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SIMON STARLING

THE NANJING PARTICLES



MASS MoCA
GALLERY GUIDE

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Simon Starling (b. 1967, Great Britain) has become known for his poetic investigations of the labor, material, and processes associated with both art and industry. In many of his works, Starling engages directly with the conditions of the exhibition site, collapsing local stories onto global narratives. In his new work for MASS MoCA, Starling addresses the museum's former life as a factory in a once-bustling industrial town as well as its current incarnation as a space of culture and leisure in a postindustrial era. The artist links a contemporary economic reality: the outsourcing of manufacturing, including the fabrication of the artist's own sculptures, to cheap Chinese labor—to one of its historical precedents: the importation of a group of Chinese workers to North Adams to break a factory strike in 1870. Starling's installation, *The Nanjing Particles (After Henry Ward, View of C.T. Sampson's Shoe Manufacturing, with the Chinese Shoemakers in working costume, North Adams and vicinity, c. 1875)* (2008) began with a stereograph of these nineteenth century immigrant laborers pictured in front of the shoe factory once located on what is now the MASS MoCA campus. Visitors to the exhibition are greeted by enormously enlarged copies of these historic photographs which originally measured 2 15/16 × 3 1/8 inches. The photos are blown up to a size that brings their ghostly subjects closer to a human scale while returning an historical context to the museum. The images were originally meant to be viewed through a stereoscope, an optical device which produces the illusion of space and depth in a pair of two-dimensional photographs taken from slightly different perspectives. As scholar Rosalind Krauss has noted, the immersive stereoscopic viewing experience, like cinema, "transports the viewer optically, while his body remains immobile."¹ In Starling's exhibition, however, the artist enables his viewers to both physically and

metaphorically navigate the space of the photographs, which are presented in the gallery as a 20 × 40 foot structure that visitors can both see through and walk behind, in the manner of a sculpture.

Throughout his practice, Starling has explored the relationship between photography and sculpture. He is interested in the photograph as an object and as a receptacle for actual quantities of metal (the silver, gold, or platinum used in the printing process). For *The Nanjing Particles*, the artist extracted silver grains from the stereograph's emulsion to demonstrate the photograph's material structure—which he sees as "a constellation of sculptural elements—a particle field." Starling has, in essence, transformed the gallery space into a magnified section of a sheet of photographic paper, ushering viewers into what he has described as "the nano-world of photography."² Viewers can indeed glimpse—through the two apertures which correspond to the areas from which the particles were extracted—two silver grains in sculptural form, each magnified one million times their original microscopic size. Using a one million volt electron microscope Starling was able to accurately render two specific particles. Scanned images of the particles were first translated into three-dimensional computer renderings, and then rapid prototype models were made to scale. From these a team of foundry workers in Nanjing, China, created traditional clay and plaster models of the particles at full scale before forging the final forms in stainless steel. Reminiscent of the highly engineered sculptures of artists such as Jeff Koons and Anish Kapoor, Starling's *Nanjing Particles* were made in China for a fraction of the cost in a seamless mix of old craft and new technology—a marriage which mirrors the relationship of third world laborers to first world economies. Hand-polished to produce a highly reflective surface,

the sculptures belie the hand-made element of their making. Instead, the nearly perfect surfaces provide distorted reflections of, initially, their makers in the factory in Nanjing and, ultimately, the viewers cum cultural consumers who have replaced workers in the re-purposed factory space at MASS MoCA. Thus, while Starling offers us a kind of cross-section of the makeup of the photographs, he also offers us a similar view into the global economy past and present, as well as North Adams' connection to those economies through both art and industry.

In the mezzanine gallery, an earlier but related work titled *One Ton, II* (2005) emphasizes both the material reality of the photographic medium and the unseen quantity of labor and resources that contributes to its production. The five platinum prints depict an enormous open cast platinum mine in Potgieterus, South Africa. The number of Starling's handmade prints was determined by the quantity of platinum derived from one ton of ore excavated from the mine. *Ten* tons of ore are, in fact, required to produce just one ounce of platinum group metals. Further emphasizing the photographs' relationship to their subject and source, the crystallized surface of the images mimics the surface of the brutally engineered landscape. Not far from these photographs sit table-top models of the silver grains extracted from the Henry Ward photographs for *The Nanjing Particles*. Nearby, a vitrine contains printer's proofs of images of the sculptures' elaborate fabrication process, as well as a dummy of the catalogue, which has been designed to be used as a home-made stereoscope to view the portraits

of the Chinese workers. A nearly comprehensive collection of the artist's previous publications is also on view. These documents are an integral part of Starling's practice, explicating the protracted processes behind the construction of his various narratives and objects.

In the gallery below, Starling presents *Strip Canoe (African Walnut)* (2007–08), an ongoing project that was inspired, in part, by a 1909 expedition to Northeast Congo by scientist and photographer Herbert Lang. Sent on a biological survey for the American Museum of Natural History (and sponsored by J.P.

Morgan, a friend of the Congo's renowned tyrant, King Leopold of Belgium), Lang is now perhaps best known for his photographs of the okapi, an elusive animal related to the giraffe. These prize photographs were shot in the Ituri region, now home to the Okapi Wildlife Reserve as well as violent conflicts over the area's gold deposits. The okapi's black, brown, and white markings are referenced in the stripes of Starling's canoe, which was constructed in the manner of typical New England cedar strip canoes (themselves derived from Native American birch bark canoe). Using African hard woods instead of the usual

cedar, Starling has transformed the canoe into a hybrid: part African, part American, part camouflage, part sculpture, part vessel. In the galleries the canoe is presented in a manner suggesting the dioramas typical of Natural History Museum displays. Two mannequins portage the canoe, their combined silhouette mimicking the four-legged okapi, situated amidst a forest of "trees" fashioned from pillars salvaged from the museum's original



TOP: Simon Starling, *Strip Canoe (African Walnut)*, 2007–08. Photo: Jonathan Dennis. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York. • BOTTOM: Herbert Lang, *Okapia johnstoni. Okapi male. Total side view. Akenge, Congo Belge. Oct. 15, 1913.* Glass plate negative, 5 × 7 inches. American Museum of Natural History Library — Special Collections.

factory buildings. Here again, Starling interrogates a pictorial form—the diorama in this case—characterized by its relation to both illusion and didacticism.

In the spring of 2009, Starling will remove the canoe from its museological site in order to make a journey down the Hoosic River, the south and north branches of which join at MASS MoCA's west end. The artist will paddle from North Adams towards New York and will have his travels filmed along the way. A new work made from the footage will be added to the exhibition in Summer 2009. A billboard on River Street subtly announces the coming attraction with a mysterious image of the four-legged canoe in transit. In the film, Starling overlays documentation of his own excursion on the Hoosic (in a type of boat the colonists in North America borrowed from the Native Americans)



with references to Lang's expedition on the Congo and Ituri rivers (made via Belgium during that nation's violent rule over the African region). In doing so Starling seems to raise questions about New England's own bloody, colonial past and the relationships played out in the Hoosic region between the Dutch, British, and French, and their Native American allies and enemies.

The suite of works in *The Nanjing Particles*, like Lang's original images of the okapi and Henry Ward's stereographs, illustrates the profound relationship between image-making—whether framed as documentary photographs or elements of a contemporary art work—and the economic and political agendas of a given time.

—Susan Cross, Curator

¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1985), 139.

² All quotes attributed to Simon Starling are from correspondence between the artist and the author, November 19, 2008.



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COVER & ABOVE: Simon Starling, Production still, *The Nanjing Particles* (After Henry Ward, View of C.T. Sampson's Shoe Manufactory, with the Chinese Shoemakers in working costume, North Adams and vicinity, c. 1875), Nanjing, China. Photo: Simon Starling. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York.