













Modular Artefacts, Mammoth Remains

Italian Giovanna Petrocchi grew up amid the conserved fragments that together form the heart of the city of Rome, surrounded by demarcated World Heritage attractions with entrance gates that millions of tourists a year (pre-Covid) are drawn to like bees to honey. Archaeological artefacts in museums and archaeological sites were a self-evident part of her upbringing. They are engraved on her memory as a mental archive of images.

Since 2015 Petrocchi has been making collages based upon images found online showing ancient landscapes and archaeological artefacts, fusing together digital and traditional techniques. She takes inspiration from surrealist paintings and sculptures, ancient cultures, virtual reality, video games, and representations of the future that resemble science fiction. To her collages Petrocchi adds contemporary objects (often 3D printed) that show fascinating similarities with objects from the past. In the case of the series *Modular Artefacts, Mammoth Remains* (2019) they are scanned cut-outs of cardboard skeletons from kits for making miniature dinosaurs. She combines these with digital images of artefacts from the collections of the Smithsonian Institution, which are archived online. The original images are glass negatives numbered chronologically from 1 to 5,075. Sometimes Petrocchi erases details to insert new ones, making

them engage in a visual dialogue. Elements from the collages have been removed from their original context, digitally trimmed and transformed into a fictional platform that gently mocks the traditional museological classifications.

In contrast to her earlier series, in *Modular Artefacts, Mammoth Remains* Petrocchi opts to work in black and white. It is a choice largely imposed on her by the Smithsonian's online archive, although the absence of colour also means the focus is on the shapes. Perhaps, even more importantly, it creates the impression that we are dealing with a seriously intended, authentic and faithful archive in which the act of documenting is central.

Archaeology and photography are inseparably bound up together. The development of archaeology as a separate scientific or semi-scientific discipline coincides with European expansionism and the rise of photography in the second half of the 19th century. Photographers like Félix Teynard (1817–1892) accompanied archaeological expeditions to the Ottoman Empire. A little later, adventurer, businessman and pioneer in the field of archaeology Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890), who famously discovered Troy, commissioned a photographer to record the artefacts he excavated there. The photographs were made in a no-nonsense, straightforward manner, from the front, and naturally in

black and white. The camera was a means of providing visual evidence. A photograph appeared to be the objective, efficient and accurate registration of a new, supposedly scientific discipline that left little space for the imagination.

Like photography, archaeology soon developed into a discipline with an ambivalent character. On the one hand what it does is measurable and scientific, on the other it is a discipline in which an absence of information is filled in by the imagination. Much about the past is unclear. Cities have degenerated into ruins, historical objects and paintings are often mere fragments of what they once were. Those fragments invite speculation, the addition of missing information, imaginative interpretation, narratives that cannot be directly corroborated by quantifiable proof. In the early 1980s, this created a movement known as post-processual archaeology, which stresses the location-specific subjectivity of archaeological interpretations and distances itself from the idea that archaeology can draw unequivocal, objective conclusions. There is a striking parallel here with Petrocchi's fictional photography.

Petrocchi seems at first sight to be using photography to create a record. The use of black and white and the presence of the chequerboard scale bar typical of archaeology emphasizes the scientific

character of the work. In fact, however, she does precisely the opposite. In her collages she portrays a fake narrative, an imaginary story that lies somewhere between the past, the present and the future. She puts it like this. 'There is a sense of mysteriousness evoked by ancient cultures, their traditions, the use of objects and tools, their relationship with animals, that I find very fascinating [...]. This leaves much space to the imagination and that's why I am so drawn to them.' (e-mail correspondence, 9 May 2021)

Nevertheless, Petrocchi's fake narrative seems to come closer to the reality of archaeology than the artificial classification by period and geographical location that is applied to museum collections.

An observation by Polish journalist and writer Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) perhaps helps to make clear what I mean. 'In the world of our own day there are no longer any cultures that exist separately, distant from everything else, in isolation. Nowadays every culture, although each to a different extent, is influenced, hybridized, marked by eclecticism. All cultural currents now meet in the great delta of modern civilization, where because of modern means of communication that encompass and connect the planet, they interpenetrate and combine together before, in a single channel, pouring into the new era to form the coming cosmic civilization.' (Ryszard Kapuściński, *Lapidarium. Observaties van*

een wereldreiziger 1980–2000. Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 2003, p. 95, originally published as *Lapidaria* by Czytelnik, Warsaw. Quote translated via the Dutch.)

Archaeological fragments are continually in flux; they transcend their own time, are distributed to other regions, given new functions, reused, destroyed by iconoclasts and reconstructed by guardians of heritage. They therefore become part of a story that is broader and more continuous than anything represented in their museological pigeon-holes.

The entities presented by Petrocchi do not belong to a specific time or place either. In most cases they float against a white or black background in which the notion of scale has been abandoned. The scale itself remains, but not its relationship to the object. Her collages have become free spaces made up of real data concerning the artefacts along with new visual information. They are not accompanied by captions to guide the viewer in a specific direction. They poke fun at the historical, linear and scientific perspective and in doing so contain a promise to tell a different story, that of a Universal Collection of artefacts linked together across time and space in which cultures mix, just as the artefacts themselves do.

— Text by Kim Knoppers

All images from the series *Modular Artefacts, Mammoth Remains* © Giovanna Petrocchi, courtesy of the artist

GIOVANNA PETROCCHI is an Italian photographer based between London and Rome. She graduated from the London College of Communication with a BA in Photography in 2015 and she completed her MA in Visual Arts at Camberwell College of Arts, London in 2019. She was selected as a winner of the Lens Culture Emerging Talent Award in 2017 and she won the Photographers' Gallery New Talent award in 2019. She has been recently nominated by CAMERA—Centro Italiano per la Fotografia to be part of the 2020 FUTURES photography talents. Recent exhibitions include 'With Monochrome Eyes' at the Borough Road Gallery, London, the Athens Photo Festival at the Benaki Museum, Athens and 'Contemporary Mythologies' at Tenuta di Monteverdi, Grosseto, Italy (from 12th June).

KIM KNOPPERS is an independent curator and art historian graduated from University of Amsterdam. She has been curator at Foam between 2010 and 2021. Since 2011, she has worked on group and solo exhibitions, most recently Lorenzo Vitturi's *Materia Impura*, *Morpher III* by Kévin Bray, *Extendable Ears* by Sheng-Wen Lo and *Afropean: Travels in Black Europe* by Johny Pitts. She has contributed to various magazines including Foam Magazine, Unseen and Aperture and has written catalogue texts for Jaya Pelupessy and Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques, amongst others. She is a lecturer on the MA Photography at ECAL in Lausanne where she initiated and developed the course *Do Not Disturb—Curating in Progress*.