

BRUSSELS

Stephen Sack at
Tilman, Fesler & Coufo

As if in reply to Arthur Danto's statement that "the only picture we have of the future is the erased picture of the past ...", Stephen Sack gives us pictures from Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière*, but not the ones you might expect. Buffon's work was intended as a catalogue of the entire natural world. The engravings in the early editions (they began appearing in 1749) have bled through to the reverse sides, producing ghost images, and it is these ghosts that Sack has photographed with acute precision, capturing even the weave of the paper. The photographs thus register time's passage and its tendency to leave blurred and distorted after images.

But the actual depictions, the "right" sides, were themselves hardly accurate reflections of nature. Buffon's illustrators were hired hands who in many cases interpreted the writer's detailed descriptions of creatures they (and most other Europeans) had never seen. Furthermore, their representations were based on the language of a naturalist whose penchant for slanting observations to advance his own hypotheses stirred nearly as much controversy as the scientific implications of his work (which opened up the field of paleontology and posited a theory of evolution that paved the way for Darwin's). *Histoire Naturelle* now reads a bit like inspired science fiction. In Buffon's menagerie, extinct varieties and imaginary ones exist within a gamut of familiar species ranging from fairly exact to loosely approximate likenesses. Represented by paradigms of the Other- "La Negresse Blonde," for instance Homo sapiens, too, finds a place on the evolutionary chain.

Sack, like Buffon, treats all these creatures, from the dubious to the domestic, as emanations of a seamless reality, like shadowy fossils of a distant past when art and literature, facts and fantasy commingled naturally, invoking wonder as they advanced knowledge. Sack's gold-toned photographs are steeped in regret. They recall an era when extinctions were precipitated principally by natural events rather than by human irresponsibility and before science and the humanities irrevocably parted. It's interesting to note that the photos themselves are about to bridge this divide. The Buffon Museum in France has proposed that Sack photograph recently discovered original folios-back and front-before they are restored. The project's technical and historical purposes are evident; its contribution to art-documenting the other side of Buffon before unintended images are presumably cleaned from view - is as adventitious as it is welcome.

-Sarah McFadden