



Gallery Review:
Stranded
@ Aberystwyth Arts Centre

By Katya Johnson

Originally created for Cape Farewell's Art & Climate Change exhibition (2006), art duo Ackroyd and Harvey's installation piece *Stranded* is currently on display in the Aberystwyth Arts Centre. Famous for creating biological and ecological-themed 'living interventions', the couple use biochemical processes to comment on our relationship with the natural world. Examples of their innovative practice include grass paintings such as *Presence* (2001) and *Sunbathers* (2000) 'grown' using grass-seed impregnated canvases and the beautiful *Ice Lens* (2005), an orb of fractured, misty ice sculpted from a piece of frozen sea water in the High Arctic.

By anyone's standards, the sculpture *Stranded* – consisting of the skeleton of a 6 metre-long minke whale encrusted with alum crystals – is an arresting sight. Laid out on the horizontal white display platform like a patient on a surgery table, if you weren't told it was a whale, it might be hard to guess. In fact, at first sight, the enormous skeleton seemed more reminiscent of the remains of a mythical underwater beast with its prickly spinal column, pectoral fins, strange anvil-shaped protruding head and gaping mandibles. Glittering and lapidary, the piece also reminded me of Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull *For the Love of God* (2007), made with platinum and set with diamonds and human teeth.

Recalling associations of the bottle-nosed whale that was washed up on the banks of the Thames in 2006, the title *Stranded* is a play-on-words, suggestive of the marine environment that the minke whale takes as its habitat and the human neglect of care for nature. It also evokes the active and visceral process behind the making of this work of art. In a press release for the Natural History Museum exhibition, Ackroyd and Harvey remember the laborious and bloody process of removing the bones from the body of

the minke whale washed up in Skegness, Lincolnshire in 2005 before chemically imbuing it with crystals. They comment: 'Stripping this creature right down to his bones, we become connected to him in an intimate and intense way, as if his death is giving us a closer understanding of his life.'

As artists who use nature both as the base material and meaning of their work, Ackroyd and Harvey are candid about the environmental mission behind what they do, describing themselves as 'artist-activists'. In this sense *Stranded* is typical: on one level it acts as a piece of protest art against the whaling industry still practised in parts of the world including Iceland, Norway and Japan; on the other hand the glittering crystal deposits, beguiling as they are, are a reminder of oceanic pollution and the human 'corruption' of the ocean on-going today, with acidity levels rising, coral reefs under threat and gyres of plastic the size of Texas floating about in the Pacific.

Though the 'poetry' of the gem-studded whale at moments risks undermining the serious environmental message behind the piece, overall *Stranded* is a brilliant, visually arresting and thought-provoking work, whose ghostly presence is an eerie reminder of man-made climate change.