan Smith

The largest of ArtSway's three rooms is dominated by an image of a volcano. It is a photograph of a facsimile--constructed in Ma's studio--of an actual museum display. It is certainly striking, conveying something of the terribleness of nature, but also pathetic in its attempt to pass for real. A functioning model emerges from darkness. The dramatic hues of red and yellow illuminating jagged rock are almost reminiscent of the fiery turbulence of John Martin's apocalyptic *The Great Day of His Wrath*, 1851-53. However, the impressiveness here is of a nerdish variety, a somewhat embarrassing acknowledgment of recognising the accomplishment of a functioning model. This is a low-level mystique in operation. Yet the intensity of recreation is staged to reveal its own artificiality, not as an illusory effect. Cracks appear in the surface of the lava flow, the lava itself gives way to fracture, painted effect dominates the perception of unimaginable heat and molten rock. These ruptures have their own sense of menace, of layers of illusion giving way to something beneath. We are at some distance here from the real, whatever definition of the term might be employed.

The bathos of *Volcano* (2007, as are all works) is short-lived, as there is a shift in tone and method for the other two large images here. *Parakannemeyeria Brevirostris* is a long, stretched letterbox shaped photograph that forms an illusory object. Its borders suggest a solid, rectangular form, and from the corners grow edges, dark lines of shadow that suggest inversion or protrusion. Within there seems to be a raised trench covered in the shapes of vague, overlapping skeletal remains. There is an unmistakable artificiality about this: it is a replica of an actual fossil that bears the remains of nine separate prehistoric animals. The unshakeable indexicality of both fossil, and as Barthes suggested, photography, is detached by this additional insertion by the museum into the chain of signification. Like *Volcano*, there is a presence of a thematised sublime here, albeit in a rather flaccid state. It is not a sublime experience of unmediated nature, but rather a more literary articulation of an idea of temporal depth and catastrophe. Catastrophe is identified here as the discursive materiality of museological display, rather than anything to worry about.

In *Hibernation* Ma produces an image of a museum diorama that frames itself with details of its artifice. The lighting is clearly produced by electricity, and is divided between a green-hued substitute for daylight and a cut-away burrow lit by a red glow. The glares of the lights form two circular patches of brightness on the surface of the painted background, disrupting the illusion of an endless expanse of forest and mountains. The warp of this background, visible from the low angle of view at the top of the diorama, replaces the curvature of the earth. Behind the trees covered in snow that will never thaw, a plastic latticed ceiling panel is a substitute for starry heavens. There is a detectable pleasure in the incorporation of such details and the tension that they provide to these photographs.

In a smaller gallery space on one side of the room, the volcano is brought to a kind of life as a looped video projection: it erupts, or rather sparks, flares, shimmers and pulsates. The lack of sound and the bewitching glow of the thing are soothingly mesmerising, as is a second projection: this is the volcano's elemental opposite, a body of water that sloshes backwards and forwards in a clear acrylic container. It seems to be a recording of an interactive exhibit, inviting children to operate a device that illustrates the mechanical properties of liquid in motion. Ma manages to generate layers of uncertainty and confusion and arrive at images that are modestly beguiling. These works are not so much casual observations of the strangeness of museums as they are the outcome of an informal, perhaps oblique, resolution to engage with these technologies that sustain the construction of nature as a set of cultural ideas.

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