

THE SKIN PAPERS

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This time we've let the skin do the talking, from the walking biography of a foreign legionnaire's tattoos, to the epidermal canvas of the grandmother of performance art. We track down the world champion taxidermist and ask who will keep the skin trade going for the next generation? While listening to the sounds of the Trojan Skins, we ask what happens when an actor really gets inside the skin of a character, and stays there for 50 years?

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“Owners bring us the mangy old body of a dog and expect us to reconstruct Fido the way they remember him as a young, healthy animal”



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A life in skin

Taxidermy: it's a word so dusty and outdated it sounds as if one must first shake mothballs from its syllables. It conjures up images of stuffed foxes and dull-eyed rabbits, caught for eternity mid-stride in the glare of unseen headlights.

Taxidermy may no longer be exactly mainstream, but the craft maintains a quiet following: artists, biologists, naturalists, academics and museum curators that are as passionate about the animals in death as they are in life. Among their number are Dirk Claesen and Katie Brookes - he a World Champion taxidermist, she a student discovering the art one delicate step at a time.

The path to becoming a taxidermist is not clear-cut. Obtaining a formal qualification is virtually impossible. It remains a craft that is passed on from one aficionado to another and workshops are mostly offered informally by practicing taxidermists.

Dirk, who won the world championship taxidermy title for his recreation of a rhino, first studied sculpture. He used this background to become model maker for local taxidermists and so learned the trade. Now, 20 years later,

he works on recreating animals that truly fascinate him: elephants, rhinos, sperm whales, the coelacanth. Katie, on the other hand, found her inspiration in the jars of pickled animals her school art teacher brought to class as inspiration. Her fascination with animal anatomy led her to London, where she is completing an internship with artist-cum-taxidermist Polly Morgan.

Speaking with Dirk and Katie about their passion, it's clear that neither would be able to kill an animal, and both draw a clear line as to what they will and will not work with. They count on family and friends - or in Dirk's case zoos and game reserves - to collect the cadavers they use in their work. "Taxidermy is about representing the animal anatomically as truthfully as possible. That's why I refuse to take on people's pets or game caught by hunters," says Dirk. "There's too much emotion involved. Owners bring us the mangy old body of a dog and expect us to reconstruct Fido the way they remember him as a young, healthy animal. Hunters want us to capture the raw wildness of an animal and the glory of the kill in a head mounted on a felt-covered plaque. It's an impossible task."

Skin remains as fragile in death as it was in life. To be useful, it must remain 'fresh': hair and feathers must remain securely attached; the

skin must remain plump. In winter that gives a taxidermist maximum four days to work with an unfrozen cadaver: in summer, only two. Working with bigger animals such as rhino or elephants, time becomes even more critical. While smaller animals can easily be frozen for later use, it is almost impossible to transport and freeze the body of an elephant in its entirety.

Whether skinning a baby chick or an elephant, both involve skill. The dainty body and fragile skin of a chick won't tolerate the slightest slip of the scalpel and the 4cm thick hide of an elephant must be skilfully shaven down to a manageable four millimetres before it can be used. It is a process that requires enormous patience and respect for the animal's anatomy. For there is nothing that confronts us with death as harshly as a badly stuffed animal; and there is nothing that inspires us as much about the possibilities of life as a skilfully recreated creature. (SC)

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