



# TESSA FARMER

ARTIST TESSA FARMER IS ONE OF BIRMINGHAM'S BEST KEPT SECRETS, having been quietly establishing herself as one of the city's leading emerging talents. Having grown up on the border between Moseley and Kings Heath, she did a foundation in art at Bournville before gaining a place at the prestigious Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at the University of Oxford, where she completed both her BA and MA. In 2004 she was selected for *New Contemporaries*, a prominent annual national exhibition picking up promising artists during or soon after graduating, and this led to exhibiting opportunities at firstsite, Colchester, and the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland – both significant venues on the UK's contemporary art map. Since these shows, her career has been going from strength to strength, with Spencer Brownstone, a reputable commercial gallery in New York, recently signing her up and, currently, a solo exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London, entitled *Little Savages*.

This might sound like an unusual venue for an exhibition of contemporary art, though when getting to know her practice, it becomes clear as to why the museum would choose to include her in their programme. Farmer is immersed in the animal kingdom and has a particular fascination with insects, spending much of her time collecting specimens with all the enthusiasm of a 19th Century zoologist. With the help of Danielle Arnaud, gallerist and curator from the London-based commissioning agency Parabola, Farmer was not only able to make a show but also fortunate enough to be awarded a four-month residency at the museum, working closely with the department of entomology. During this time, she developed a new body of work that was informed by research into the parasitic wasp. Beyond simply living off another creature, the parasitic wasp is a parasitoid, meaning it actually ends up killing its host, giving Farmer's extraordinary imagination plenty to work with.

In case the reader hasn't already gathered, Farmer's interest in animals is not for the faint hearted or those of a queasy disposition. A sign at the front of the exhibition at the museum warns parents that the material might upset their children, though the children are, of course, transfixed. Mixing science fact and the poetic imagination, the artist creates a fantastical world of invented creatures interacting, and generally engaged in warfare with, existing creatures. In a beautifully devised and executed stop-frame animation created in association with Sean Daniels – the first that Farmer has made – we witness a story that is not unlike a flea circus staging a production of *Jason and the Argonauts*.

The film begins with the camera moving at pace through the Natural History Museum, down into the archives and through a small hole in a stone wall. We emerge in what seems like a salt crystal desert, confronted by a strange organic lump sprouting needles like a porcupine. A tiny, skeletal creature, part human, part insect walks into view, and having weighed up the object in front of it, plucks out one of the needles. With a moment of realisation akin to the ape in *2001 A Space Odyssey*, the vile little creature brandishes the quill like a spear. The scene changes to a rocky outcrop not dissimilar to coral with a worm weaving its way in and out of the holes and crevices. It disappears into the ground and resurfaces to find the aforementioned needle promptly speared through its head. The insect creature soon appears to claim its prey.

Next we find ourselves in front of a cave, made from the skull of some long deceased animal, and enter through its mandible, its upper row of teeth forming a makeshift archway. In the darkness can be made out some foul creature scabbling around. Sure enough, as if in homage to Shelob from *The Lord of the Rings*, Farmer brings forth an almighty spider-like creature that turns out to be an Asian Long Horned Beetle. Too much for the insect creature alone, he summons his mates to take on the giant prey. As soon as the beetle emerges from its cave, the creatures attack, springing up from the sand and jumping on it from all directions, swinging on its antennae, spearing its feet and hacking off its legs with improvised razors. Despite putting up a good fight and claiming some lives in the process, the beetle is finally overcome with a large pointed tooth stamped fatally into its head. These nasty little fairies are no Tinkerbells, leaving a wasteland of insect genocide behind.

While the animation, *An Insidious Intrusion*, marks an exciting new direction in her practice, Farmer has made her name with sculptures and sculptural installations – the sculptor's art and that of the model-maker are perhaps not so far apart. The work that gives its title to the show, *Little Savages*, is an arresting and intriguing sculptural piece presented in a museum display case embedded in the wall. A taxidermied fox stands in the case, its back arched, its tail trailing on the floor, its mouth wide open and tongue sticking out to one side. Having been chosen as their host, the poor fox has been infested by the insect creatures, and doesn't quite seem to know what to do about it. They have been breeding, laying their eggs in the fox's fur, and some have already begun to hatch. There are pupa sacks hanging from the fox's chest, larvae filling its ears, snakeskin binding its legs and a most peculiar kind of webbing suspended from its chin, made up of frogs' skeletons, assorted bones, butterfly wings and cobwebs. A variety of wasps, bees, flying beetles and insects only identifiable by the most proficient of natural scientists fill the air around the fox, all of which are harassed by the malevolent fairies. Made from root systems and insect wings, these miniscule monsters seem to be gaining in experience and confidence, now taking on sizeable mammals. Is it only a matter of time before they take the life of a human?

While Farmer's work is sometimes macabre, usually vicious and often repulsive, it is equally charming, curious and beautiful. In addition to its cinematic qualities, lending itself to photography, animation and film, the work also seems connected to a long tradition of poetry and literature, from Homer and Aristophanes to Kafka, Sartre and Poe, from Blake and Dickinson to Keats and Wordsworth. And whether allegorical for man's destruction of the natural world or a warning to mankind on behalf of extremist epidemiologists, it is clear that these are certainly fairies you wouldn't wish to find at the bottom of your garden.

## Matt Price

Tessa Farmer will be on show at Art Basel Miami Beach this winter and next year will be exhibiting at the Saatchi Gallery, London, and in the Tatton Park Biennial 2008, Knutsford, Cheshire (a National Trust property near Manchester). *Little Savages* continues at the Natural History Museum, London, until 27 January. [www.parabolatrust.org](http://www.parabolatrust.org)

Top left: *Little Savages* (detail), 2007. Insects, roots, hedgehog spine. Courtesy the artist and Parabola. Top Right: Tessa Farmer and Sean Daniels. *An Insidious Intrusion* (still), 2007. Stop-frame digital animation on DVD 4'53". Courtesy the artists and Parabola. Bottom: *Little Savages* (detail) (Fairy attempting to oviposit in roof of fox's mouth), 2007. Insects, roots, bone, stuffed fox. Courtesy the artist and Parabola.