

OTTAWA CITIZEN

Whitney Lewis-Smith brings death to life

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By **PETER SIMPSON** FRI, APR 1 2011 COMMENTS(0) THE BIG BEAT

I first noticed the work of Whitney Lewis-Smith while visiting SPAO, [the photography school in the Byward Market](#), about a year ago. The exhibition she has at [La Petite Mort Gallery](#) on Friday night (April 1) shows that she continued to make good use of her time at the school.

The exhibition is titled *Amarantos*, a Greek word that means “everlasting/never dying,” Lewis-Smith tells me in an email. “I am trying to explore the strangeness of human nature and our desire to preserve life. Perhaps our lack of understanding of what comes after leads us to want to stop time.”

Her images are of time stopped twice, first by taxidermy, and then by photography. Lewis-Smith — the daughter of renowned graphic designer Neville Smith and the portrait painter Dodie Lewis — made photographs of animals that were long dead, then reanimated by taxidermists. I’ve always found stuffed animals to be creepy and unsettling, like exhibits in some surreal David Lynch sideshow. Lewis-Smith has heightened the effect by using a most idiosyncratic photographic process.



“They are all glass plate negatives, 8 x10 large format photographs shot with a bellows view camera,” she says. “Quite a slow and labour intensive process but the physicality of it helps me feel close to my work.”

The result is perplexing, in that the images simultaneously look antique but fresh, as if a portfolio of old photos had somehow survived the decades and remained in perfect condition. “Every hair is visible at that size, thanks to the format,” she says. So a rooster stands in an assertive pose, with the finest detail of its feathers made clear. In another photo, a red fox looks startled — active, vibrant, *alive*, yet those eyes, those eyes, there’s death in those eyes.

There’s something macabre about dead animals being yanked from their eternal slumber, stuffed with wood and metal and forced to pose for our pleasure. Lewis-Smith sees that, and wants us to look again and contemplate our own uneasy relationship with death and all that.

“Perhaps our lack of understanding of what comes after leads us to want to stop time. Though these animals are dead and their memories gone, we preserve them for the sake of our own emotional attachments or so that we, the living, have a physical vessel for memory.”

There’s an opening reception at La Petite Mort, 306 Cumberland, from 7 to 10 p.m. Friday, April 1. The exhibit continues to May 1.



Quote

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A mostly misunderstood mixture of natural history ,
objects of desire and relics of day long past.

not the home of a hunter

not a lair for an eccentric heir

not a bold baphomet stronghold