

The Pensive Image

Paul Kilsby



In The North Wall gallery, fine art photographer and Senior Lecturer, Paul Kilsby presents a compelling exhibition of photographs, as part of IF Oxford. Science and ideas are on display in Summertown evoking 17th Century posed paintings with a 21st Century twist, offering a fresh way of looking at how connections are formed and represented in the world.

In the first collection, *Unnatural Histories*, Kilsby has constructed twelve meticulously-staged tableaux-style photographs using taxidermy specimens. These artificially posed night-time encounters use a high-contrast chiaroscuro effect to draw the eye to specific areas of an image, evoking the focus of a hunter. Predatory birds each have 'caught' a species of impossible prey in their clutches, insects that share no common habitat with the avian species. There is no pretence that these are authentic representations from the wild. Rather this series of images creates a critique of the 'nature-as-spectacle' genre of television documentaries made famous by David Attenborough.

"I have chosen the prey for aesthetic reasons and the photographs are not intended to be ornithologically factual," says Kilsby. "My tableaux are deliberately 'Unnatural Histories' and are gentle satires of the imagery we see all the time in TV nature documentaries. The natural history programmes we see on television today are truly extraordinary," he continues. "Their film footage is recorded with military grade lenses and saturated in colour. An animal's behaviour is often set to environmental soundscapes that are recorded with cutting edge technology but then mixed with fake Foley sounds [the reproduction of everyday sound effects that are added to films, videos, and other media in post-production to enhance audio quality]. Some of the imagery may also be staged or digitally enhanced. Seeing wildlife in this hyperreal way, where every shot is spectacular and dazzling, generates a sense of awe and wonder, yet I question how real this is when it has been constructed in a way that we could never actually experience? You could argue it's a falsified version of what nature's about."

Kilsby's fictitious scenes do indeed share the exaggerated aesthetic of the genre with larger-than-life detail: he highlights incredible textures, the patterning of a moth, the perfect reflection of iridescent plumage or the echo of the curves of whisker-thin antennae of a violin beetle in the tilt of a kingfisher's head.

The constructed images in Kilsby's second series, *Geometria*, take a broader look at the world. Most of these images show an assemblage that draws on age-old mathematical formulas and classic art in contemporary images that encourage us to explore space and time, to reflect upon concepts of solidity, fragility and jeopardy, and to question reality and illusion.

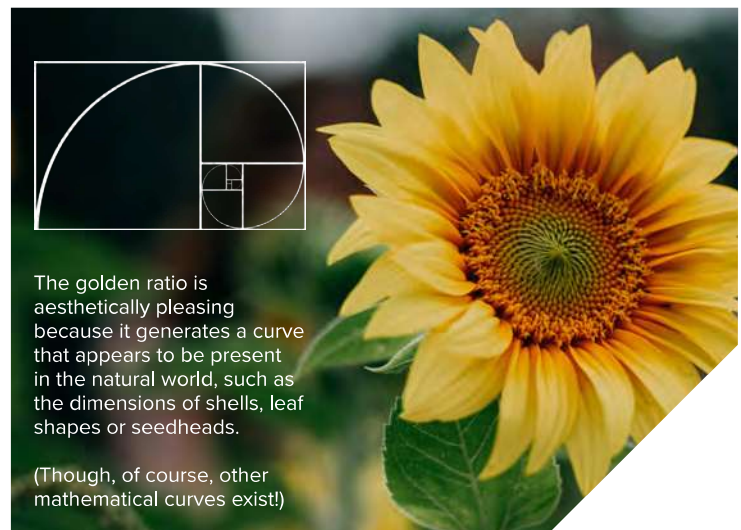
Originally trained as a sculptor, Kilsby has constructed these scenes for the camera with perfect placement and exquisite lighting, staging the contradictions in strength, scale and permanence perhaps as if he were designing a

film set in his quest to capture the definitive image.

For each of his novel compositions, he weaves together specimens from all facets of the natural world (flowers, insects, stone, water and air, feathers and fire) and human-crafted artefacts, often with implicit or explicit mathematical references. He incorporates other eclectic influences ranging from Plato and Archimedes to the Italian High Renaissance artists such as Piero della Francesca or Raphael, along with Dutch and Spanish Baroque still life and, closer to home, paintings that hang in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum.

With delicate charm and a dark aesthetic, akin to that of seventeenth century Dutch masters, Kilsby's photographs explore the patterns and shapes in the world that underly our visual culture, quietly alluding to the complex ways that art and science coexist. Geometry, after all, is a set of age-old rules, timeless mathematical shapes that underpin the structure of the world and the way we perceive the environment around us. It is also key to beauty we perceive.

The Golden Section, also known as the Divine Proportion, was first described by Euclid in the 4th century BCE. It is widely considered to be a universal rule of beauty because its proportions create a balanced relationship that our mind's eye loves.



The golden ratio is aesthetically pleasing because it generates a curve that appears to be present in the natural world, such as the dimensions of shells, leaf shapes or seedheads.

(Though, of course, other mathematical curves exist!)

As Kilsby draws truths and fiction together in unexpected and imagined ways, he explores this golden ratio and the Fibonacci sequence, a classic mathematical formula which is found in the shapes of various natural phenomena, including the arrangement of leaves on a stem and the structure of certain flowers. It is also seen in the spirals of shells and a fossilised Madagascan ammonite that Kilsby has incorporated into one of his images which dates back 160 million years.

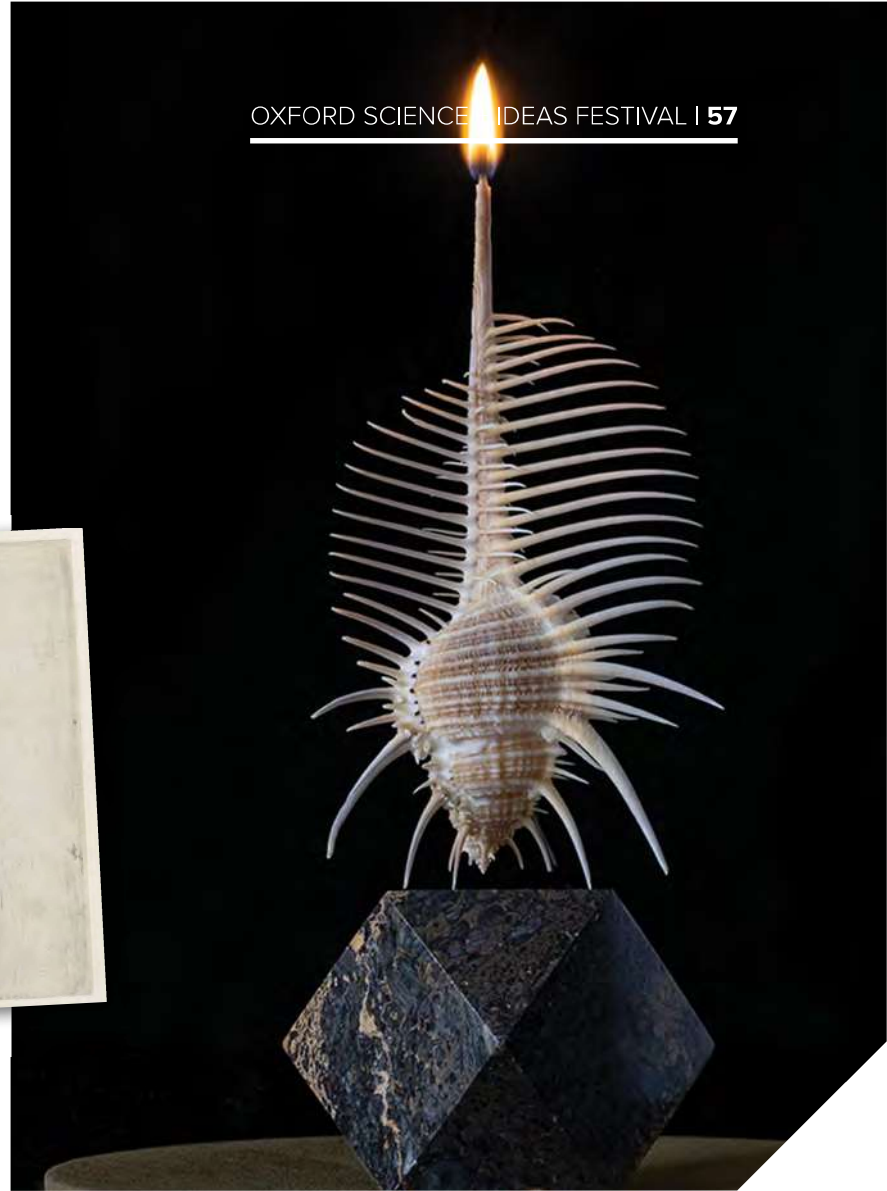
One of Kilsby's works is inspired by Rembrandt's tiny etching with drypoint, *Shell or Conus Marmoreus* (1650). For this construction, Kilsby has balanced a very similar shell on a sandcast brass polyhedron made by the Japanese designer Oji Masanori which has an interesting texture. This polyhedron is in turn placed on an upturned red lacquer bowl dripping with honey, which pins his chosen objects in an instant of time.



Another image shows the exquisite Venus Comb Murex, a shell with an extraordinary skeletal form. Its central spine stands at a perfect vertical in his photograph, topped by a small flame burning from a wick inserted into the shell, an ephemeral instant that tops an assemblage very precariously balanced on a polygon made from stone that dates back millions of years. The apparent permanence of the stone – or is it simply a painted prop created by Kilsby, you might ask? – contrasts with the delicate gold of the flame, reflected through the shell's fine calcified spikes which might fall and break into shards at any moment.

The apparent simplicity of the works belies layers of calculation and science: with atmosphere and mystery, Kilsby uses the power of the images to encourage the viewer to look beyond the aesthetic elegance to layers of intrigue. As he sets the fleeting nature of animals and plants against the solidity of the elements, of form and time, the photographs play with concepts drawn from the fundamental mathematical order of the world, with the interplay of scale, structure and equilibrium, and with concepts of fragility and jeopardy.

They also suggest inherent questions and contradictions: Kilsby reminds us we should always consider carefully what we see and understand and ask whether it is real or fiction. In the photographs of *Geometria*, you might ask which elements of the composition



are drawn from nature, and which have been created purely for the staging of each photograph? Because many of the objects in his photographs are actually constructed models painted using trompe l'oeil techniques to simulate the look of marble or wood, for example.

Geometria also includes subtle references to the crises we are facing in the Anthropocene. Two further images present details of a landscape that might be apocalyptic for example: a lily and a magnolia bud are dusted in black ash and reek of destruction and death. And yet, are these photographs pessimistic or optimistic? The flowers, after all, continue to bloom, in one case attracting the attention of a Siberian moth.

As a finale, perhaps, visitors can also muse over a burning South African Protea flower atop an Ionic stone column. "It's a very remarkable flower that has evolved over three hundred million years and can survive a bush fire because its roots go deep below the earth," comments Kilsby. "I discovered when I was in South Africa that it was chosen as their national flower because it symbolises strength, courage and resilience. Those are qualities I think we are going to need!"



The Pensive Image Exhibition will be hosted from Wednesday 2 – Saturday 19 October as part of the Oxford science and ideas Festival, at **The North Wall Arts Centre South Parade Summertown Oxford OX2 7JN**

Free entry – Suitable to all ages