



Heather Ackroyd & Dan Harvey

18 October 2005: Richard Sabin from the Natural History Museum calls with news of a minke whale washed up on the beach near Skegness, email images arrive, it seems good, skeleton intact. We start to organise ourselves, collecting together our whale flensing kit: knives, sharpeners, plastic bags and sheets, rubber gloves, overalls, rope and numbering tags. The whale is resting almost half-buried on a stretch of sandy beach called Gibraltar Point. The council provides a large skip for the flesh to be dumped in and we are ready to start cutting by mid-afternoon. On that first day we remove the two jawbones and separate the skull from the rest of the body. There is a light breeze that keeps the smell almost bearable; the six-metre carcass has been dead for approximately a month judging by the state of its decomposition.

There is quite a precise way that one needs to approach removing the bones of a whale, first taking off the head and cutting off as much meat as possible, then working along the backbone, cutting halfway down the ribs and letting the mass of the flesh peel back by its own weight. The knives blunt fast and need constant sharpening. The ribs, in fact all the bones, are covered with a thick sheaf of almost golden skin, which is firmly attached but can be removed like a stocking once cut away. The ribs protect all the internal organs and Richard has forewarned us to be careful of exposure to pathogens when cutting into the lungs. The stomach and intestines are easy to spot but with the state of decomposition it is hard to tell apart the other organs. In fact, we do not think the lungs are there. When a whale dies its internal temperature will begin to rise as heat is generated from the rotting process, the blubber acts as a very good insulator and as gases build up inside the corpse, the lungs are violently expelled through the mouth. Each bone is bagged, numbered, sealed and tagged on the outside. The backbone is separated into sections of four or five vertebrae. After two and a half days we have a skip with about five tons of putrid flesh in it and a pile of plastic-wrapped, smelly bones. It is a very particular, pungent smell of death, one that enters your nose and haunts you.

We are under the impression that the smell could not get any worse, but leaving bones wrapped in plastic for the best part of a week is another thing. Although the bags are fairly well sealed, blood seeps out and flies slip in. Then the hatching of maggots soon turns much of the remaining flesh to a grey soup. Weeks of boiling and cutting ensue, along with keeping track of which bones go where. Each vertebra has two end discs (biscuits) that in an older creature would be fused to the bone. We realise that the minke, whilst fully grown, was still an adolescent. Stripping this creature right down to his bones, we become connected to him in an intimate and intense way, as if his death is giving us a closer understanding of his life.

The final cleaning process is done with enzymes. The bones no longer smell and almost look as if they are carved. A perfect specimen ready for the next stage: crystallisation. We begin with the bones weighted down to base plates, as they lie for days in dark, steaming tanks of a supersaturated chemical solution. As the solution cools a reaction happens; seeds form, attach themselves to the bones and begin to grow. Slowly the skeleton is encrusted with crystals, a strange embalming in chemical water. As we draw to the surface the crystal covered bones, they are exquisitely fragile and any sharp movement will cause crystals to fall.

Ephemeral is a word we often use in describing our work. Our site-specific artwork involves processes of growth, decay, erosion and transformation. It is transient. It is about change. And in our world there is continual change, and therefore continual loss. So how and why does loss matter?

The chemistry of our oceans is changing. It is now accepted that, if we continue unabated in our consumption of fossil fuel, the acidity of the oceans will increase incrementally and the life they support, from tiny carbonate shells and plankton upwards, will perish.

Does the loss of this young minke whale matter? We only know him through his death and we really know very little of his life. So we have embraced his loss and sought to reappraise the value of his life. Here, where the gleaming crystals encase his lifeless bones, lies a memento mori for our times.

— Images: Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey's Whale Stranding Project



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