

Morally ambiguous but stuffed with fun: my six hours as a taxidermist

Emma Freud spends a day combining hands-on crafting with head-exploding moral philosophy — stuffing a mouse



Taxidermy: a metamorphic act of philosophical joy

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If you walk into Dawn O’Porter’s living room, you’ll find her beloved cat Lilu curled up asleep on an armchair. Lilu is always there — she died a few years ago and Dawn had her freeze-dried. She still looks exactly as she did on her final day and lies, 100% dead, in her favourite position on her favourite chair.

Freeze-drying involves ten posthumous months spent vacuum-packed in a freezer. It’s a technique that’s considered less controversial than taxidermy, which is the earliest of these procedures. Some folk find it disrespectful for a deceased animal to be skinned, stuffed and mantelpieced. Whereas advocates for taxidermy describe it as a respectful preservation of life; an acknowledgement that after death there can still be beauty and a tender marriage of art, sculpture, naturalism and upholstery. It’s a compelling debate ...

... so I signed up for a six-hour taxidermy lesson. On arrival we were each presented with an ethically sourced, small, dead mouse. I had mice and rats as a child but learnt more about the murine world that day than through years of ownership. In exploring the intricacy of the animal’s frame you come to understand the mechanics of its little body — and then get to play a part in its story.

We skinned and prepped the tiny pelts, preserved them with chemicals, created models of the mouse’s skeleton out of wires and wadding, draped the pelts on to the wadding, sewed them up like keyhole surgeons, pinned their limbs into positions, added tiny glass eyes and then dressed them — I made mine a tiny hat and scarf — before securing them on to small wooden plinths.

The day was peaceful and soothing — a regular side-gift of craft activities — while also being artistically challenging, scientifically fascinating and ethically mind-blowing. Imagine making an intricate Lego model with your hands, while your head is exploring the intimate relationship between death and maker and you’re simultaneously carrying out a training day as a mortician. That’s what taxidermy feels like. I loved it all.

I’ve thought about applying the same process to my cat Badger when he finally comes to a sticky end, but his favourite position is biting my head at 5am when he has the munchies, and I fear a pillow made of stuffed cat might deter potential suitors.

Mr Mouse (and I can tell you categorically he was male) now lives on my shelf and is beautiful in a slightly rakish way. Interestingly he horrifies some visitors, who feel that he’s the embodiment of animal cruelty, even though they often say this while wearing leather shoes or carrying a suede bag.

And the joy? My brief time as a taxidermist was an education. Over the course of a few hours I breathed a type of life into a tiny corpse — a metamorphic day of philosophical, genuine and unexpected joy with a dead pet.

There are taxidermy classes all over the UK. The ethical Vegan Taxidermist is at afieldguide.org