Zac Langdon-Pole
Chimera

James Street Food and Wine Trail
James Street, Meanjin/Brisbane
Sunday 28 July 2024, 10am–5pm

IMA INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
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When Does One Thing Become Another?

Zac Langdon-Pole interviewed by The Art Paper

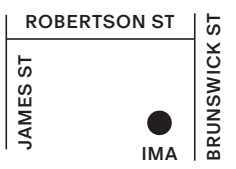
Zac Langdon-Pole lives in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland. His enigmatic works trace historical forces that have deposited us into the present. In 2017, he won the Ars Viva Prize, and, in 2018, the BMW Art Journey. In 2020, City Gallery Wellington presented his major survey show, *Containing Multitudes.* In 2022, he was a McCahon House Artist in Residence at Parehuia, Titirangi. Later this year, his work will feature in the Asia Pacific Triennial at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Meanjin/Brisbane. He is represented by Station Gallery in Warrane/Sydney and Naarm/Melbourne, and by Michael Lett in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland.

Since 2011, **Art on James** has provided opportunities for the James Street community to enjoy great art works on the street and within its retail spaces, exploring the intersection of art and commerce. It has featured works by Ben Quilty, Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, Helga Groves, Pope Alice, Jonathan Zawada, Jon Cattapan, Gerwyn Davies, Sam Cranstoun, D Harding, Sebastian Moody, Jemima Wyman, Ghost Patrol, and Ross Manning, and now Zac Langdon-Pole.

The Institute of Modern Art—just around the corner from James Street—is Brisbane's hub for contemporary art. Established in 1975, it turns fifty next year. It's the oldest surviving contemporary-art gallery of its kind in Australia.

IMA
INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART

Institute of Modern Art
420 Brunswick Street
Fortitude Valley, Meanjin/Brisbane
Tuesday–Sunday 10am–5pm
ima.org.au



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The IMA is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland, the Australian Government through Creative Australia, and the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian Federal, State, and Territory Governments. The IMA is a member of Contemporary Art Organisations Australia.

Image: Zac Langdon-Pole *Chimera* 2024, *Perpetual Guardian Sculpture on the Gulf*, Waiheke Island, 2024. Photo: Peter Rees. Courtesy Michael Lett, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland. With support from Richard Douglas and Kriselle Baker.

The Art Paper
Your sculpture *Chimera* finds a bronze replica Camarasaurus skull dangling from a spider crane. It takes inspiration from an episode involving mismatched and mislabelled dinosaur skeletons in the period known to palaeontologists as the 'Bone Wars'. Can you recount this story and what interested you about it?

Zac Langdon-Pole
The Bone Wars of the nineteenth century were like a gold rush to discover, name, and collect dinosaur bones. My work revolves around how the world came to know one of the most iconic dinosaurs, the Brontosaurus. The head of one dinosaur (a Camarasaurus) was mistakenly put on the body of another (an Apatosaurus). Palaeontologists were quick to identify the error, but because it was the first full dinosaur skeleton to be put on display in a museum it cemented its place as real in the popular imagination. So real that one hundred years later I grew up being taught at school that it was a dinosaur.

To me, it's a beautiful parable of how malleable history and reality are. As a puzzle-like assemblage, the Brontosaurus is a perfect analogy for ourselves. If we are our memories, and these memories are constantly being edited and reshaped by new experiences, doesn't that make identity a process rather than a finite thing? I love that the Brontosaurus has one foot in fact and one foot in fiction. Much like a Brontosaurus, we are both real and imagined entities built on the fissures of different things coming together.

***Chimera* reminds me of Sid's mutant toys in *Toy Story* (1995). It also makes me think about horror, in Noël Carrol's sense, as being about the 'threatening and impure'. Robert Leonard previously described your work as exemplifying the surrealist 'marvellous', which seems like a quite different affect, so I'm curious how the invocation of horror sits for you?**

I love that *Toy Story* reference. That scene in Sid's room is brilliant, because those mutant toys turn out to be far richer in character and allude to their owner (Sid) being more complex than Woody and Buzz's owner (Andy). Uncannily enough, when Woody and Buzz encounter the hybrid toys, they assume they are cannibals, because according to where they come from—as classic toy-store readymades—the hybrid toys look so different. Isn't that a deft portrayal of encounters within colonial history?

I'm drawn to the monstrous as a projection. As Peter Mason defines the exotic, a monster is not a monster until someone deems it so. It isn't a pre-existing fact, before our encounter with it. I find it all quite beautiful. So maybe there's something about how the monstrous can contain the beautiful and the beautiful can contain the monstrous.

Previous works of yours have examined ideas of passage—following bird-migration routes and colonial trade, for example—and the ways these things have mapped knowledge (sometimes erroneously) and power (mostly unevenly). *Chimera* seems more interested in lines and logics of descent and ascent than those of flight. Was this question of orientation something you thought about when developing the work?

Previous bodies of work were guided by a question of belonging: What belongs where? This was a useful tool to unpack how we order the world: How do we apprehend what we see and place it rightly or wrongly into a system of thought or worldview? That question is still there with *Chimera*, but it also incorporates a new question: When does one thing become another?

The work is formally hinged between two readings. On the one hand, the position of the skull obviously makes the piece read as a hybrid 'monster', albeit a glaringly wrong or incongruous one. On the other, the crane is just doing what a crane does, lifting the skull into place. So the work is literally performing this moment in which any possible body might be added. I like that it fizzes with potential. It's a monument to becoming. If there's one major ethic to my work, it would be that I want to underline how the world is constituted not by definite things but by numerous processes.

In terms of the logic of ascension and descension, you could say the piece is a collage of two quite different time frames. The Camarasaurus skull—found buried underground and now raised to the sky—is from the deep history of the Earth. The spider crane is more obviously from our time. Cranes dominate our skylines, building upwards. They feature on the tops of buildings, which seem to me to be emblems of human civilisation's so-called 'progress'. The crane, however, is powered by petrol, a substance derived from once-living things, now fossilised, buried in history. So everything is connected. In terms of orientation, the work is about both looking backward and looking forward at the same time, like a Janus head or Paul Klee's 'angel of history'.

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