



AN ARTIFICIAL NATURAL HISTORY

ALEXIS RAGO

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Synopsis

An Artificial Natural History is an exhibition created for galleries, museums, institutions and venues engaged in contemporary art and or aspects of natural history.

A collection of ceramic sculptures inspired by the palaeontological evidence for evolution which also draws on a wide variety of sources from biology to archaeology, tribal cultures and world aesthetic movements to religious art.

The installation recalls cabinets of curiosities, bringing together biology and art whilst mediating between fine art and craft-orientated practice.

The exhibition can also include other activities such as illustrated talks and educational workshops.

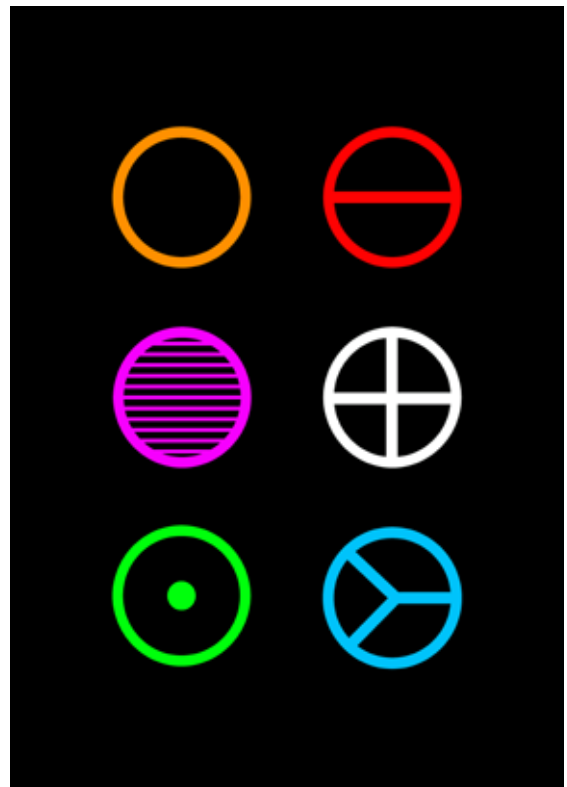
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Introduction

Over the last millenium what was once termed natural philosophy gradually separated from the arts becoming natural sciences. In the C19th modern science emerged, dividing in ever finer distinctions to the point where we are today, in which scientists stay within very narrow specialisms.

This exhibition draws on the tradition of natural philosophy; art and science coming together in a speculative synthesis or curious vision of a world set in a parallel past or perhaps the deep future.



Building Blocks of Life
Alexis Rago, 2009, digital print, size variable

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Overview

Each one of us is as old as the entire biological kingdom, and our blood-streams are tributaries of the great sea of its total memory.

—The Drowned World, J.G Ballard, Millennium 1999, p 41.

150 years after the first publication of Darwin's 'Origins of Species' Alexis Rago creates icons of imaginary fossil forms as though they were statuary made in the tradition of religious iconography. Using symmetry and biological structures he crosses the boundary between science and art with an artificial natural history. Blurring the distinction between scientific rationale and faith-based revelation, the works are collected together as quasi-scientific specimens with the reverence of a holy context. The ensemble reads as a *Wunderkammer* dedicated to an idea that has completely transformed our view of ourselves and continues to exercise a strong influence on society.

Alexis Rago uses a vast range of sources, from tribal and archaeological artifacts to the nineteenth century drawings by the German scientist and supporter of Darwin, Ernst Haeckel. He draws from cultures as diverse as Indian, Chinese, Islamic and Renaissance Europe and is inspired by speculations on the deep past such as the Cambrian explosion 530 million years ago.* His working practice is a form of meditation on evolution, each piece growing from previous works, developing and evolving stylised "body plans" that stand as idealised models rather than representations of reality. He works with clay as a metaphor for the creation of fossils. The fired earth is both durable and extremely fragile calling on ideas of the fragility of life, ecosystems and the dependence of a narrative of the past on fossil and archeological finds.

Fine art practice and craft, scientific and artistic influences are brought together in a celebration of life with a chilling reminder that humanity is as fragile as other life events in Earth's past.

* *The Cambrian explosion was the seemingly rapid appearance of most major groups of complex animals accompanied by a major diversification of other organisms. Before about 580 million years ago, the rate of evolution accelerated and the diversity of life began to resemble today's.*

Statement

People have always made icons to represent the intangible and come to worship them in the hope that an essence of that idea be transferred into the real world. I have taken my rational belief in evolution and divested it of scientific rigour in a simulacrum of the religious process.

We humans are sign-makers. My signs touch on origins and the future of life on this planet. In searching our deep past and possible futures I am also looking at the relevance of our presence in the universe.

Blurring the boundaries between rational speculation and blind faith is an attempt to uncover significance beneath the surface of things. Clarity and truth are variables of belief and faith. I ask myself, which do you hold to be more important for an accurate measure of your existence?

Selected Works Summary



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Selected Images



Protogenitors
heights 31 - 37 cm



Telos and Technos height 97 cm (not including base)



Great Progenitor height 85 cm (not including base)



Philosopher height 52 cm (not including base)



Persephone height 52 (not including base)



King Queen height 32 cm (not including stand)



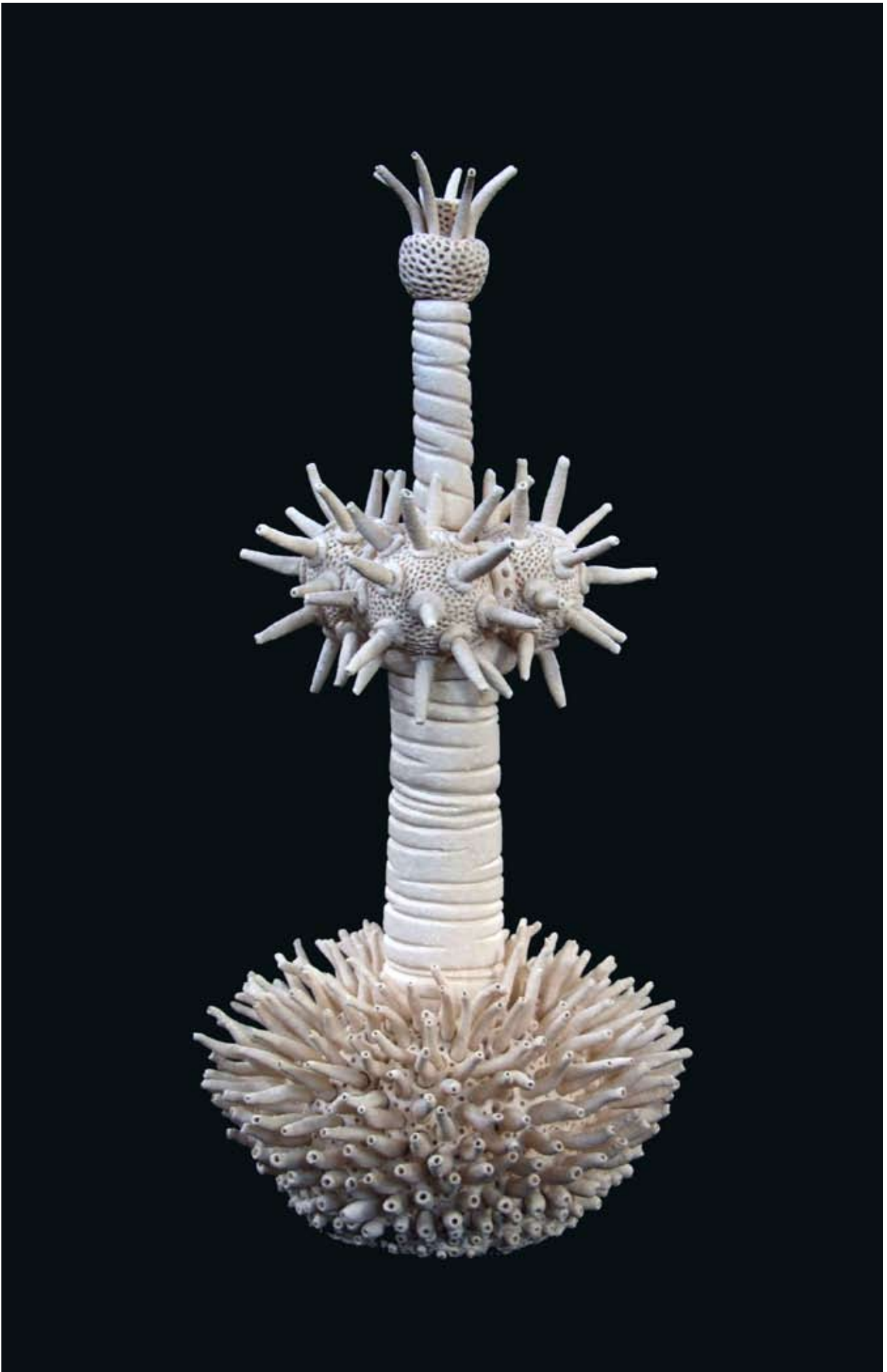
Extinct Possibilities heights 15 - 30 cm (not including bases)



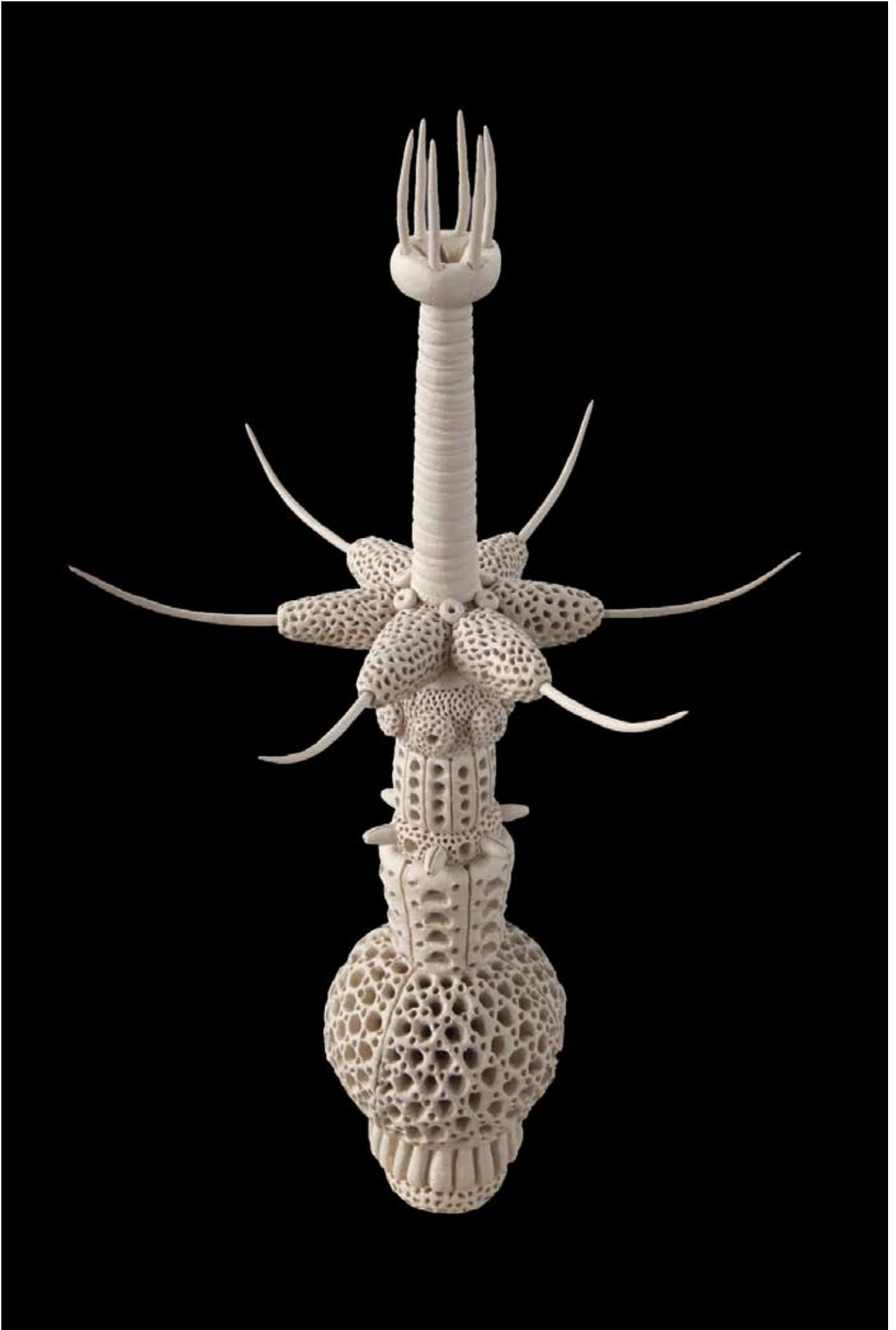
Anthropic Principle height 36 cm (not including base)



Emperor height 25 cm (not including stand)



Courtier height 24 cm (not including base)



Maiden height 30 cm (not including base)



No 1 height 22 cm



No 2 height 24 cm



No 3 height 22 cm
(heights not including bases)



No 4 height 24 cm



No 5 height 31 cm (not including base)



Other Activities

This is a flexible area of engagement in which the artist is available to:

dialogue with the collections, staff and public to create an art work in the form of an installation, individual work or interaction with audiences;

give a talk focusing on an aspect of the exhibition and its context;

delivery of workshops to schools and public based on the exhibition.

Artist's Talks

From the Orinoco Basin to the Kiln

Illustrated

A tour around the sources and influences of Alexis' work in the form of a personal journey through places and ideas that have shaped our view of the world.

Thinking Art from within Biology:

A Holistic Approach

Illustrated

We often think of art and science as being very different, however this has not always been the case. A closer look at similarities in their histories and how they are practiced would suggest that they are not as far apart as one might think. Taking the botanist and natural philosopher Agnes Arber (1879-1960) as a starting point, Alexis looks

at how nature has been studied throughout history and how this has related to the way people have made art. This talk arises out of Alexis' current work in developing a way of developing art objects from within biological thought.

Workshops

Workshops that touch on themes in the exhibition can be designed to fit the context of the host venue. Alexis has a great deal of experience delivering workshops in schools, museums and art galleries. Suitable for all ages.

Key Words

Here are some suggested ideas:

Sculpture • 3 D • Modelling • Ceramics •
Life Forms • Fossils • Evolution • Palaeontology
Burgess Shales • Anatomy • Biology • Zoology
Clay • Icons • Classification • Collecting • Cabinet of Curiosities • Natural History • Pattern •
Tribal • Archeology • Symmetry

Alexis has over 25 years experience working with people of all ages and abilities and is contracted as an educational consultant on a regular basis.



Exhibition Material

Material Content

Clay and mixed media sculptures and found objects ranging in size from a few centimetres to over two metres in height including stands and cases.

Number of Sculptures

The number of works is flexible to suit the venue ranging from single pieces which can stand alone or be integrated into existing collections to a group of over thirty individual works.

Transport Storage and Display

Selected sculptures are supplied with their own display cases and stands. Alternatively, in house displays may be used or a combination of both. The works come carefully packed in their own space saving cases. Notwithstanding their apparent fragility and instability, an important aspect of the works, the sculptures are robustly engineered and mounted. The larger works are assembled on site by the artist.



Publicity Material

All material can be supplied as templates or, if required, as source files.

Additional Material

Videos

Captions and labels if needed

Leaflets

Printed catalogue to be confirmed

Prints for sale

Hire Fees and Costs

The cost of delivery and installation of the exhibition is negotiable with each venue depending on what is agreed; number of works, period shown and what work is done in-house.

We can provide:

- delivery and collection of the exhibition
- installation and dismantling
- marketing and publicity images and text or templates
- literature and labels
- a dedicated website to the exhibition

Workshops are costed as per normal workshop rates of £250 per day plus expenses

Illustrated artist's talks are costed at £100 plus expenses

The cost of art collaborations is dependent on the nature of the work.

Travel for workshops and talks is costed at 25p per mile.

Insurance is the responsibility of the venue once installation is completed.

Alexis is CRB checked and has public liability insurance.



Background

Alexis Rago was born in Rome in 1959. His early training was in biology, graduating with honours from Manchester University. During this time his interest in art arose as a response to the aesthetics inherent in scientific ideas. Many of his interests during this period inform much of his current work including taxonomy and palaeontology.

He moved to Florence to study at the Institute for Art and Restoration. During this time he immersed himself in the study of mass, volume and colour concentrating mainly on painting and printmaking with particular focus on the traditions of the 'bottega', artist's workshop, and working from life. He remained in Italy for a decade during which he exhibited widely, culminating in the solo show, 'Traces of Life,' at the Montespertoli Biennale, Florence which subsequently moved to London's Bolivar Hall. By this time his work had radically changed from the exploration of surface light to a darker, more introspective analysis of human archetypes and resurgent atavism.

On return to Britain his work began to take on the non-objective elements of his experiences in Italy, distilling them into works that concentrated on formal underlying structures and chromatic values. Concurrently he started experiments with primitive photography in a re-evocation of his early paintings through the use of pinhole photography. This departure from painting ushered a period of search for a new means of expression that could bring together the many ideas he had gathered including, archeology, biology, religion and cosmology. The time element played an important part in his photography using long exposures in what he called, 'the capturing of time in a single image'.

During this period he also began working with clay, a material he had encountered at various points of his development and as early as school. With clay he was able to evolve a language that increased in complexity until reaching its present expression. He combined aspects of volumetric enquiry and surface treatment found in his paintings, gradually moving away from two dimensions. This process coupled with the chromatic restraint of his photography has given rise to the current work.

In 2009 Alexis was elected Fellow to The Linnean Society of London.

Curriculum Vitae

1983 Diploma Fine Art, Institute for Art and Restoration, Florence, Italy

1980 BSc (Hons) Biology, Manchester University, UK

Solo exhibitions

2010 Linnean Society of London

2009 Weekend Gallery, Hastings

2008 Eternal Metamorphosis, Dissenters' Gallery, London

2005 A Glimpse Through the Void, Czimmerl Gallery, Lincoln

2004 Protoangel Visions, Normanby by Spital, Churches Conservation Trust, Lincolnshire

2002 New Work, Sam Scorer Gallery, Lincoln

2001 'Chromatic Hybrids: 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, North Lincolnshire

1999 Recent Work, Doncaster Museum and Art Gallery

1997 Steel in the Art, Scunthorpe Museum and Art Gallery

1991 Traces of Life II, Bolivar Hall, London

1990 Traces of Life, Montespertoli Art Biennale, Italy

1989 Fontanarosa, Empoli, Italy

1988 The British Institute, Florence, Italy

1987 Palazzo Dei Pellegrini, Barberino Val D'Elsa, Florence, Italy

1985 Landscapes, Empoli Town Hall, Florence, Italy

1981 Venezuelan Embassy, London

Group exhibitions

2010 Meleager's Garland Exhibition, Joseph Banks Conservatory, Lincoln

2010 Linnean Society, Burlington House, London

2010 Sumarria Lunn, London

2009 Journey to the Centre of the Earth, 20-21 Visual Arts Centre

2009 Blackheath Gallery, London

2007 Show with Janet Waring, Trinity Arts Centre, Gainsborough, Lincolnshire

2007 Bankrobber, London

2006 Usher Gallery, Lincoln

2006 Gallery on the Strait, Lincoln

2006 Special Photographers' Company, London

2004 Light Box 3, Linn-Benton Community College, Albany, Oregon, USA

2004 Out of Sight, Out of Mind, House Gallery, London

2002 Inside Art, 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, North Lincolnshire

2002 Power of Art, Usher Gallery, Lincoln

2001 The Gallery, Lincoln

2001 Brigg Live Arts, Brigg

2000 Bend in the River, Gainsborough

2000 Stamford Arts Centre, Stamford

2000 Harding House, Lincoln

2000 Moot Point Gallery, Louth

2000 01.01.01, touring exhibition, Lincolnshire County Council

1999 The Talent Search Gallery, Santa Ana, California

1999 Ludwig Becks, Munich

1999 Cheers, The British Lime Gallery, Santa Ana, California

1998 Riverbank House, Klein Wort Benson, London

1998 Oxo Tower, London

1998 The British Lime Gallery, Laguna Beach, California

1997 Barker and Stonehouse, Newcastle

1997 Pull up a Chair, Scunthorpe Museum and Art Gallery

1996 Watercolours, Cassian Gallery, Lincoln

1996 Gallery 58, Inaugural Show, Gainsborough, Lincolnshire

1995 Watercolours, Cassian Gallery, Lincoln

1990 VI International Fair of Contemporary Art, Palazzo degli Esposizioni, Florence, Italy
1989 Fontanarosa Gallery, Empoli, Italy
1989 Monastery of S.S. Annunziata, Empoli, Italy
1988 Galerie Bruno Ract-Madoux, Paris
1986 Flying Colours Gallery, Edinburgh
1981 Hampton Hill Gallery, London

Curated projects

2008 Eternal Metamorphosis, Dissenters' Gallery, London
2004 Protoangel Visions, St Peter's, Churches Conservation Trust, Lincolnshire
2003 Exhibition and concert, St Peter's, Churches Conservation Trust, Normanby by Spital

Public Commissions

2000 Design for Lincoln bus station environmental refurbishment, Lincoln City Council, Lincoln
2000 01.01.01. photographic commission, Lincolnshire County Council, touring exhibition
1996 'Greensite' public sculpture - Canute, West Lindsey District Council, Gainsborough, Lincolnshire
1986 Murals of 'contrade' for summer festival, Stadio Comunale, Montespertoli, Florence
1983 Portrait of Simon Bolivar, Venezuelan Embassy, London

Projects

2005 Lincolnshire Landscapes - pinhole photography
2004 The Material Essence of a Poetic Image - pinhole photographs of Michelangelo's Prisoners, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy

Competitions, Prizes and Awards

2008 Arts Grant, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London
2005 Beneficiary Grant, Lincolnshire Creative Solutions Initiative, Lincolnshire
2004 Grant for the Arts, Arts Council England, East Midlands
1998 Individual Artists Development Fund, Eastern Arts Board, East Midlands
1983 1st Prize for Drawing, Institute for Art and Restoration, Florence, Italy

Publications

2008 Eternal Metamorphosis, Book, publ. Protoangel Publications (with essay by Deborah Ravetz)
2004 The Material Essence of a Poetic Image, Book, publ. Protoangel Publications
2002 The Journal, Arts Feature (issue No. 23 November 2002)
2000 The BritArt Directory (publ. HMP 2000: ISBN: 0-9540781-0-1)
1990 Traces of Life, publ. Montespertoli Town Council

Collections

Montespertoli Town Council, Empoli Town Council, Florence, Italy; Barclays der Zoete Wedd, Danwood, Admiral Francisco Mendoza and R.H. Smith and Sons

Artist Talks

2008 The Who, What and Why of an Art Work, Dissenters Gallery, London
2007 Presentation to the Lincolnshire Creative Solutions Initiative
2002 Talk accompanying solo show, Sam Scorer Gallery, Lincoln
1994 Italy, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull
1989 Interview with Alexis Rago, Galleria Fontanarosa, Empoli, Italy

Appointments

2005 - 2009 Arts Consultant to Lincolnshire Schools Improvement Services and CfBT Education Trust
1985 - 2009 Freelance work in museums, schools and colleges in Italy and U.K.
2000 - 2008 Chairman of Art On The Map, Lincolnshire Open Studios
1982 - Assistant tutor, Institute for Art and Restoration, Florence, Italy



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Text

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quote from, *The Drowned World*, J.G Ballard, Millennium 1999, p 41.

Images

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from top down

Kota (Wumbu or Ndassa subgroup). Reliquary Guardian Figure (Mbulu Ngulu), late 19th century. Gabon. Wood, copper, brass, 20 1/4 x 8 3/4 x 2 1/4in. (51.4 x 22.2 x 5.7cm) . Brooklyn Museum, The Adolph and Esther D. Gottlieb Collection, 1989.51.2. Creative Commons-BY-NC

Vitruvian Man by Leonardo da Vinci, Galleria dell' Accademia, Venice (1485-90). Pen and ink with wash over metalpoint circa 1492 (original drawing), 2007-09-08 (photograph) on paper. Luc Viatour. www.lucnix.be

Scanning electron micrographs showing morphological variation of bdelloid rotifers and their jaws. Diego Fontaneto. March 20, 2007 . Who Needs Sex (or Males) Anyway? Gross L PLoS Biology Vol. 5, No. 4, e99 doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.0050099

Reconstruction of a placoderm living during the Devonian period 380 million years ago, provenance unknown.

Fossil Crinoid. The Jorum Consortium
<http://open.jorum.ac.uk> Image file S193_I_017i.jpg .

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M. A. Arber. 1968. List of published works of Agnes Arber, E. A. N. Arber and Ether Sargent. *Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History* 4:370-384, 2 pls.

All images on pages 20 and 21 are used solely in conjunction with educational activities.