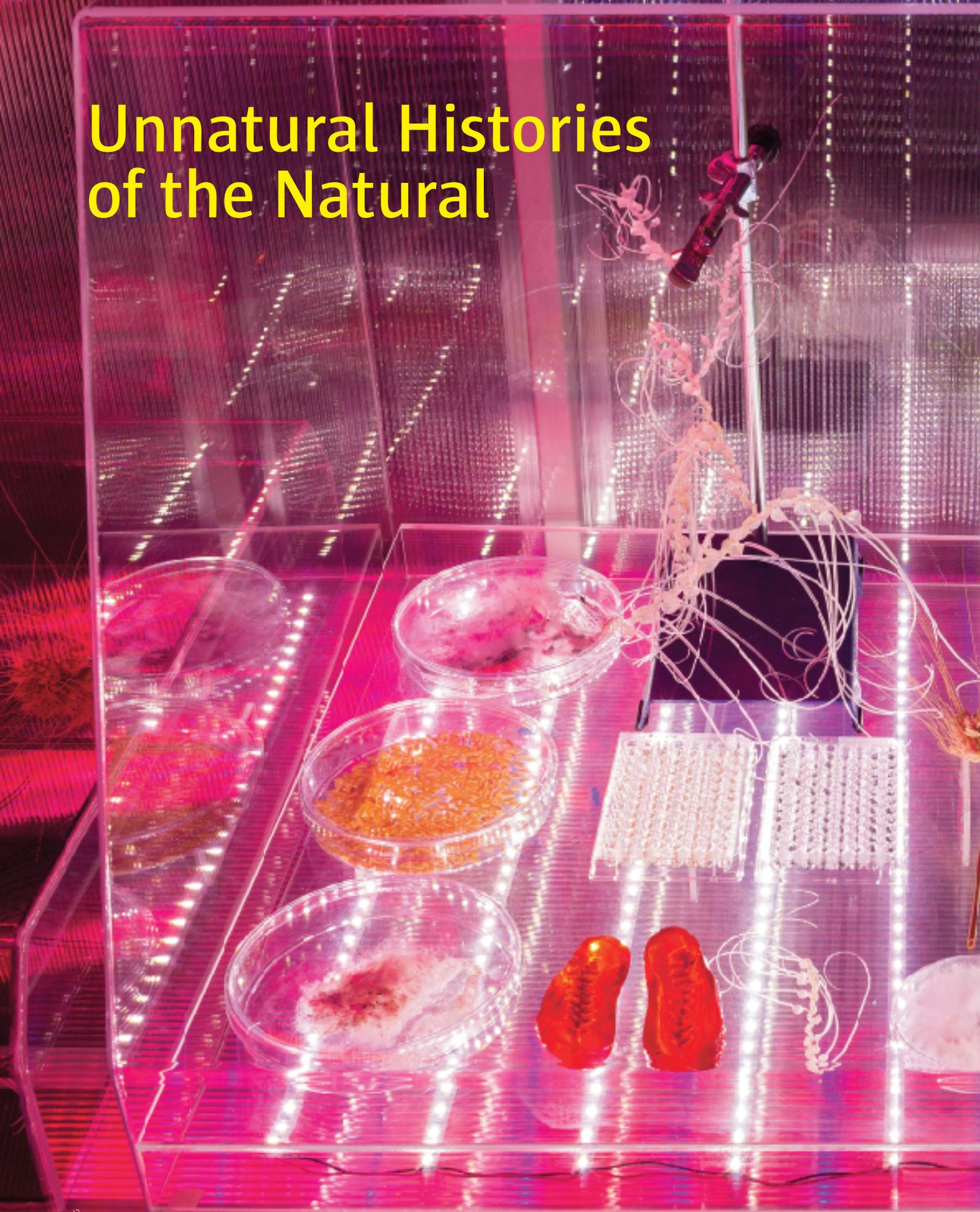


Unnatural Histories of the Natural



ELAD SARIG

Mother of All Wheat (detail) 2014–15. Galvanized iron, polycarbonate, Perspex, LED tubes, wheat, photopolymer 3D prints, epoxy, pigments, cement, salt, soil, latex, seeds, and grains, 230 x 210 x 23 cm.

A Conversation with **Tomer Sapir**

BY ANGELA LEVINE



In July 2008, an animal carcass of unknown identity washed up on the shores of Ditch Plains, New York. This object, which became known as the “Montauk Monster,” has proved to be a major catalyst in the evolution of Tomer Sapir’s work. A crypto-taxidermist, the Israeli artist creates sculptures that integrate fiction and reality, organic and synthetic materials. The result: a unique body of work in which nature and the unnatural co-exist in harmony.

Angela Levine: *Could you tell me the story of the Montauk Monster and how it affected you?*

Tomer Sapir: This carcass, with bloodstains on its body, was a kind of hybridization between mammal and fowl. The photo aroused compassion in me, but I was also aware of its threatening aspect as an unidentified creature. The women who discovered it claimed that it was decomposing rapidly and disappeared within a few hours. The truth of the story is less clear. The event received wide media coverage that hinted at different conspiracy theories. The “truth” didn’t really interest me, just the story of this mysterious organic body washed up out of the amorphous ocean onto solid ground, where it upset the natural order of things.

AL: *You produce objects called “Cryptids.” What are they?*

TS: Cryptids are creatures that are not registered in any official zoological index, whether because of a lack of scientific proof as to their existence or because they really are fictitious. *Overtured Cryptid* (2008) was my first exhibited example. It took the form of an upside-down turtle, with a downy anus in the center of its soft, exposed belly.

The Visit (2009), a site-specific piece that I produced for my final MFA project at the Bezalel Academy of Arts, developed from this work. It included a “Queen



Left: *Overtured Cryptid*, 2008. Cement, salt, wax, latex, and *Ceiba insignis* fruits, 43 x 77 x 59 cm. Right: *Scleroderma*, 2008–10. Concrete, dimensions variable.
Below: *The Visit*, 2009–14. Wax, *Ceiba insignis* fruits, plaster, cement, salt, pigments, polyurethane foam, latex, mirrors, steel, and plywood, 135 x 590 x 120 cm.



LEFT AND BOTTOM: ELAD SARIQ

Cryptid,” an unidentified organic mass that appeared to have burst into the space and broken up. It was surrounded by chemical stains, like an emission. Around it, and on the walls, I placed cocoons made from *Ceiba insignis* fruits to give the impression of tiny nesting colonies of cryptids. This installation resulted in a series of works, the last of which was displayed in 2014 in “Dark Times” at the Tel Aviv University Art Gallery. There, I worked on the original object, displaying it as three units on raised and mirrored platforms. I added many layers of paint and materials of different textures to it so that it looked like an extra layer of skin, something between a discharge and a skin disorder.

AL: For the last 10 years, you have been amassing a collection of found and fabricated objects for your *Crypto-Taxidermal Index*—the phrase alluding to the embalming of unrecognized creatures. Is this a serious research project?

TS: This is ongoing and complex research, but not in the scientific sense. As opposed to scientific research, I am not seeking the “truth”; instead, I want to challenge it. This project and others aim to raise questions dealing with the development of the language of sculpture. My research is mainly material and visual; and my discoveries will, I believe, have cultural and political impact. I focus on the compressed critical moment with the potential of questioning an existing order: a twilight zone where dichotomies such as good and bad, male and female, living and dead are not fully determined.

I am a collector of objects, mostly from nature. It is a family tradition. As far back as I can remember, my mother was a collector and her mother before her. Nature is the prism through which I look at the world. As an artist, this is my way of telling a story; it is an aesthetic language.

“Crypto-taxidermy” is a very apt term to describe my work since I produce fictitious organic configurations. I work with very few materials. This is the vocabulary through which I try to create a rich and complex language. My process is slow and evolutionary; each new work is a response to the last.

Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermal Index was the title I gave to a work I exhib-



Above and detail: *Research for the Full Crypto-Taxidermal Index*, 2010. Mixed media, 250 x 240 x 165 cm.

ited in “Shelf Life” at the Haifa Museum of Art in 2010. Afterwards, I thought the title should become the umbrella description for future projects. My installation there included dozens of objects I collected or created over many years. I exhibited some of them as they were and worked on others to create entirely new entities. Although I moved, and still move, between different media, my starting point is always sculpture.

AL: In group shows, like “*The Hidden Passengers*” at Apexart in New York and “*Collecting Dust*” at the Israel Museum (both 2014), you chose to display mini-hybrid sculptures under glass, as if they were valuable museum pieces. Why present them in that way?



Top: *Untitled*, 2012. Mixed media, 33 x 105 x 22 cm. Above: Installation view of “*Terra Incognita*,” 2012.

TS: This method of display is an inherent part of the work, designed to blur the distinction between an art gallery, a natural history museum, and a scientific research laboratory. The aim is to create hybridizations between different languages and the abstract. Placing objects on a legible grid with an internal logic enabled me to question scientific methods of indexing.

Viewers are confronted with a loaded system, an abstract organic configuration in which it is not necessarily clear which are found objects, works of art, or scientific materials. My interest is in systems that create tensions between history/histories and the unstable present. For this purpose, I displayed fossil-like objects made from cement and salt alongside seemingly decayed ones fashioned from wax, latex, and the fibers of *Ceiba insignis* fruits. The range of items was wide and included stones, artificial skeletons, and tubers, as well as textiles that looked like leather scraps—the product of cultures nurtured in the laboratory.

AL: For “*Terra Incognita*” at the *Chelouche Gallery* in Tel Aviv (2012), you planted outside, insect-like creatures on the floor and hung fossil-like objects from the walls. Was the character of this

menacing ensemble influenced by the work of specific artists, or, perhaps, by other sources?

TS: From a young age, I watched horror movies intensively, and they made a powerful impression on me. The tense moment before a terrifying and extreme event was what I waited for, more than the catastrophe itself. As a spectator, even then, I was aware of the fact that the filmmakers were using manipulative techniques, but I knew they were necessary to heighten the experience.

There are indeed connections between my work and that of specific artists, namely Mark Dion and Roxy Paine. In the case of the objects featured in “*Terra Incognita*,” I drew inspiration from three sculptors in particular: Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, and Berlinde De Bruyckere.

The original intention for “*Terra Incognita*” was to create a sculpture of a huge cryptid with 10 legs. But looking at legs strewn all over my studio floor, I decided to give up on the idea of constructing a whole body and concentrated only on its lower limbs and a few other body parts. A wall work was also drawn from the original concept. Composed of the rear part of the monster, it was a junc-



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ture between a giant testicle, a large stinger, and a lion's tail. I remember that this piece, at once seductive and poisonous-looking, captured the attention of every visitor to the show.

With "Terra Incognita," I was expanding my concern with the tensions that exist between past and present, history, mythology, and fiction. The use of materials such as cement and salt allowed me to create fossil-like objects alluding to the remains of a distant past that might be in possession of secret codes. As a sculptor, one of my main challenges has always been to create clearly defined objects that also have metaphysical value.

AL: *What is the basis for your latest, most ambitious installation, Mother of All Wheat?*

TS: A year ago, I read about the Svalbard Global Seed Vault—a mountain facility located at Spitzbergen, a remote Norwegian island, where seeds from all over the world are stored as a safety net in case of global disaster. I became fascinated by their "Day of Judgment" preparations, and this was the starting point for *Mother of All Wheat*.

To prepare, I held many conversations with Professor Avi Levy and other scientists from the Department of Plant Sciences at the Weizmann Institute. I visited its laboratories and greenhouses, documented details of the buildings and the objects that they contained, methods of display, and so forth. I also paid a visit to the underground bunker at the Vulcani Institute, near Tel Aviv, where a sperm bank is maintained for use in the event of a catastrophe.

I invented a system full of contradictions and blurred boundaries, basically, a structure that merged a greenhouse, a research laboratory, and a gene bank. It was lit by blue and red LED lamps, with its roof and southern wall covered with blue and red Polygal boards. The balance between the sunlight and the LED lighting altered during the day. At night, the greenhouse became a light box. I sought to simulate optimal growth conditions and a sense of microbiological activity. But the system was impotent and nothing grew there.

The objects I placed in the greenhouse relied on the specific architecture of wheat. I broke up sheaves of different species and re-assembled them to make new forms. I also conceived a module of spines and seeds that I produced on a 3D printer to create artificial mutations of various sizes. Fossils were included, made by pouring cement and salt and also ambers—translucent resins—within which I placed residues of sheaves, archaeological remains with the potential of resurrection.

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