

Media information: Monday 9 March 2009

BALTIC

A DUCK FOR MR. DARWIN

Evolutionary Thinking & the Struggle to Exist

Friday 10 April – Sunday 20 September 2009

**Charles Avery, Marcus Coates, Dorothy Cross, Mark Dion,
Andrew Dodds, Mark Fairington, Ben Jeans Houghton,
Tania Kovats, Conrad Shawcross**

A Duck for Mr. Darwin is a group exhibition of nine contemporary artists exploring evolutionary thinking and the theory of natural selection. Transforming **Level 3 Gallery** of **BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art** from **Friday 10 April**, the show will feature sculpture, drawing, painting, film and installation. Focusing on the legacy of **Charles Darwin's** ideas, this exhibition is informed by the spirit of experimentation which was so distinctive to the time in which he lived.

The mindset of the Victorian naturalist and his contemporaries, their sense of scientific experimentation and genuine wonder at their respective discoveries are shared by several of the artists in the exhibition. Ideas of isolated, closed worlds of meaning and ordered systems recur throughout, as does the location of the **Galapagos Islands**. Several of the artists' visited the Islands and have made work as a result. These remarkable islands were pivotal to the story of the development of **Darwin's** theory and have continued to exert a fascination to many.

The art mixes fact and fiction, experimentation and observation, methods of display and personal research. Collectively these artists reveal facets of **Darwin's** extraordinary ideas. The exhibition presents work by nine international contemporary artists including a number of new commissions – a large working wormery by **Tania Kovats**, a museum tableau on the early Victorian explorers by **Mark Dion** and a new sound work by **Andrew Dodds**.

Mark Dion (USA) whose practice and methods look at history and its presentation will create an installation that concerns some of the lesser known Victorian naturalists and tropical collectors. These buccaneering characters, including **H.W. Bates**, **Richard Spruce** and **Alfred Russel Wallace** boldly ventured to remote locations like the **Amazon** in the **1850's** and were part of a colonial endeavour and early science. Since the **1980's** **Dion** has developed and constructed installations, re-creating laboratories and museum displays, looking at ways of ordering knowledge and the classification of systems.

Tania Kovats (UK) is an artist who has recently completed a commission to create the **Darwin Canopy**, an artwork entitled **TREE** set into the ceiling of the **Natural History Museum**, London, that celebrates the life and work of **Charles Darwin**. For **BALTIC**, **Kovats** continues her exploration of **Darwin's** work by creating **Worm**, a fully working wormery that will change over the course of the exhibition. Earthworms fascinated **Darwin** throughout his life and were the subject of his last publication. **Kovats** who has a long-standing interest in geology frequently makes work that responds to what she describes as "geological explicit landscapes".

Marcus Coates (UK) whose practice has continually questioned the ways in which we relate to other species, presents two new works which were made whilst on a recent trip to the **Galapagos Islands**. **Intelligent Design**, a film which captures a mating ritual of giant tortoises on the island and **Human Report for Channel 9, Galapagos TV** where **Coates** dresses up as a native bird for local television to address the reality of evolution on the island today.

Charles Avery (UK) has created a new environment of drawings and sculpture. This forms part of his ongoing project, **The Islanders** where through drawing and sculpture **Avery** describes the topology, cosmology and inhabitants of an imaginary island. This island has been inspired in part by **Avery's** childhood spent on the island of **Mull**, off the west coast of **Scotland**. For **BALTIC**, **Avery** presents a sculpture entitled **One Armed Snake** and a number of drawings including one of a bar and gambling emporium in **Onomatopoeia** – a town on **Avery's** island.

Dorothy Cross (IRL) has been making significant works since the late 80's across a variety of media. **Cross's** work often has a strong sculptural presence. Her imagery is drawn from a unique vision and sometimes visceral relationship with nature. **Stage**, a film created by **Cross** in **2007** whilst on a visit to the **Galapagos Island**, was made to be shown in the **Unitarian Church, Shrewsbury** which **Charles Darwin** attended with his mother as a child. It is a conversation with a friend which combines questions on the possibility of art on the **Galapagos Islands**, personal reflections, scientific enquiry, and fragments of writing and poetry. Other works in the **BALTIC** exhibition include **Sapiens**, and **Jellyfish Lake**.

Andrew Dodds (UK) draws on his research visit to the **Galapagos Islands** in 2001 and his long standing interest in the wider social and cultural implications of **Darwin's** theories. **Dodds** is a sculptor with a cross media approach and who adopts a range of roles and strategies within his practice. For a new work at **BALTIC** **Dodds** looks at the contestations between evolutionary theory and creationism and its role within contemporary teachings, specifically in the North East region.

Mark Fairington (UK) known for his meticulously detailed paintings of insects and animals has created **Tally**, a large painting of a four year old stud bull. The domestication of animals and our capacity to breed, cross fertilise and to make different forms and hybrids through the knowledge of genetics today perhaps compels us as much as it did in **Darwin's** day. Alongside this are a series of recent paintings of images of the eyes of wild animals, which were presented and prepared for museum display.

Ben Jeans Houghton (UK) a recent Fine Art graduate from Northumbria University, Newcastle will present **On the Ark and I**, a durational performance taking place throughout the length of the exhibition. **Jeans Houghton** creates art within self imposed structures. Exploiting his own attention to minutiae, he has created a scientific workshop, and complete environment that he perpetually reorders.

Conrad Shawcross (UK) is renowned for his ambitious works that engage such disciplines as physics, biology, geometry, philosophy and cosmology. **Pre-Retroscope V** comprises a hand-constructed wooden rowing boat and a series of objects collected by **Shawcross** as he navigated the **River Lea** in **London** last summer. The boat incorporates a circular track system, and camera, which make a 360 degree panoramic film of the horizon in a poetically futile attempt to capture a moment or experience in its entirety. A compelling fusion of performative artistic practice with scientific discovery and urban exploration, **Pre-Retroscope V** gently nods to the impossibility of a singular knowledge, or of a total understanding of our surroundings at any one time.

A Duck for Mr. Darwin has been curated by **Alessandro Vincentelli** (Acting Head of Programme) at **BALTIC** and devised to coincide with the **Darwin 200** programme of celebrations and events.

The title references the story of an exchange between the young naturalists **Alfred Russel Wallace** who sent a particular specimen, a domestic duck from the island of **Lombok** to **Darwin** in 1857. Within a year a second parcel arrived from the **Malay** jungle containing **Wallace's** short twenty page essay on species variation. This package proved to be the catalyst precipitating the publishing of **Darwin's** monumental theory - the book we now know as the **Origin of Species**.

A book **A Duck for Mr. Darwin** will be published by **BALTIC** to coincide with the exhibition with essays by writer **Harry Pearson**, **Bergit Arends** Contemporary Curator at the **Natural History Museum** and **Alessandro Vincentelli**. The book will go on sale in May 09 priced at **£10.00**.

A series of talks by artists featured in **A Duck For Mr. Darwin** will take place at **BALTIC** throughout the summer. Details on the first talk with **Mark Dion** are:

MARK DION

Friday 10 April 2009, 14:00 – 15:00

Admission: FREE

BOOKING DETAILS

Booking is essential by contacting BALTIC via
Tel: 0191 478 1810 or Email: events@balticmill.com

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NOTES TO EDITORS

DARWIN 200

A Duck For Mr. Darwin is part of the **Darwin 200** celebrations. **Darwin200** is a national programme celebrating Charles Darwin's life, his ideas and their impact around his two hundredth anniversary. Information about national Darwin events can be found at www.darwin200.org



DARWIN200

The title **A Duck for Mr. Darwin** is drawn from the story of the exchange of letters between **Charles Darwin** and **Alfred Russel Wallace** as recounted in **David Quammen's** engagingly written book **The Kiwi's Egg Charles Darwin & Natural Selection**, published by **Wiedenfield & Nicholson, 2007**.

BALTIC:

BALTIC is a major international centre for contemporary art situated on the south bank of the River Tyne in Gateshead, England. **BALTIC** presents a constantly changing, distinctive and ambitious programme of exhibitions and events, and is a world leader in the presentation, commissioning and communication of contemporary visual art. **BALTIC** has welcomed over 3 million visitors, since opening to the public in July 2002.

GALLERY INFORMATION:

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Opening hours:

Monday - Sunday 10.00 - 18.00 (excluding Tuesday)

Tuesday 10.30 – 18.00

ADMISSION FREE