

Taxidermy Fire

When a Parisian taxidermy shop burned down, Martin d'Orgeval was invited to snap the stuffed, furry flambe

Text: Hannah Gregory / Photos: Martin d'Orgeval/Steidl Photography International

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Like a bear with a sore head: A grizzly surveys the scene

“I found that taking photographs in a half-destroyed building, with charred walls and a fragile architecture, produced a strange malaise. We’re used to living in solid structures, we’re used to living in peace, but in an environment like that, you feel unsettled,” says Parisian photographer, Martin d’Orgeval.

He’s telling Bizarre about his latest work, *Touched By Fire* (published by Steidl, 2009) – a visual document of a blaze that swept through Deyrolle, the oldest taxidermy shop in Paris. From boxes of butterflies to dioramas of birds, Deyrolle was an emporium of natural history, where every exhibit was for sale.

Established on the chic left bank of the Seine at the beginning of the 19th century by the entomologist, Jean-Baptiste Deyrolle, the shop’s reputation was as high as its cavernous ceilings.

“I knew the shop very well,” explains Martin, “It had a scientific, sombre atmosphere, and contained a chaotic accumulation of stuffed creatures. I loved it.”

Artists including surrealists André Breton and Salvador Dalí had visited and been inspired by the biological wonders on display, so when the shop was struck by a fire in February 2008, its proprietor, Louis de Broglie, encouraged artists – including detective-artist Sophie Calle, documentary photographer Nan Goldin and Martin – to work on and in its carcass, perhaps seeking some poetic justice from the tragedy.

Martin entered the debris just two days after the disaster, confronting the ruins and immediately shooting what he found.

“I viewed the scene as tragic, but also very beautiful,” he remembers. “Not everything had been destroyed. It was as though the exhibits were in shock. I photographed the scene like the remains of some obscure happening.”

He found and shot a great bear with a torn muzzle, posing with its paws in the air. Beetles had been knocked out of uniform lines and collected beneath the fractured glass, prettily discoloured by the foam of the fire-extinguishers. There was even some surreal black humour to be found in the impromptu arrangement of fallen moose-heads and sooty tortoise shells.

“Perhaps the most bizarre thing I found was a crocodile, whose skin had been contorted by the fire, so that it took on a very strange form. There was also a zebra, whose head was parted in two, as though it had two mouths,” he says.

“But these half-burned animals told an unexpected story. It seemed to me that the destruction of the flames had also been a kind of creation, of a new order.”

Did the fire cause the animal-objects a second death? “You might say a second death, but I would say a second life,” argues Martin. “The creatures possess a natural stillness. Yet after the fire, you can see their insides – their souls are exposed.”

Exploring the blurred division between life and death, Martin’s photographs resurrect the creatures’ ravaged skins. Thankfully, they’re not the only ones getting a rebirth: Deyrolle has also risen from its ashes, and it was fitting that photographs from *Touched By Fire* were exhibited at its first stage of re-opening in May.

Martin agrees, and says, “The ‘charred’ images seemed at peace in the new interiors of the very same rooms I’d photographed.”

For more info, visit Martindorgeval.com

Touched by Fire is published by [Steidl](#)