

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A LIE

April – May 2002, Lloyd Jerome Gallery, Glasgow

This joint exhibition with Stephanie Connelly had a shared starting point – a pamphlet entitled ‘The Biography of a Lie’, a RSPB leaflet from 1903.

My work was a tailor-made collection of body jewellery for victims of the Victorian plumage trade. I made another version of history, refashioning materials to enable birds used in the plumage trade to become different kind of ‘victims’. I asked my audience to imagine birds wearing these items: the images stimulate a flow of questions and associations. Questions arose about why humans wear feathers, about anthropomorphism (especially when people dress up animals and birds), and about taste – what we find attractive. Other associations are with cruelty, defencelessness, and waste from human society.

Making the items, I thought about deception and illusion, when I turn my face away from possible truths. When I buy a label or an animal-print, I gain something of the label and animal, entwining myself within a long history of how people ‘read’ what other humans wear. If I use part of a bird, I give it a meaning that evolution did not intend. I am saying: this bird existed for me.

In Victorian times, the market for fashion opened up and many ordinary people could dress more lavishly. Different birds were exploited for their plumage, some species becoming endangered or extinct. Wings were torn from the back of living kittiwakes. Egret feathers in the Victorian era were split to become ‘aigrettes’, worn in hairstyles. These feathers were also called ‘ospreys’, and were often sold as being ‘artificial’ to appease the buyer’s conscience. They were actually ‘real’. Some women turned into activists, their pressure led to the formation of the RSPB and legal protection for birds.

The Zoological section of the Hunterian Museum has a large collection of bird skins, largely from the nineteenth century. I wondered how I could, as an artist, use these birds today. The birds were sumptuous – their shapes, textures, colours and their natural history and behaviour sensuously suggested possibilities. I explored how embellishment could transform status and looks, offering power and sexual allure, referring to survival and conquest. I used significant events in Victorian times – copper wire refers to the network of submarine telegraph cables that linked the Empire while women wore crinolines. I looked at the elaborate and constricting designs of this era, which also spawned the ideological designs of Dr Jaeger and Ms Bloomer. I used materials with specific appeal – scavenged fish-bones for kittiwakes who today thrive on waste from fishing trawlers, human hair for an egret. My materials were ‘scavenged’ – found, begged, recycled – and diverted from their destination.