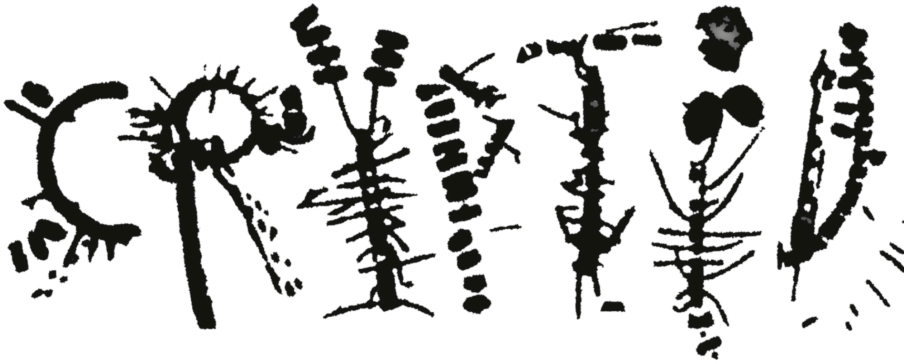


Joey Holder



25th Nov 2023 - 17th Feb 2024

Joey Holder, *Cryptid*

25 November 2023 – 17 February 2023

(Closed 18th Dec - January 3rd)

Two Queens is proud to present a new exhibition by Joey Holder, 'Cryptid'.

A Cryptid is a creature which may or may not exist, unrecognised by mainstream science. Cryptozoology is a pseudoscience, which primarily looks at anecdotal stories, and other claims rejected by the scientific community. An astonishing 86% of all plants and animals on land and 91% of those in the seas have yet to be named and catalogued. With the majority of life in the sea unmapped, unobserved, and unexplored there are millions of 'Cryptids' out there – this project is a speculation on these creatures alongside those that have been 'captured' and catalogued by mankind.

For her project at Two Queens Holder draws on the term to explore queer ecology and the limitations of Western scientific taxonomy. Turning her attention to the well known catch-all terms for microscopic marine creatures – viruses, bacteria, plants and embryos – this new installation centres on plankton, one of the most understudied and diverse groups of creatures on the planet. The organisms and viruses that make up the Plankton universe are vital for the Earth's Ecosystem; they are the basis for the entire marine food web. Phytoplankton photosynthesis provides oxygen for an estimated 70% of the earth's atmosphere.

Centred around an immersive installation showing shifting, layered footage of plankton from laboratory cameras, imagined creatures from cryptozoology forums and conspiracy sites, and set to an electronic score by AJA and Ptewigs, 'Cryptid' adopts a diagrammatic aesthetic,

with Holder using the visual language of science, rhythmic data streams and electron microscope photography, informed by her collaboration with marine biologists. Using 3D modelling, AI generative images of deep sea creatures and mystical symbology she reveals the interdimensional zone these creatures occupy across popular culture, and their importance to all life on earth.

Queer ecology seeks to challenge a worldview based upon the dualistic notions such as natural and unnatural, alive or not alive, human or not human, stating instead that nature exists in a continuously changing state. The idea of the Natural arises from human perspectives on nature, not nature itself. This branch of ecology rejects ideas of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism that position humans as unique and more important than their non-human counterparts, specifically challenging traditional ideas regarding which organisms, species, and individuals have value. For Holder this contrasts the prevailing, limited system of Western thought, that recognises some bodies and rejects others.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a programme of talks and workshops, more details to be announced.

Credits:

'Cryptid' is a project by Joey Holder
Sound design by AJA Ireland and Ptwiggs
Lighting intervention by Matt Woodham
Creature modelling by Finley Stewart
Animations by Copy Planet
Essay by Günseli Yalcinkaya

Special thanks to Beth Scott, Professor in Marine Ecology, University of Aberdeen

INTERSPECIES LIBRARY: Cryptozoology Section

By Oscar Salguero

Cryptozoology (Greek: *kryptós*, hidden / *zōion*, animal / *logos*, study) is a research field concerned with hidden, unknown, undetected, uncatalogued, and out-of-place beings.

Interspecies Library: Cryptozoology Section highlights a selection of contemporary literature and artists' books exploring aquatic, terrestrial, hominid, aerial, and exobiological cryptids, as well as the cultural, historical and scientific implications of their potential existence.

A timeline of cryptozoology books reveals a fascination with unknown creatures going back to the 18th century. Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy, once believed that mermaids and tritons could exist, claiming in 1794 that “science does not have a certain answer of if the existence of mermaids is a fact or is a fable or imagination of some ocean fish.” In 1892, Dutch zoologist Anthonie Cornelis Oudemans published ‘The Great Sea-Serpent: An Historical and Critical Treatise’, a survey of 200 eyewitness accounts of the sea monster which he named *Megaphius megaphius*. In the last 150 years, multiple creatures formerly believed to be fantastical such as the giant squid (1870s) have been identified. Other examples include the finding of the mountain gorilla (1902), the ‘mythical’ Komodo dragon (1912), and even the formerly considered extinct Indonesian coelacanth fish (1997-98).

Less control and more mystery: Though cryptozoology as a research field is often regarded as pseudoscience, its openness to the possibility of nonhuman mysteries has been particularly attractive to a recent wave of artists interested in decentering the human as the

predominant or 'controlling' species.

What yesterday was unknown is now known. What was once known, it is now questioned. This library section toys with and extends into the unknown unknowns. An immersion into the blurriness and outer limits of our understanding of lifeforms on this planet.

INTERSPECIES LIBRARY

Interspecies Library is the first archive dedicated to the curation and advancement of artists' books focused on alternative interspecies futures. The growing collection aspires to reflect our changing attitudes and acknowledgment of more-than-human worlds.

INTERSPECIES LIBRARY- CURATOR

Oscar Salguero (Interspecies Library) is an archivist, book curator, and independent researcher based in Brooklyn, NY. In 2021, Salguero curated "Interspecies Futures [IF]" at the Center for Book Arts. The show marked the first public survey of bookworks by emerging artists working at the intersection of speculative fiction and interspecies possibilities. Salguero founded Interspecies Library in 2019.

Cryptid

Essay by Günseli Yalcinkaya

“We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear.”
Henry Beston The Outermost House, 1928

“Man, it is true, can, by combination, surmount all his real enemies, and become master of the whole of animal creation: But does he not immediately raise up to himself imaginary enemies, the dæmons of his fancy ...?”
David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, 1779

A cryptid is an animal that may or may not exist. Unproven by science, and chronicled through anecdotal stories passed down through word of mouth, tales of such mythological creatures have captured our imagination for centuries, and typically reflect our innermost fears and desires. These slippery and undefinable animals take many shapes: semi-divine spirits, malevolent tricksters and sci-fi monsters. Yet it's within the context of modern science and reason that cryptids take on new significance, from cultural markers of the strange and surreal to something far more complex and reality-bending.

Derived from the Ancient Greek *kruptós*, literally “hidden, concealed, private, secret”, the cryptid is by definition

unknowable, and occupies a strange interdimensional zone between fantasy and reality. Its mysterious and peculiar presence is comparable to those anomalous experiences associated with the paranormal, occult practice, and psychedelics. For this reason, the cryptid plays an important role within pop culture, especially in our current post-truth landscape – the sort that probes us to question what’s real, what’s ‘out there’. In *High Weirdness*, Erik Davis points out that the “intertwining of reality and fantasy has become a crucial feature of what some scholars of religion now identify as ‘postmodern’ or ‘hyper-real religion’,” and nowhere is this more prevalent than the realm of the unknown.

To understand the cryptid’s position requires us to suspend real-world rules, and to immerse ourselves in the fantastic otherworldliness of the weird – that strangeness that lies beneath the threshold of what we know, or have yet to understand. After all, the possibility of cryptids is both terrifying and fascinating; to encounter a creature so ineffable, so unverifiable, poses a threat to the human, and subsequently the notion that we control the world and its inhabitants. In this context, stories of cryptids function as a sort of cosmic fiction, an ontological tool to expose the cracks in consensus reality with mystic utterances of a world beyond our own. As Timothy Morton puts it, “in the term weird there flickers a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing, a pathway that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed.”

Like all urban legends and folklore, the cryptid is defined by the patchwork of stories surrounding it. This myth-making is the most ancient human tradition, dating back to the earliest stories of beasts and folk creatures told around the fire, and passed down through generations. The modern classification system of animals and plants began in the 18th century, before then mediaeval bestiaries contained detailed descriptions and illustrations of wild animals, taken from verbal accounts, though this has since been replaced by scientific reason. While it's unclear whether many of these creatures actually existed, it's useful to consider these texts as allegorical in nature, which in turn might help us understand the role of cryptids in society today.

In our current era of unreality, it's easy to see how cryptids have ignited the attention of online cryptozoology communities and conspiracy theorists alike. Stories of strange creatures take shape across social media and online forums, where users post sightings, recordings, conversations, and lists to an ever-evolving fandom of dedicated researchers. With each like, post and share adding to the lore surrounding them, there's a memetic contagion to these ideas, no doubt exacerbated by the rapid pace of the internet – and it's within this feedback loop of networked myth-building that the cryptid truly comes into its own.

Whether these creatures actually exist isn't particularly important, but rather what counts is what they tell us about ourselves. When observing the current state of the planet and the crises we face, of which there are many – climate change,

social inequality, and rapid technological acceleration – the cryptid plays an interesting role in dissolving the hierarchies between realities, collapsing the conceptual codes – social, ecological and ontological – that govern us, and giving a terrifying glimpse into the intense and bizarre world we currently inhabit. One such example is advancements in artificial intelligence, which is completely scrambling our sense of temporality through discoveries of ancient languages and artefacts. We see a similar phenomena unfurl in the field of science too: researchers are currently resurrecting dodos and mammoths, defrosting palaeolithic worms and rolling out large tanks of algae, dubbed ‘liquid trees’, across major cities – all of which adds to our stranger-than-fiction reality.

To explore how this ontological time-warping affects us – and it’s important to remember the role fictioning plays here in shaping our worldview – we must suspend our linear conception of temporality, and in doing so, unlock a multitude of realities that encompass the material and immaterial, fact and fiction, past and future. In Xenofeminist teaching, for instance, “the primacy of human phenomenological experience of time is no longer sufficient for how we organise, inflect and orient the systems we have created because these systems function on scales beyond the experiential capacity of the human”. Stepping out of human time then enables “a necessary and productive alienation between our experience and our knowledge that broadens how we think about the very idea of ‘the future’ and how we might go about constructing it’.”

But let's pause for a moment, and boil the cryptid down to its bare essentials. We find a creature whose existence is simply unproven. And while it's true that fictioning can help us to understand the unknowable, there's more to cryptids than devils, frogmen and folk creatures. There's countless species undiscovered by humans: nearly 86 per cent of all plants and animals on land and 91 per cent of those in the seas are yet to be named or catalogued, which means that there's countless cryptids on earth, whose existence has yet to be proven.

As one of the largest and least understood habitats on Earth, the ocean is likely home to the largest number of living cryptids out there. With only 15 percent of the oceans mapped, their sheer vastness means that a majority of its inhabitants will likely remain out of reach. These deep sea creatures might as well be fictional for even contemplating their existence requires us to imagine a world beyond our own – or, as K Allado-McDowell puts it: “an act of becoming other than ourselves”. But the ocean itself also operates as its own mythical body, and hosts an interconnected web of stories of inhabitants whose language is different and unknowable, and therefore beyond our control. Yet it's these creatures whose narrative pathways have been forever re-routed by our actions in what is commonly referred to as the anthropocene.

Language ultimately shapes how we perceive the world, and it's through modern-day taxonomy, and its arbitrary groupings, that we limit our understanding of the non-human entities around us. For McDowell, the world is full of unseen inhabitants who we can take for granted – “unless something reaches out to remind

us that without them, we too would die”, and this has disastrous consequences for the global ecosystem, from habitats being destroyed to the irreversible effects of deep sea mining and the plastic we pump into the ocean. For example, the organisms and viruses that make up the plankton universe are one of the oldest and most diverse groups of creatures on the planet, and provide oxygen for an estimated 70 percent of the earth’s atmosphere, making up 95 percent of ocean biomass. But the human urge to classify and categorise these creatures, which is ultimately rooted in our own needs and desires, overlooks their vital contribution to the environment – or, at least, chooses to ignore it for profit. As I write this, the Atlantic has been described as ground zero for the world’s next ‘gold rush’.

Moving forward requires us to disorientate the human experience and adopt a radical empiricism as suggested by Bruno Latour, and map out many modes of being-in-the-world to allow for “more diversity in the beings admitted to existence.” One way to tackle this is through the lens of queer ecology, which challenges traditional ideas regarding which organisms, species, and individuals have value. Another path is what Allado-McDowell refers to as cybernetic animism, which uses computational design to imagine a material world beyond human cognition. In this context, it is “no longer Man versus Nature, but rather the one fold of plants, animals, humans, etcetera bringing these entities into communication, which reveals them to be subjects like us, in other words: secretly human.”

Our current reality is far removed from the techno-utopian dream of cybernetic meadows, where humans and non-human agents coexist in networked harmony. Human activity is shaping the global ecosystem faster than anything that came before it, the effects of which will remain far longer than recorded history. The plastisphere, the name given to the marine environment that thrives on plastic waste, is one of the fastest growing habitats on earth, and is already home to countless species who colonise the marine debris for their survival. It's not a far stretch then to conceive of a world where these creatures, many of them unrecorded, grow and thrive in a world increasingly uninhabitable for humans. But perhaps it's through our encounters with the unknown, the cryptic and otherworldly, that we can commune with nature, tapping into millennia-old magic to embrace the ineffable.

Joey Holder - Bio

Joey Holder is an artist whose work raises philosophical questions of our universe and things yet unknown, regarding the future of science, medicine, biology and human-machine interactions. Holder has exhibited widely in the UK & internationally including the Harvard Museum of Natural History, Athens Biennale, Design Museum, Sydney Biennale, Transmediale & Venice Biennale. She is the director of SPUR, an online platform which supports digital practice and the director of Chaos Magic, an arts project space in Nottingham.

Working with scientific and technical experts she makes immersive, multimedia installations that explore the limits of the human and how we experience non-human, natural and technological forms. Her artwork is fuelled by continued dialogue and collaborations with researchers & practitioners from varied fields. She creates fictional worlds & constructed environments that respond directly to contemporary, real world events. Each artwork is considered a 'set' with filmic, narrative, architectural, visuals & sound elements created uniquely for the conceptual underpinning of the project. She has worked with computational geneticists, marine biologists, behavioural psychologists & investigative journalists where the artwork has addressed themes including future farming, synthetic biology and deep sea ecosystems. Mixing elements of biology, nanotechnology and natural history against computer programme interfaces, screensavers and measuring devices, she suggests the impermanence and interchangeability of these

apparently contrasting and oppositional worlds: 'everything is a mutant and a hybrid'. Connecting forms which have emerged through our human taste, culture and industrial processes she investigates complex systems that dissolve notions of the 'natural' and the 'artificial'. GM products, virtual biology and aquatic creatures are incorporated into an extended web; challenging our perception of evolution, adaptation and change.

This project is made possible by public funding from The National Lottery through Arts Council England.

Two Queens is an artist-run gallery and studios situated in Leicester's Cultural Quarter. With the ambition of providing a centre for experimental modes of arts production, exhibition and exchange, Two Queens is dedicated to establishing an agenda for new activity in the city and across the region.

We want to invest our energies into collaborations with new institutions and individuals from outside of Leicester whilst also assisting in the development of artists working within the city.

Two Queens was established in 2011 by recent graduates from De Montfort and Loughborough Universities, and has been programming regular exhibitions and events since March 2012.

www.2queens.com

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