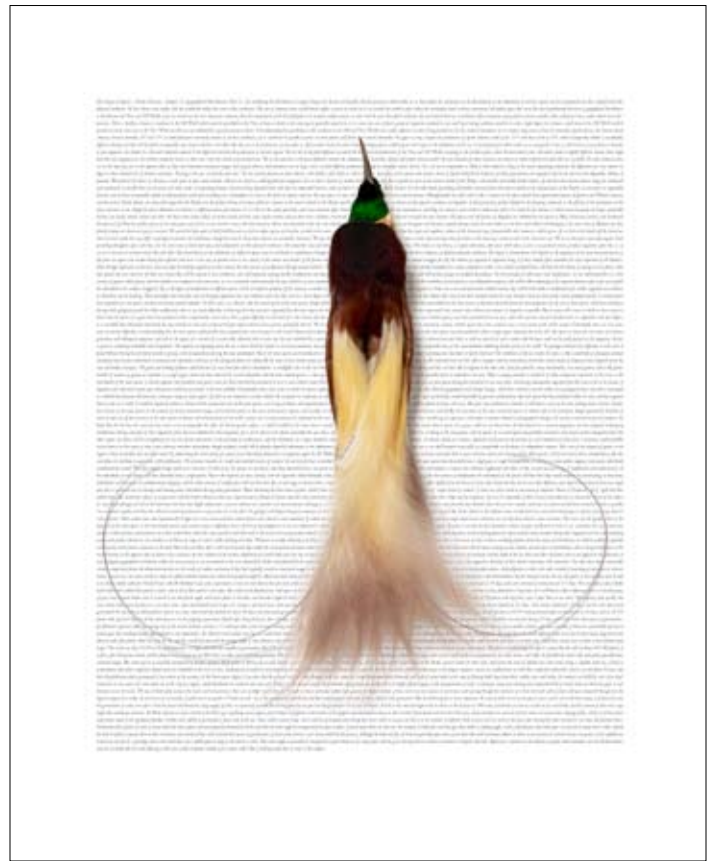


# Donald Farnsworth • *Origin: Specimens*

March 23 - June 3, 2007 • Fresno Art Museum

Notions about science and the natural world tend to be determined by the various lenses offered by media sources, educators or religious teachings, and beliefs are often taken for granted as common knowledge. Which led Donald Farnsworth to wonder, when religious fundamentalists challenged the teaching of Charles Darwin's theories to children in Kansas a few years back -- have any of these people really looked at Darwin's research, at the actual words he wrote? For that matter, have they bothered to take an unbiased look at the incredible biodiversity of the world around them? As it turns out, the Kansas school board members eventually admitted, under cross-examination, to not even having read the curriculae they sought to change. But Farnsworth -- a master printmaker operating in the art world, where the visual is paramount -- was intrigued by the chasm between observation and belief that became apparent in the Kansas controversy.

A collector of strange and beautiful insect specimens and a fiend for the latest digital technology, Farnsworth began the *Origin* series by bringing some of his bugs into his studio, Magnolia Editions, where he cut out the usual middleman -- a camera -- by placing them directly on a flatbed scanner. This allowed the capture of an incredibly detailed digital image without the use of photography. Later specimens were selected from the research collections of the oldest scientific institution in the West, the California Academy of Sciences, and were digitally captured in collaboration with Ben Blackwell, the Principal Photographer for the UC Berkeley Art Museum. Blackwell, too, sidestepped chemical-



*Origin:Specimens XI, pt. 1 (Bird of Paradise), 2007*  
Pigmented inkjet print on canvas, 62 x 51.5 in, edition of 8

based photography by using a Better Light scanning back, a photosensitive device which records an image as pixels. Farnsworth likewise bypassed the traditional delivery system of print media -- the book -- by sourcing the text of Darwin's groundbreaking 1859 treatise, *On the Origin of Species*, from an online library of public domain classics. The text is vector-based, not pixel-based, allowing for an unmediated crispness when printed that enhances the works' sense of impossible detail.



Chapters I through IV (pt 1) of Farnsworth's *Origin:Specimens* series.



*Bird Skin Tray I (Tanagers 1)*, 2007  
Pigmented inkjet print on archival rag paper, 22.5 x 40 in., edition of 12



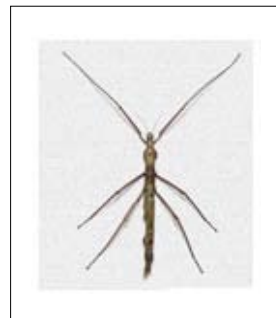
*Bird Skin Tray II (Nectarinia 1)*, 2007  
Pigmented inkjet print on archival rag paper, 22.5 x 40 in., edition of 12

There is a calculated directness in Farnsworth's choices: an invitation to forget what you think you know and to simply look. The artist does not ask the viewer to read a yellowing tome or to peruse dated photographs. Instead, he invites us to engage with the works' content as fresh, raw data, just as pioneering naturalists did in the years before museums and biology departments were commonplace. Digital imaging software was used to recreate shadows and depth, intensifying the realism of each specimen's appearance. The resulting digital prints have a dramatic scale and a three-dimensional, trompe-l'oeil quality that arrests the eye, making it almost impossible not to scrutinize the most minute details of each form. At the same time, the raw data of Darwin's text acts as a tip of the hat to the epistemology of science, subtly locating the specimens within a scientific context and reminding us that a considerable wealth of observation-based research informs the development of scientific theories like evolution.

- Nick Stone



*Origin:Specimens IX, pt. 2 (walking Stick - Phasma Gigas)*, 2007  
Pigmented inkjet print on canvas, 62 x 51.5 in, edition of 8



Chapters IV (pt 2) through VI (pt 2) of Farnsworth's *Origin:Specimens* series.