

Enter Two Zoos

Storyteller Alison Solomon responds to the Barber Institute of Fine Arts exhibition *Miss Clara and the Celebrity Beast in Art, 1500-1860* (November to February 2022), drawing connections between colonialism and the exhibition of people and animals.

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FIRST ACT

Scene - In a circus tent somewhere...

(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist welcomes her audience to the show.)

Roll up! Roll up! Enter Two Zoos. You are in for a show tonight and what a story! Let's see how I can unpack this for your delight. How I can come at it from a different perspective so that you interrogate your sense of linguistics, morality, and ideas of freedom. I want you to free your minds from an unconscious sense of collective apathy. Unquestioning minds that are happy to look at the surface of things, but too afraid or disinterested in mining deep, deeper still, for the truth. This truth, my dear audience, will come to light as we Enter Two Zoos.

(The audience mutters) What is our Ring Mistress talking about? I hear you ask one another. The premise is simple: That both animals and humans from warmer climes, were taken from their homes by a highly organized confederacy of people from Europe, and the British Empire, to be exploited for maximum financial, scientific, artistic, and societal gain. The Two Zoos that this show will present tonight is ... *(a drum roll)* Wait for it! Wait for it! Miss Clara the celebrated Indian Rhinoceros, and Sarah Baartman, the celebrated African or 'Hottentot Venus.'

SECOND ACT

Scene - The circus tent is relocated in India.

(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist performs a sleight of hand trick.)

Come, enter the first zoo. Look. See. In my hands there is nothing. Come closer. Examine my hands, closer. Don't be afraid. Now, look, *(an object appears in her hands)* I hold in my hand a miniature statuette, a bronze from the eighteenth century of a beautiful Rhinoceros called Miss Clara. Look how attractive and diminutive she is. A bronze crafted to the highest standards by a top artisan. This statuette is highly prized and equally desirable. Watch my hands again... This is no sleight of the hand. This is no smoke and mirrors. Now you see her, now you don't! Yes, this is true of Miss Clara in more ways than one.

We start our show with an amazing animal, a mammal of exotic South East Asian heritage, with a strange thick skin known as a pachyderm. Yes, you guessed it. Well remembered! This is an Indian Rhinoceros from the family: RHINOCEROTIDAE. By the eighteenth century, this creature had developed a mythical persona, considered the first ever unicorn, with its one horn protruding from its head full of mystery and fairytale-like powers. It was drawn by many artists who had never been fortuitous enough to travel to India and see a Rhinoceros in the flesh, so drew what they believed it would look like, such as: amour-like skin, horns on its head, on its back, and scales ... Tell the truth now, would it not be an ambition of your eighteenth-century self to see such a mythical creature in your own surroundings?

She was not the first of her kind to be seen in the flesh. She was not the first mega-fauna to travel, some unsuccessfully, abroad, but she is probably the first journeying animal still read about in books, and depicted in ephemera: photographs, booklets, postcards, letters, songs sheets and poems and art: clocks, bronze statuettes, porcelain models, snuff boxes, engravings, tin medallions and woodcuts. So, for us to understand why we are here taking the gamble to Enter Two Zoos, let us see how a Rhinoceros by the name of Miss Clara, came to travel across the seas and toured in several countries, including England.

With any story, we must start at the beginning... A female animal was born free in the Assam region of India in 1738. This Rhinoceros and her mother basked in the sun and roamed in their natural habitat of tropical forests, swamps, grassland plains and savannah woodlands. As naturally herbivorous mammals, they ate of the flora in their locality a broad diet of fruit, leaves, aquatic plants, and young woody stems.

Watch my hands again... This is no sleight of the hand. This is no smoke and mirrors. Now you see her, now you don't! This is true of our Rhinoceros's Mother, heartlessly killed by Indian hunters, leaving our approximately one month old Rhinoceros orphaned. This docile animal did not have a great start in life, and from that moment forth, her life direction dramatically changed.

Our Rhinoceros was acquired by Jan Albert Sichterman, the director of the Dutch East Indian Company: a mercantile mega-corporation that shipped and traded in goods internationally. He gave her the European name, Clara – now you see her, now you don't – at odds with her native India, and with all that was in her DNA.

When Clara was about three years old, something in explorers blood raged, with their desire to travel to warmer climes. One such globetrotter was retired Dutch sea-captain, Douwe Mout van der Meer, of the sailing vessel *Knappenhop*. Whilst he was in India in conference with Jan Albert Sichterman, van der Meer saw Clara, a Rhinoceros, a mythical beast, alien to the people of his home and the rest of Europe. He saw an unmissable opportunity to acquire her and carried her to his home in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1741. Clara left her home, familiar surroundings, and natural habitat, to endure a seven-month sea crossing skirting Africa onboard the *Knappenhop*, with unfamiliar people and animals for food, but none so rare and exotic as Miss Clara.

Remember, this is no sleight of hand. This is no smoke and mirrors. Now you see her, now you don't. Do not get me wrong, I was not there, I do not know for sure the real motivation behind this strange union, but, in the beginning, it seems to all intent and purposes that van der Meer loved Clara. Look! Pay attention to my hands... (*the statuette disappears and the audience gasps*) Audience, where will our statuette turn up next? Behind your ear maybe? Or yours!

THIRD ACT

Scene - in Europe.

(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist performs a number of illusions)

Once the *Knappenhop* and her cargo safely arrived in the Netherlands, van der Meer successfully negotiated a grueling ticketed tour of Miss Clara to Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Poland, Denmark, and England from 1742 - 1758. For seventeen years Princes would prod, ogle, and celebrate her, as well as menagerists, fanatics and paupers alike.

Watch, watch very closely (*the statuette reappears*) ... As Clara's celebrity grew, not only did she consume more food, now a diet of hay, beer, and oranges, as Captain van der Meer transported Clara on a grand tour in a wagon pulled by a team of horses, but she unwittingly gave rise to a mania, 'Claramania,' and 'rhinomania,' that influenced a raging materialism, consumerism, worldliness, and a new greed for luxury. She inspired art, science, anatomy, zoology, and fashion, all at her own expense. Are you still watching? (*the audience nod*). After seventeen years, in 1758, Clara died suddenly. Now you see her, now you don't. She died prematurely in captivity. An exotic animal not able to attain the average 35-, 45- or 55-year life span of a Rhinoceros in the wild, or to live out her years in a sanctuary, our Clara disappeared like a puff of smoke (*the statuette reappears then disappears*). Ha-ha! All is not lost! ... Look! See a statuette here, there, there, up there, drawn, painted on porcelain, made into ornate clocks. What a legacy. What price for a life? Albeit not a human life. At least we have the memories of a dwindling, exotic animal domesticated for our own entertainment and financial commodification ... We are coming to the end of our first performance. See in my hands there is nothing. Come closer. Examine my hands, closer. Don't be afraid. Now you see her, now you don't! Yes, this is true of Miss Clara in more ways than one.

FOURTH ACT

Scene - In a circus tent in Africa.

(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist welcomes her audience to the second show.)

Come, enter the second zoo. Look, see, in my hands there is nothing. Come closer, examine my hands, closer. Don't be afraid. Now, look, I hold in my hand a miniature statuette, a bronze from the eighteenth century of a beautiful woman called Sarah Baartman. Look how attractive she is... (*the statuette is looked at from different angles.*) This is a whirlwind tour, a tour packed full of events with a timeline that ends too abruptly. Come, watch my hands. Closer, closer still... This is no sleight of the hand. This is no smoke and mirrors. Now you see her, now you don't!

You promised to Enter Two Zoos, with your eyes wide open and your hearts too. With any story we must start at the beginning. Sarah Baartman, aka Sara or Saartjie was born 1789 near Gamtoos River, Xhosa Kingdom of South Africa's Eastern Cape. An African born a Khoikhoi woman to loving parents. Now you see them, now you don't. Sarah's mother died when she was two, her father died when she was transitioning from childhood to adulthood, Sarah's partner was heartlessly killed by a Dutch colonist intent on forcing black labour into South Africa, and her baby died too, leaving Sarah orphaned. Sarah did not have a great start in life. Her life was beset with hardship, and from that moment forth, her life direction dramatically changed.

Sarah found work as a domestic servant in Cape Town in the house of mixed raced entrepreneur, Hendrik Cesars. She stood out as a woman in Cape Town because the DNA of the Khoikhoi women and other women from ethnic groups from arid South Africa, was that fat reserves would accumulate in their buttocks and thighs resulting in an exaggerated 'curvilinear figure.'

Whilst working for Cesars, something in these entrepreneurs and explorers blood raged, with their desire to steal from warmer climes. One such globetrotter was English ship surgeon and confederate of Cesars, William Dunlop. Whilst he was in South Africa, in conference with Cesars, Dunlop was shown Sarah, a woman, a mythical sight, alien to the people of his home and the rest of Europe. They both saw an unmissable opportunity to bind her in a contract to perform in Freak-Shows. Sarah had allegedly signed but, now you see her, now you don't, she was illiterate! ... Audience, I ask you, is this just smoke and mirrors? In 1810, Sarah was escorted from the country of her birth to endure a sea crossing with unfamiliar people with perverse desires to make folks see their rare and exotic Sarah (*the statuette disappears*).

FIFTH ACT

*Scene - Freak-Shows in England
(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist performs for the audience)*

Is this just sleight of hand? Is this just smoke and mirrors? Now you see her, now you don't. Look! Pay attention to my hands... (*the statuette appears and the audience gasps*) Audience, our statuette could turn up next behind your ear, maybe? Or yours! Now you see her, now you don't. Do not get me wrong, I was not there, Sure, the real motivation behind this strange union, looks like commodification, classism, sexism, colonialism, and racism! Pay attention to my hands. Watch, watch very closely ... They gave her the name, 'Hottentot Venus,' and as Sarah's celebrity grew, so did people's appetite to see her. She endured grueling and ceaseless shows being ogled, prodded, touched and leered at by men and women in England. As they yielded to temptation, just like a drug they needed to feast on her increasingly. She was exhibited privately, and for the rich and famous, as well as in such popular entertainment places as a Human Zoo at Egyptian Hall Piccadilly Circus 24 November 1810, paving the way for 50 Natives of India and Ceylon exhibited in an Indian Village at the International Exhibition Liverpool, in 1886 and the African Exhibition of Somali people and exotic animals at The Crystal Palace, London in July 1895.

A. Solomon, 'Enter Two Zoos', *Midlands Art Papers*, 5 (2022)

The Sarah-mania that she inspired gave rise to a raging voyeurism, division, racism, colourism, materialism, consumerism, worldliness, commodification, body modification, colonial exploitation, and a new greed for luxury. She inspired art, science, anatomy, fashion, competition, jealousy, shame, suffering and insecurity. Are you still watching? (*the audience nods*) White women wanted to be her: wearing bustles to artificially pad out their bums. Men must have fantasied about her, as their women felt the need to compete with the new unwanted label Sarah was forced to become: the exotic, hyper-sexualized 'hot totty!'

SIXTH ACT

*Scene - a series of Freak-Shows and exhibitions.
(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist continues the show)*

Now you see her, now you don't. Sarah was later sold to Henry Taylor who took her to France and sold her to an animal trainer/exhibitor with the stage name S Reaux and real name Jean Riaux, in France, 1814, who allegedly exhibited her next to a baby Rhinoceros... (*the statuette appears tarnished*) The dye was cast, the labels of racism indelibly stained. In Paris Sarah was paraded at private parties, prostituted, and subjected to new 'scientific' racism.

Famous French Naturalist, George Cuvier along with a confederacy of scientists, anatomists, zoologist, and physiologists joined together to draw and examine Sarah. With a confluence of agreement, they established a system to differentiate, organize, exploit, and socially condition ideas of white supremacy based on hierarchy by colour and ethnicity. If they could establish the missing link between animals and humans was based upon this black woman, they could socially condition humankind so that man was never kind to their black and brown brothers and sister. Remember, this is a sleight of hand. This is just smoke and mirrors.... Look. See. In my hands there is nothing. Come closer. Examine my hands, closer. Be afraid. Sarah Baartman died in Paris 1815 aged around 26. Now you see her, now you don't. She died prematurely... Does it not say in the 'good book' human beings live on average twenty score years and ten? (*the statuette disappears*) Sarah disappeared like a puff of smoke (*the statuette reappears then disappears*). Ha-ha! All is not lost! ... Look! See a statuette here, there, there, up there, drawn, written in medical encyclopedias, exhibited in museums and natural history galleries. Even after her death Cuvier wanted more: preserving her brain, bones, skeleton, and genitalia, and making full body casts of her which were displayed in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris until President Nelson Mandela had her repatriated to be buried in Hankey in Eastern Cape, South Africa in 2002. What a legacy. What price for a life? A human life. At least we have the memories of a human, stripped of her dignity, home, life and humanity and treated like an animal for entertainment...We are coming to the end of our performances... See in my hands there is nothing. Come closer. Examine my hands, closer. Be afraid. Now you see her, now you don't! Yes, this is true of Sarah Baartman in more ways than one.

SEVENTH ACT

A. Solomon, 'Enter Two Zoos', *Midlands Art Papers*, 5 (2022)

Scene - In a circus tent somewhere...

(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist speaks to her audience.)

I hope that you enjoyed the show tonight. You dared to Enter Two Zoos! These were not the happy illusions I had planned for you tonight, but an illusionist can only work with the tools she is given. Every coin has two sides: wherever there is heads there is tails. Wherever there is black there is white. Wherever there is wrong there is right. *(The Ring Mistress/Illusionist holds both the statuettes in each hand)*. Dare yourselves to come closer, closer still, where evidence becomes overwhelming, and lives become entwined. What you will see is that both stories take place in dark times in history: amidst Empire and the Trans-atlantic slave trade (1525 - 1866) and in the infancy of freedom. That both stories share an uncanny similarity of grief, misfortune, loss of true freedom, dignity and identity and perverse ownership by people in Europe and England: royalty, famous people entrepreneurs, educators, collectors, and paupers alike.

Do we ever mean what we say or even know what we mean? The words that are conjured up time and again connected to Miss Clara and Sarah Baartman is 'Loved' and 'Celebrated.' 'Loved' seesaws between fondness and lust. 'Celebrated' seesaws between famous and infamous. This is not a fairytale, there is no happy ending. All that I see is love is a matter of degrees where animal and human trophies were loved for the legacy of commodification, merchandise, wealth, prejudice, entertainment, and racial intolerance at the expense of humanity.

Be afraid... Is there a correlation between the unchecked human activity of the Empires past and the world's problems today? The Two Zoos and the associated insecurities of an Empire's past have now become strangely mainstream, resulting in lives cut short. Could the preventable collection of animal menageries and the deaths of exotic animals in captivity and in the wild, as well as the out-of-control sexual voyeurism, pornography, body dysmorphia, plastic surgery, cultural appropriation, and rise in racism all be traced back to these two events? If so... This is no sleight of the hand. This is no smoke and mirrors. I beg you please do not Enter Two Zoos. Look, see, in my hands there is nothing, because now you see them, now you don't!

THE END

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