

# Art

MONTHLY

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**Sonia Boyce**

Interviewed by Isobel Harbison

**I, Genius. I, Robot.**

Dave Beech

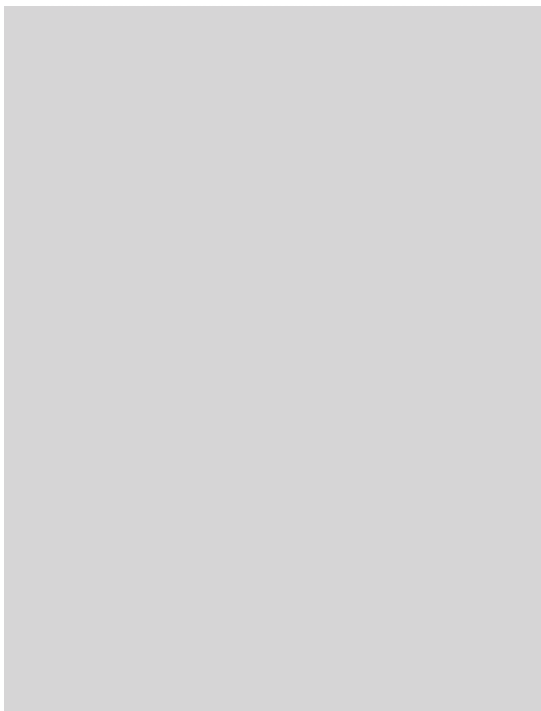
**Art Treatment**

Maria Walsh

**Alternative View**

Eddie Chambers





## Marcus Coates: The Last of its Kind

Workplace Gallery London

9 February to 14 April

Suppose those species hunted to extinction by humankind had been able to argue for their survival, what would they have said? We cannot know, but the crime of extermination is certainly not lessened by the fact that the victims were not only innocent and defenceless but also unable to make their case. It is typical of Marcus Coates to think himself into the animal world, so it seems a logical move for him to ask what man could say in his own defence in parallel circumstances.

Coates's answer, casting himself as the only surviving human in *The Last of its Kind*, 2017, is to list some 50 of humanity's greatest achievements. Did we not produce

language and music, cure smallpox and develop the theory of relativity? The list starts well but soon runs into more doubtful examples: is the ballpoint pen at the right level of significance? If we take plaudits for abolishing slavery and for the fall of the Berlin Wall, don't we also have to take the blame for establishing them in the first place? Barbed wire and plastic have their uses, but also their dark sides. And as for the atomic bomb ...

Standing naked in a stone ruin on Newfoundland's shoreline, Coates declaims his mixed bag of justifications. The sea, of course – even were the list thoroughly convincing – is no better placed to hear us than we were to hear the pleas of vanished species. No wonder, it seems, he goes unheard, and decides he'd better try again. For 15 minutes Coates attempts to make his point by repeating the list, like the stereotype of a monoglot English tourist raising his volume abroad. Each repetition sounds more desperate, as he gets breathless and hoarse from the shouting. It's hard not to be reminded of John Cleese beating his recalcitrant car: comic, memorable, cathartic, yet also uncomfortable viewing.

Our predecessors made no equivalent attempt to understand the position of other species. Is it too late now? Newfoundland is the former home of the great auk, and Coates decided to organise an official expression of regret for how it was hunted to extinction. The seven-minute film *Apology to the Great Auk*, 2017, deftly alternates three elements: Coates presenting the principles of the apology to the local mayor; a specially convened panel of residents and visitors discussing what form the apology should take; and the mayor broadcasting its final form. The panel's points are sensible: we apologise not just for what our descendants did, but for all equivalent human actions; we resolve to act differently from here on; we don't disguise the emotion we feel. We believe in the mayor's sincerity when he declares: 'We will use the lessons of your extinction to educate our young and to promote respect for other species.'

The exhibition complements the films with 15 table-top sculptures, *Extinct Animals*, 2018. These are plaster casts of the artist's hands performing the actions to cast the shadows of lost species such as the Atlas Bear, the Syrian Elephant and the Auroch – tributes, perhaps, to go along with the apology each is due. Some broken forms appear: indeed, the Lake Pedder Earthworm is represented by one snapped-off finger (or, rather, its implied shadow). That suggests fossils or bones



**Marcus Coates**  
*The Last of its Kind*  
2017 video

dug up, the only other way in which these creatures maintain their presence in the modern world. Coates also shows a blank 3m-wide canvas, which mimics the dimensions of the titular – and still living – *Siberian Tiger*, 2018. He has made parallel moves before, using planks to represent albatrosses, for example, and has explained that he and his brother used to stand either end of a room to imagine the great cat's presence: 'it was as if the tiger, this exotic animal, had come into our home'.

All of this plays well against the various projects in which Coates has attempted to bridge the supposed gaps between human and other species, and between modern ways of living and primitive rituals. Thus, for *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004, he dressed in a stag pelt to communicate with animal spirits and used his encounters to answer questions from the occupants of a tower block in Liverpool. Disregarding those boundaries between life forms, even when their reality is – on the surface at least – particularly apparent, generates an affable, yet somewhat bonkers, incongruity, which generates much of the humour that keeps Coates's work entertaining.

So, is that just a tactic for effect? I don't think so. Coates is proposing that there is much less difference between 'primitive' and 'civilised', between 'human' and 'animal' than we tend to suppose. It follows that when he cites 'democracy' as one of the achievements on account of which *Homo sapiens* should be preserved, that system of government – like plastic – should perhaps not be understood in simply positive terms. Our record in the truly democratic non-human-centric recognition of all life and ways of living could be a great deal better. ■

**Paul Carey-Kent** is a writer and curator based in Southampton.