

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sharon Mizota, "Allora & Calzadilla celebrate beauty, oddity of animal world," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2014.

Allora & Calzadilla celebrate beauty, oddity of animal world

BY SHARON MIZOTA
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In 1798, two elephants, Hans and Parkie, arrived in Paris. The French had seized them as spoils of war from the Dutch, who had in turn expropriated them from what is now Sri Lanka.

Objects of both national pride and intense curiosity, the imposing animals must have seemed completely exotic. In fact, their arrival was so remarkable that a group of musicians organized a concert in their honor. They hoped to communicate with the beasts through music.

This concert, situated at the intersection of nascent imperialism and Enlightenment science is the inspiration for Allora & Calzadilla's first L.A. exhibition at REDCAT. The Puerto Rico-based duo (Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla) has created an evocative, 23-minute film that is a beautiful meditation on otherness.

The piece begins with an ultrasound image of a human throat, vibrating, contracting and expanding to an array of low hums and guttural sounds. This remarkable organ belongs to Tim Storms, a vocalist who can reach a note known as G-7, eight octaves below the lowest G on a piano.

We then see Storms, a bald, fastidiously groomed man, singing songs that were played at the elephants' concert in his super-low register. As he sings, he walks slowly past shelves of taxidermy animals in storage at France's National Museum of Natural History. Included among their ranks are the bones of Hans and Parkie.

The words, and indeed the melodies of the songs are barely decipherable; Storms' singing, to our ears, is little more than a series of buzzes and rumbles, often sounding a bit like water running down a slightly clogged drain. We experience the songs as drones or vibrations, but elephants apparently can hear such low frequencies. Storms is singing for them.



MARC DOMAGE

Exhibition view of Allora & Calzadilla's "Apotome," at Paris' Chantal Crousel Gallery in 2013.

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When he finally comes upon the remains of Hans and Parkie, he grasps and caresses the large bones, which seem like alien specimens. Although they might resemble our skeletons in shape and texture, they are completely incommensurable in scale. Like Storms' singing, they are of this earth yet seem completely otherworldly.

By revisiting the elephants' concert in a register only they might fully comprehend, Allora & Calzadilla's film occupies a limbo in which human communication is made strange. The work is a gesture of rapprochement, shifting a bit from our people-centric perspective to imagine how other species might perceive the world.

Still, it is no more than a gesture; it can't undo the past. The images of the taxidermy animals are especially poignant and ironic in this regard. We stuffed them to save them, even as we hunted them down, despoiled their habitats and ensured their extinction. In this light, Storms' singing becomes a funeral dirge.

It's only fitting that the film ends with another ultrasound image of Storms' throat. While the piece celebrates the beauty and strangeness of the animal kingdom, it is also an admission of our inability to escape our own limited frame of reference. No matter how much we may want to bridge the gap, there will always be something we cannot know.