

HUMBER STREET GALLERY

EXHIBITION GUIDE
PROJECT SPACE

OLLIE DOOK

PROBOSCIDEA RAPPINGS

19 DECEMBER 2019 – 2 FEBRUARY 2020

Proboscidea Rappings is the latest work by artist Ollie Dook that explores the life and legacy of Jumbo the elephant in a new exhibition combining HD video, sound and sculpture. Forcibly taken from his native land of East Sudan along the borders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Jumbo was first shipped to Paris and then to London Zoo. Jumbo was then purchased by P.T. Barnum and became the star of his circus, at which point Jumbo's fame became stratospheric and he was known globally.

As a starting point, the artist uncovered an archived photograph of Barnum's circus parade crossing Hull's monument bridge in c.1880, and as part of this parade there is an Elephant referred to as 'Jumbo'. Upon research it appears this is not the 'Jumbo' but an imitation, a copy.

For Humber Street Gallery, Dook examines the context that surrounds this image. How and why a version of Jumbo becomes possible, with the birth of globalisation and the mass proliferation of images which began during this period but is now at a point of 'hyper transmission'. Through a combination of video installation and sculpture, Dook echoes the work of American taxidermist Carl Akeley, who famously resurrected Jumbo's hide before it was destroyed in a fire and burnt to ashes.

This ambitious installation aims to present another version of Jumbo through a séance as if he were a ghost, replicating both the enormity of Jumbo's physicality, his fame and legacy. Viewers are invited to speculate upon the similarities between Jumbo's fate and our contemporary digitally mediated bodies, which have the potential to influence far beyond our physical boundaries. The film work is mounted on a screen built to the scale of Jumbo and is surrounded by fourteen panels covered in Vinyl PVC faux leather elephant skin which collectively add up the same proportion of the animals hide. The film is punctuated with a series of questions, asked by a psychic medium with spoken responses from the ghost of Jumbo. Here the artist imagines the scene of a séance where only part of the information shared from the other side is comprehensible and Jumbo's legacy is once again left to the interpretation of history to understand his true struggle.

Jumbo embodies the contemporary condition of human–animal relationships, and our constant mediation through images, spectacle, humor and branding. Jumbo's influence has spread far beyond the seams of his body; beyond the material and into the metaphysical.

Essay by Susan Nance

What is the power of an individual animal's story in our understandings of his life, his kin, or his times? What is our own role in such histories?

Ollie Dook's installation, *Proboscidea Rappings*, proposes how we might think about these questions and rediscover the elephant whom people called Jumbo, an incredible individual valued in his time and after—for all the wrong reasons. With sound, image, and video, Dook gives us only glimpses of Jumbo and his reality, as well as its misrepresentation over the years. The installation thus asks us to consider the place of consumers in the centuries-old global trade in wild and exotic animals. As Britain and the United States drew resources inward to enrich their nations economically and culturally in the late nineteenth century, that traffic included hundreds of elephants, abducted from their families (many of whom hunters killed) and sent abroad to zoos and circuses.

First, an elephantine biography of sorts. Jumbo's story, as people would tell it, might go something like this: Born in 1861 in the French Sudan (Mali), the young bull elephant resided for a short time after his capture at the *Jardin des Plantes* zoo in Paris before arriving at London Zoo around age four. There he began to spend daytime being driven about the grounds by his bowler-clad trainer, Matthew Scott, who prodded him along or stopped him in his tracks with an elephant hook. Carrying a howdah filled with children and parents who paid for a ride, the elephant learned to accept food from visitors. He seemed gentle and contented to those unschooled in reading elephant behavior. By the late 1870s, Jumbo had become a much-loved London personality and a favourite of Queen Victoria herself.

Behind the scenes, Jumbo was a dangerous wild animal surely bound to kill someone, Zoo managers worried. Although Scott tried to manage Jumbo's behaviour, as the elephant grew more and more uncomfortable with his lot, it was a losing battle. With no senior elephants at hand to police Jumbo's behaviour, a mouth sore from tusk damage and dental disease, he appeared frustrated and lonely in the nights. He smashed his enclosure and injured himself repeatedly, driven by his D.N.A. to move, move, move so as to graze, study and learn the locations of water and food over a vast landscape, and mingle with lost elephantine family members he would never see again.

Fatigued by the situation, in 1882 London Zoo managers sold Jumbo, with his trainer in tow, to American circus impresario Phineas T. Barnum. Jumbo was shipped to America as circus property just as the globalized ivory trade was decimating his kin in Africa by the hundreds of thousands. It was a difficult time to be an elephant, captive or free.

In these days, Jumbo served as a screen onto which people broadcast various patriotic and consumerist fantasies. Dook's work urges us to see how people wilfully misconstrued and misrepresented the elephant's actions and experience. Scholar Erica Fudge warns us that the modern human habit of misrecognizing animal behavior is a stubborn and self-serving one.ⁱ It allows us to exploit animals commercially while believing we actually love and protect them, that we have their best interests in mind when we act. Dook's installation points out how so many of the myths and tall tales people pasted onto the elephant were motivated just so: Jumbo loved the British public! Jumbo was a happy celebrity! Jumbo was native to show business! Jumbo wants you to buy more!

All the while, Jumbo soldiered on with Barnum's circus, utterly unaware of the nature of his exploitation but immersed in the reality of his own day-to-day experience.

Then, on September 15, 1885, Jumbo was killed in an industrial accident at the railyard in St. Thomas, Ontario following a show in that small Canadian town. Earlier that summer, as taxidermists had waited at the ready to process and preserve Jumbo's body, respected American naturalist Henry Ward had written to a colleague at Tufts University with gossip about the elephant.

Rumor had it that Jumbo's handler, Matthew Scott, had confided "(quietly) that he does not think that [Jumbo] will live long, that it is nearly a year now since he has been able to lie down, etc."ⁱⁱ Hit by a locomotive while being hurried across the railyard after dark that September night, a crew from Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester, New York soon descended upon the death scene and found Jumbo's body bearing new and old scars. "His head was fearfully smashed," reported Ward to his patron, Phineas T. Barnum. There were "a couple of big gashes in the hide," a long abrasion in the skin from the locomotive, and six vertebra "broken clear off." Most challenging, Ward and his crew found that "the skull is the bad part of the whole ... broken into three main pieces and more than fifty little ones." Hence, the "artistic part" of Ward's job was to repair and hide the damage to the body, using the elephant's skin to recreate a facsimile Jumbo that erased all evidence of how the elephant had lived and died.ⁱⁱⁱ

So it was that the promotional imaginings of Jumbo continued to dominate people's memory of him. Like his weighty hide and skeleton preserved and assembled for display, Jumbo's story was stripped and boiled down into a caricature that spoke of human perceptions of the elephant. He had become "an adjective" in both colloquial and commercial terms.^{iv} Advertisers, product and packaging designers exploited the media residue purporting to portray the elephant and his motivations so as to persuade consumers of a central premise of capitalism, namely that one can achieve consequence-free satisfaction in life through ever-expanding consumption and an ethic of "more." Today we know that that idea was a naive environmental and ethical fantasy. "And so was "Jumbo the Elephant." Jumbo's popularity even led to imitation elephants touring the world under his name, one of whom was photographed crossing Hull's Monument Bridge in the 19th Century as part of Barnum's circus parade.

Ollie Dook's work asks us to consider elements of Jumbo's possible experience, even if we cannot really ever know them with perfect certainty. Indeed, there is some risk in trying to imagine and represent the elephant whom people called Jumbo in this way. Still, what are the risks if we do not try?

ⁱ Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 26

ⁱⁱ Henry Augustus Ward quoted in Russell L. Carpenter, "P. T. Barnum's Jumbo," *The Tuftonian* 1, no. 2 (January 1941): 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Susan Nance, *Animal Modernity: Jumbo the Elephant and the Human Dilemma* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 60–61

^{iv} Les Harding, *Elephant Story: Jumbo and P.T. Barnum Under the Big Top* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2000), 11.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Nance is a historian of animals. She is professor of United States History and affiliated faculty with the Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. Her books include *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* (2013), *Animal Modernity: Jumbo and the Human Dilemma* (2015), and *Rodeo: An Animal History* (2020).

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ollie Dook (b.1993, Brighton and Hove, UK) received his MA from the Royal College of Art in London in 2017 specialising in sculpture and moving image.

SCRIPT

MEDIUM: When did it begin?

JUMBO: It started when you took me from her, and her from me.

MEDIUM: 1862, 4 feet, 500 lb

JUMBO: 20 minutes and 790 pints of blood.

MEDIUM: Hers?

JUMBO: Drained into the sandy soil below, while I cried beside.

JUMBO: I was bound to the dirt of this earth, to the boxes of metal, its wood, plastic and glass containers.

Always always I was standing, but now I fly— the highways of sky, in rain drops and clouds. Everywhere. My second body... be it kinder.

MEDIUM: There was nothing like you

JUMBO: But what, what did you want to see...

MEDIUM: 1865 you arrive

JUMBO: I walked continents to be there.

MEDIUM: For us

JUMBO: I came to you broken and rotten, miserable, filthy with feet grown out of place. The wrinkly surface of my skin, my head, large— alien. My ears dangled floppy and flop around.

MEDIUM: He cared for you?

JUMBO: In time I, grew and wondered slowly... You small folk — erratic —infectious sweet — deadly and rotten.

MEDIUM: And you for him?

JUMBO: Thrashings aside. He never left my side.

MEDIUM: They found you a sweetheart, married you lovers?

JUMBO: Love is a complicated thing. Keeps me kind to all.

MEDIUM: Do you know what they said about you?

JUMBO: A delight and one few pleasures in this great and sorrowful city.

MEDIUM: In truth?

JUMBO: The days seem golden, but the nights were black.

JUMBO: Sharp, throbbing, constant pain soreness, and infection.

Have a drink

Arghh

drink

Laughter

liquid

breath

Could they control you?

JUMBO: Through this coercive intimacy. It would now seem so.

MEDIUM: 1882, Did you want to stay? I know we said you did.

JUMBO: I'm not quite sure what I wanted, I trusted so I left.

MEDIUM: And your wife?

JUMBO: "Adie Adieu my Alice in the zoo...?"

MEDIUM: Tears flowed for the old beast so unwilling to leave?

JUMBO: My friend was now alone.

MEDIUM: It's said they all wept for you

JUMBO: For my wondering and unsettled life I lead, productive of misery.

MEDIUM: Finally, you left, across that great ocean, to the New World.

JUMBO: Of course... every celebrity needs a compelling story

MEDIUM: How did it feel?

JUMBO: I was a king then — a fool.

Bottle poured — drank and dropped.

JUMBO: 15th September 1885 a twist of fate, we closed ourselves early 9:20 pm
S Freight train #151 on the grand trunk.

MEDIUM: What did you do?

JUMBO: I ran towards that shining light. With a tear of joy in my eye.

MEDIUM: And then?

JUMBO: I thought it might end...

JUMBO: It didn't.

JUMBO: My body was picked at. Scavengers. Like eagles to My liver. It was divided among them...
as they cast their lots. A chunk of ear, lumps of hide, carvings of tusk, toenails and a trade of
jumbo jelly.

Unguarded this corpse would be stripped to glistening bone.

JUMBO: cutting began, boiled from the inside out. Skin stripped 1538 lb. bones separated. The
coins of my stomach were e spilled. As it was Stretched and stuffed. The whole 29 m² of my
hide was upholstered, with clay innards muscular contours and lines of tendon. My fresh seams
expanded, rendered invisible.

JUMBO: Se-----p our -Rated.

MEDIUM: And Alice?

JUMBO: That poor creature, she was taken here displayed to cry at my dead glassy eyes. This old
stuffed simulacrum.

MEDIUM: She died in 1886?

JUMBO: She was Burnt alive

JUMBO: I wouldn't be far behind.

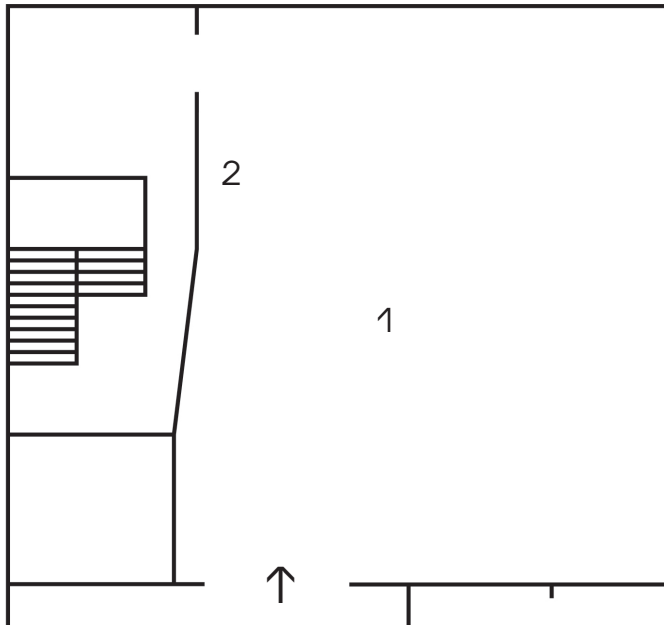
MEDIUM: Did those flames set you free?

JUMBO: I remain there to this day.

WORK DETAILS

1. *Proboscidea Rappings*, 2019
HD Video, 5:1 surround sound (looped), MDF,
paint
323 x 181 x 50 cm

2. *The elephant in the room*, 2019 (14 of)
Vinyl PVC faux leather elephant skin, heat
transfer digital print, acoustic insulation
103 x 200 cm



GLOSSARY

COLLOQUIAL: (of language) used in ordinary or familiar conversation; not formal or literary.

ELEPHANT HOOK: a hook (usually made of steel) which is attached to a long handle and is traditionally used to jab sensitive areas of the elephant's body such as behind the ears, around the anus or on their trunk.

GLOBALISATION: the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale.

HOWDAH: a seat for riding on the back of an elephant or camel, typically with a canopy and accommodating two or more people.

METAPHYSICAL: relating to metaphysics.

PROBOSCIDEA: an order of large mammals that comprises the elephants and their extinct relatives. They are distinguished by the possession of a trunk and tusks.

PROLIFERATION: rapid increase in the number or amount of something.

SÉANCE: a meeting at which people attempt to make contact with the dead, especially through the agency of a medium.

STRATOSPHERIC: extremely high.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

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ABOUT US

Humber Street Gallery is an Absolutely Cultured project, bringing a vibrant, high-quality contemporary art space to Hull. The gallery's free programme of exhibitions is supported by a series of talks, performances, screenings and workshops.

Absolutely Cultured puts culture at the heart of Hull's ambition and aspirations, commissioning and producing a programme of events and projects which are ambitious, surprising and imaginative. In addition to the gallery and our broader cultural events, we continue to develop our world-class volunteer programme, to deliver initiatives to support the cultural sector and to offer access to creative learning opportunities.

OPENING TIMES

GALLERY & CAFÉ

Tue – Sun: 10:00 – 18:00

First Thu of the Month: Until 20:00

(During Exhibitions)

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