

# NATURAL HISTORY



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photographs by

**Elliot Anderson**

These images are digital photographs of background paintings in the dioramas at New York's American Museum of Natural History. The dioramas display animal and human figures posed in front of painted backdrops that expand their glass cases into the wild. These landscapes suggest an idealized untamed and prehistoric world filled with bucolic vistas, stormy skies, threatening volcanoes, and towering cliffs.

The forms and styles of landscape painting in these dioramas intrigued me; saturated colors, diffuse atmospherics, dramatic vistas with little attempt at "naturalism". Painted in the late 19th century – the museum opened in 1869 - the colors and style of painting are reminiscent of the work of 19th century artists like the Impressionist painters. At the same time there is also a naïve earnestness to the paintings. I photographed these images by cropping out the animal or human figures in the diorama and composing the image to create my own landscapes.

Natural History is a project that involves documenting the painted backdrops on display in the dioramas at New York's American Museum of Natural History. Each of the photographs are wonderfully diffused images of what appear to be landscape photographs, but are in fact, pictures of paintings. They are documents that defy convention. Anderson composes his images by cropping out all the animal or human figures in the diorama. In the process he creates his own landscapes derived from the 19th century paintings. The painted landscapes suggest an 'untamed world replete with bucolic vistas and idealized and romanticized landscapes.'

The documentation of museum artifacts and systems as an art practice is not new. Mark Dion, Catherine Wagner and many others create work which allow the viewer to construct their own alternative narrative histories. Anderson's work in this vein is to confuse the boundaries of two seminal art practices, painting and photography, and recontextualize the meaning of these grandiose images. Anderson challenges photography's piety and position as a window on the real, while displaying the naive earnestness of the painters intent.

- Griff Williams Gallery 16

































