



Allan McCollum. *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah*. Enamel on cast polymer-reinforced gypsum

## ALLAN MCCOLLUM

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Allan McCollum's latest series, "Natural Copies From the Coal Mines of Central Utah," 1994-95, is equal parts *Jurassic Park*, Walter Benjamin, Marcel Duchamp, Claes Oldenburg, Sol LeWitt, and even Franz West. Offering endless recastings of dinosaur tracks that have already undergone a natural casting process, this group of new works can be read as the third installment that began with the artists' series "Lost Objects," 1991-, (endless recastings of dinosaur bone fossils) and "The Dog from Pompeii," 1990-, (endless recastings of that notoriously blackened and contorted canine form).

Discovered by coal miners in the roofs of mines in central Utah as far back as the '20s, the "natural" casts of dinosaur tracks were collected and eventually sold or donated to local museums. As McCollum points out, this means of collecting artifacts reflects not only a specific kind of folk taste but also demonstrates how natural

objects (traces of a former epoch) are circulated through distinct parts of the culture. McCollum sets up an illuminating analogy between the intrinsically esthetic quality of casts made for museums of natural history and the sculptor's control over the formal character of the object. Both processes easily lend themselves to the investigation of the cultural logic of mass production and simulation that McCollum has been pursuing since the early '80s. In "Natural Copies," the footprints be come virtually allegorical, testifying to the extinction of a species, to a lost world that can only return through material copies whose "origin" is at once real and the stuff of fantasy.

Using a tried-and-true presentational style that reflects McCollum's love of any thing that reeks of the archive or the factory, the artist arranged multiple reproductions of these essentially appropriated artifacts—or "trace fossil" footprints—on the floor, dividing them into five color-coded sections that somewhat disingenuously suggested internal "formal" variations. The result was an installation of empathetically object objects.

Pseudo-artifacts made of enamel-on-polymer and reinforced gypsum were placed on individually customized pedestals to form a grid that occupied the entire gallery space. The elements of each quadrant coalesced around one of five colors: an acid, blanch orange, a pastel pepper-red, a sickly institutional-green, a deep-black gray, and a mustard yellow. Echoing the taxonomic ordering system common to natural history museums, McCollum catalogued the footprint castings according to size and type.

Individually, the recast footprints bear an endearing resemblance to modern reptilian and birdlike foot structures, yet they remain only obliquely figurative, as if the passage of time had eroded their "representational veracity." McCollum took full advantage of the organic abstraction of these objects—he was undoubtedly extremely pleased to have at his disposal a set of readymades that were intriguing on strictly formal terms and that incidentally referenced some well-known Modernist abstraction such as that of William Tucker.

Though in the early and mid '80s, McCollum's "Surrogate Paintings," 1978-, and later his "Perfect Vehicles," 1985-, may have been heralded as signs of the death of painting and the triumph of commodity culture over every kind of productive activity, the artist himself never lost his sense of humor about the absurdity of the play between originality and repetition in artmaking. With "Natural Copies" he "recasts" the mysterious narrative of our pre-historic past in a way that enables us to envision an overlap between the drone of the assembly line and the thundering boom of thousands of ancient footsteps.

—Joshua Decker