

THE DODO AND MAURITIUS ISLAND, IMAGINARY ENCOUNTERS



Riviere des Anguilles #8, Mauritius, 2004

As a child, I was fascinated with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, but I don't think I paid particular attention to the dodo bird in it at the time. Many years later reread it, and I found the dodo to be a great character. I couldn't help laughing when I looked at it - somehow it was hard to believe that there had been something like the dodo really out in the world at one point.

I'm not the first one to find the dodos compelling -- more books have been written about the dodo than any other extinct species. This strange giant pigeon was exterminated by human intervention between 1662 and 1693 on Mauritius Island -- the only place on earth where dodos ever existed. Although the dodo became extinct hundreds of years ago, it

still lives on in the collective memory of the western world in our stories and mythology. I soon began noticing the dodo everywhere -- in movies -- in television advertisements and even on greeting cards -- and became curious about the reason why this crazy bird is still such a persistently present character in our culture.

Although the dodo is a popular icon, there is very little precise information about how these strange giant pigeons actually looked like. To gather as much information as possible about dodos and Mauritius island I began to spend time in Oxford University's libraries and in the Natural History Museum in London. Upon examination of all the research material I could get my hands on, two things became very obvious -- none of the sources had a solid idea about the

external appearance of dodos, and no one had previously done anything like what I had in mind. This book provides a chance to compare the original historical sources (paintings, drawings and eyewitness accounts) and also the photographs of the actual dodo remains with my interpretation of dodos in their actual habitat, Mauritius island.

I became fascinated with the idea of actually building dodo models and seeing how they would look in the real world. I thought it would be a good serious but fun project to work on. And I was right -- as I was working on Mauritius I was laughing all the time at the bizarre project I was doing. I knew that whatever I did with the dodos would be fun, funny and oddly, full of life.

"Imaginary Encounters", is a reconstruction and photographic study of the long extinct dodo bird. Based on extensive research, I produced life-size sculptural reconstructions of the bird, as well as a visual photo based study of the actual dodo remains. The project culminated in photographic reconstructions of the dodo bird made with the models in their natural habitat of Mauritius Island. While I created my photographic work in the very same locations where dodos went about their daily activities, Mauritius island is obviously a very different place now that it must have been in the early 17th century. It was a daily struggle to find land still in its natural state -- not developed with crops or housing or marred by modern human life.

My research for the dodo models was based on available historical and anatomical data, with an emphasis on art historical sources. The resulting photographic work is a visual interpretation of the dodos in the actual locations where they once lived -- an imaginary encounter between the viewer and the dodos on Mauritius Island. My idea was not so much to create a scientific reconstruction of the birds, but instead to somehow put the Alice in Wonderland dodo,

a character that is faithful to it's appearances in art history, in the landscape on Mauritius island -- to create a character that is part myth and part real. I also wanted to recreate the kind of moments that must have occurred when the settlers arrived and the birds encountering people for the first time. I got caught up with the contradiction between the historical dodo character in and the real living bird and got curious what it would be like to combine the two-- so I decided to find out.



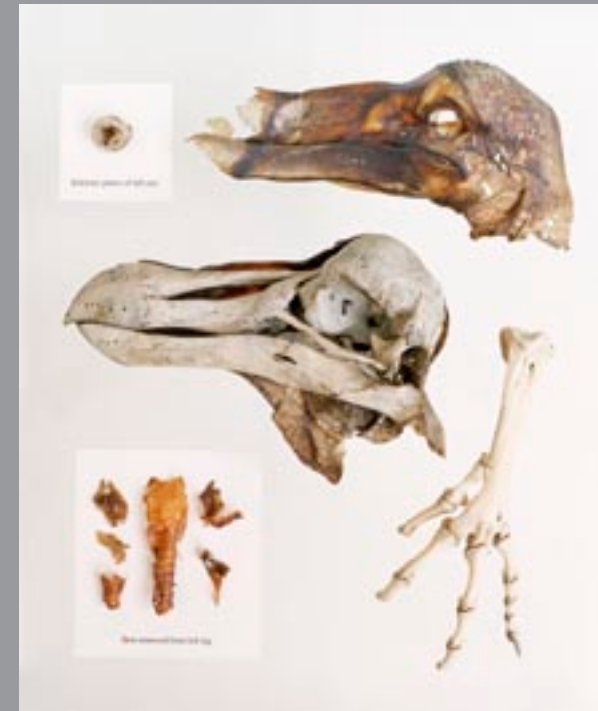
John Tenniel's Dodo, Lewis Carroll, "Alice in Wonderland", 1865



John Tenniel's Dodo, Lewis Carroll, "Alice in Wonderland", 1865



Dodo Skull, Copenhagen University's Zoological Museum 9 1/2" x 12"



Oxford Dodo, Oxford University Natural History museum 18 1/4" x 14 3/4"

Research Material (suggested layout)

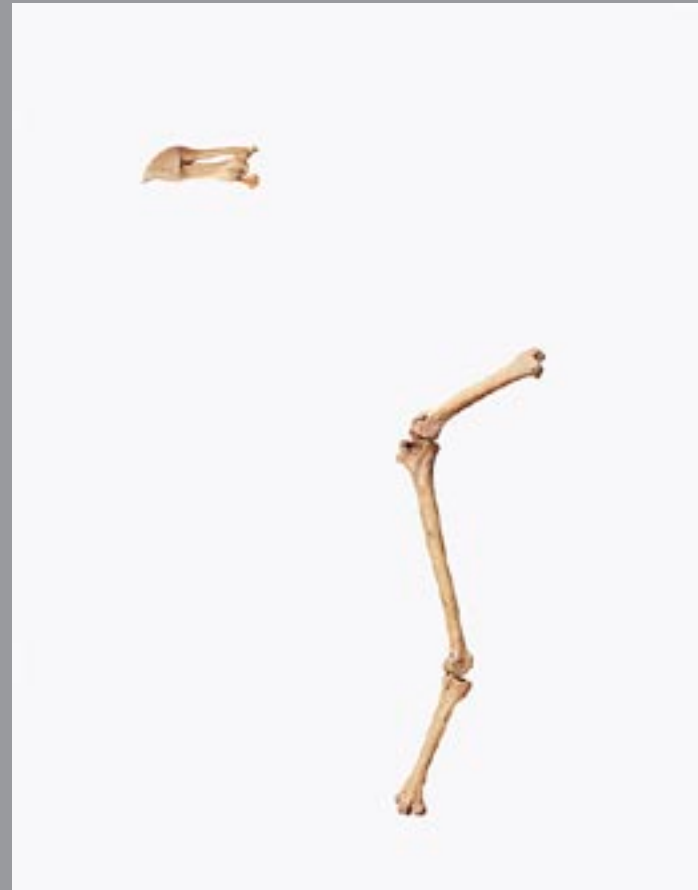
Selection of photographs of dodo remains by the artist & "Alice in Wonderland", 1865 book



Dodo fossil skeletons, 10"x18 1/4"
Cambridge University, Department of Zoology,
Natural History Museum, London,
Walter Rothschild Zoological Museum, Tring



Dodo foot. Natural History Museum London. 6 3/4"x18 1/4"



Dodo skeleton, Prague, Narodny Museum 18 1/4"x14"



Dodo head production model



Mechanical dodo skeletons