

Gareth Moore: A Burning Bag as a Smoke-Grey Lotus
Stroom Den Haag, Den Haag, The Netherlands
July 5 — Sept. 20, 2015
 by Angela Jerardi

Plastic banana, sitting in an old wooden box, its handles strung as a simple zither; a conch shell with a recorder mouthpiece protruding out the top; a brass horn, playing the shallow pool of water at his feet; a trombone (vaguely), with a black bulbous end, like a turkey baster; a tin box for rice or cookies — maroon red, decorated with a quasi-orientalist scene on its sides — married with a clarinet; a garish assembly of yellow, blue and orange paperboard cereal and cracker boxes, each with a simple wooden handle attached, now rattle and shake as maracas; the cry of a pair of cats in a squabble erupting from a faux rock, sporting a shiny chrome grill on its front from which the sound escapes; a shiny photo of a starfish, punctured by a simple plastic recorder; a small piece of cloth on the floor, acting as a doormat; an antique Esso oil drum, hit with a mallet topped by a red rubber ball, a low timbre.

Boooooom, cling, clang, sbuffle, sbuffle, ping, boiiiing-swish, squeal, creak, crack, schwap, zwap, zap, clack, blop, bap, boop, boom, choooooo-choooooo, plomp, plap, screeeeech. A tentative silence, followed by clapping and the collective sound of human murmuring. Feet shuffling out of the room. Then, quiet.

First installed at La Loge in Brussels, Gareth Moore's *A Burning Bag as a Smoke-Grey Lotus* fits the space of Stroom in Den Haag as though in its natural home. Six large dioramas are arranged around the room, each with similar rectangular dimensions. They are simple enclosures, framed by avocado-coloured wood, and lined with a flexible plastic mesh netting or taut chicken wire. The base of each diorama is made of a different material: earth, cement, water, sand, roll-on roofing or carpet. Painted in a style reminiscent of trends in house painting from the '90s, each has its own sponge-painted backdrop: aqua, drab green-grey, warm yellow. The small booklet accompanying

the exhibition explains that the six backdrops are canvas on wooden stretchers, the paint made from a mixture of tempera, acrylic or seasonal paint with a single, seemingly symbolic addition: concrete, cuttlefish ink, engine oil, fish food, rat poison, leaves and wallpaper, respectively. Inside each enclosure is a carefully orchestrated *mise en scène*, a motley crew of performers as objects/objects as performers, a collection of characters that can be played. Lacking the intervention of a sextet of human interlocutors to prod and poke these performers, it might feel as though you have arrived at the scene at just the wrong time. Or maybe not — perhaps it's been abandoned for quite some time? Or could it be that once you turn your back, the objects themselves will begin to jig and swing?

In my imagination, outside the confines of present time and space, this room is in fact the astoundingly well-preserved remains of the zoo-like enclosures of a neo-Victorian reptile and avian appreciation society. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, humans develop a deep fascination with the advanced societies of reptiles and birds. Having eclipsed human society with their advancements in sonic communication long ago, reptiles and birds have since become enamored with fabricating and playing myriad simple hand-made vernacular musical instruments for their edification and pleasure. Using found materials, primarily made of human tools and refuse, they have concocted a wide array of instruments making a cacophony of sound. Naturally, some humans then decided it would be nice to hold these creatures and their instruments captive, putting them on display for their enjoyment.

This future fable may or may not be true, but regardless, there is something eerie about this space. The objects and their placement, the particularity of each tableau, the disposition of the enclosures and the circuitous route they offer the visitor intimates a place of ritual and habit, tied up with time. While chatting with two of the musicians performing the day I visited the art space, I learn that there is a time-based score for the works. Each instrument is tied to a time of day, e.g. "First Light," "When the sun is at its highest," or "Watering (Ablutions)". Sound and performance become a means of demarcating time.

Gareth Moore, *A Burning Bag as a Smoke-Grey Lotus*, installation view at Stroom Den Haag, Den Haag, Netherlands
 PHOTO: GERRIT SCHREURS; IMAGE COURTESY OF STROOM DEN HAAG



Calling to mind the tone of vernacular architecture in the southern US, *A Burning Bag as a Smoke-Grey Lotus* feels unapologetically nostalgic. A romantic and careful tale unfolds, veering close to preciousness – a whimsy in line with the visual motif of Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*. I feel the pull of an alternative narrative, an idiosyncratic mythology carrying a bevy of hidden stories. It treads closely to Americana folklore and the allure of solitary adventure – a manifest destiny of sorts. And yet, the character of the instruments continues to compel. Even when devoid of human performers and visitors, there is an electric hum to the space's near soundlessness.

Beginning in the late 1960s, a nascent academic field began to study the soundscapes of human environments. Founded by R. Murray Schafer and his team at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, the field of acoustic ecology studies hoped to envision ecologically balanced soundscapes where the relationship between the human community and its sonic environment would be in harmony. This idea of soundscapes encapsulates both the so-called natural acoustic environment, including animal vocalizations and the sounds of weather and other natural elements, and environmental sounds created by humans, through musical composition, and other ordinary human activities, including conversation, work and those resulting from the development and use of industrial technology. This research attempted to foreground an understanding of the shared aural condition of inter-species life, which leads me to wonder if sound and music could be seen as a phenomenon of inherent inter-species sociality. In one of the Homeric Hymns, Hermes is said to have invented the lyre when he discovered that the shell of a tortoise, used as a resonant body, produced sound. But it is precisely in the void of the shell's life from which its newfound animation derives. The potentiality of its animation and the violence of its seemingly deadened state become a paradox of human engagement with our social and environmental milieu. While this quandary is not likely resolvable via rational thought, it is certainly deserving of our attention and of Moore's continuing, quiet interrogation.

Angela Jerardi is a freelance curator and writer currently living in Amsterdam.