

## **MICHAEL BAIRD : "LET'S TALK ART" QUESTIONS**

1.) Which came first, the creature or the folklore?

Wow. That's an excellent question. As a skeptic and a person who is heavily rational, as opposed to superstitious, I do not believe the literal reality of the creatures. Most violate laws of physics and biology. Some, like the modern concept of Bigfoot, can be traced to fabrications and misunderstandings of older folklore. But the literal reality of the creatures is not important, I believe. They represent various elements of humanity's complicated relationship with the world around us. Many of these elements predate spoken or written language, so I suppose all my babbling comes down to the "creatures" came first, if taken in context.

2.) Folklore is a very expansive topic. How do you pair the stories down to a singular moment/creature/mood?

Folklore is an overwhelmingly expansive field indeed. Even the small portion of folklore relating to fantastical creatures boggles the mind with its magnitude. But for my interests, I tend to read tales and reports with particular attention to the descriptions of the creatures' physical appearance and behavior. These descriptions are the core representation of the tales themselves. It can be oppressive work reading thousands upon thousands of reports filled with useless speculations, appeal to authority fallacies, and long-winded explanations of unrelated information. I often feel like, if I never read another reported sighting of Bigfoot again, it will still be too soon. However, I continue to wade through the volumes of folklore from around the world because it is an essential element of humanity. We need monsters. Frightening, mysterious, friendly, bizarre, even humorous, we need to have strange creatures in our lives in order to explore what it means to be human.

3.) In examining your own process and body of work, are pieces based on specific characters, are they personally invented/constructed, or are they an amalgam of the two?

With the exception of the installation I created a few years ago for the Arts Council, I do not invent any creatures. I create representations of creatures from real stories. Sometimes, these stories are thousands of years old. Other times, the tales come from just days or weeks before. I also tend to shy away from individual characters; I prefer to present creatures representing examples representing imagined entire species.

4.) What do you want the viewer to experience when engaging with your work?

I think our society has lost much of its sense of wonder and imagination. Families used to sit around the hearth and tell tales of far-away places and fantastical

creatures said to live there or even just beyond their back yards. But now, we receive our stories in the form of television, movies, and social media. While there is nothing wrong with these forms of entertainment, they do tend to be less of a bonding experience.

Contemporary viewers are very jaded and have difficulty suspending their sense of disbelief, even for entertainment purposes. But I would like viewers to feel a little spark of wonder, likely even chuckle a bit at the bizarre and fantastical. If just one person tells someone else about some crazy thing they saw in my exhibitions, I will be happy to know that I have helped perpetuate our storytelling traditions.

5.) Who/what inspires your work, and how has this person/idea helped your aesthetic evolve?

How much time have you got? I joke, but the honest response is that there are innumerable inspirations for my artwork. The list of individual artists alone would be an inhibitive undertaking. Sadly, in this field of research, most of the names of people who have created the things I'm inspired by have been lost.

But that's a terrible response. Specifically, I suppose you could say that I love lies. I adore gaffs, faked attractions like P.T. Barnum's Feejee Mermaid. I love stories of crazy, impossible creatures. Monsters represent the most powerful representation of human creativity and I always find a good monster to be endlessly inspirational.

6.) Your work has a theatrical quality to it...what role does staging and lighting play in the presentation of your pieces?

Art exhibitions should be dramatic, theatrical experiences. I am never happy with my exhibitions. I always wish I could have managed a more theatrical impression. But this is a difficult balance to maintain when creating artwork that is so far from the traditions of "gallery art." So I tend to display my work in a manner similar to relics and artifacts in a natural history museum or some sort of formal display.

Though, I do like dim, dramatic, creepy lighting whenever it is possible.

7.) What role does folklore play in modern society, and are there new folktales being created?

Folklore is not dead by any means. It may look different, much more commercial, but we share folklore more frequently now than ever before. Our movies, television, radio, and internet feed our needs. I believe that the majority of the folklore created and shared through these media tend to be hollow and quickly forgotten, sadly. But we still communicate person-to-person to perpetuate folklore as well.

As for new folklore, oh yes, there are new folklore tales created constantly.

Specifically, there seem to be few people who have not heard of modern conceptions of The Loch Ness Monster, starting in the 1930s, Bigfoot, starting in the late 1950s,

Chupacabra, beginning in 1995, or the Slender Man phenomena that was created only a few years ago in 2009. But even in the realm of cryptozoology, the pseudoscience, there are new examples seemingly every day. That is one of the most exciting parts of my research; there is never any end to the list of creatures and tales to explore.