

# CHRESTOMATHIA

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A supplementary text to Andrew de Freitas' *atomspheres* at WINDOW Contemporary Art Space

by Helen Broome

To encounter Andrew's work is to be faced with knowledge. This is not imparted with the educational tendency for prescribed learning objectives but exists to be reclassified and named.

One step removed from their subject, do organized systems or approximate models provide a way in to a body of knowledge?

In this respect Charles Lane recognized the daunting nature of vast libraries but assured his 19th century audience that when this gilded barrier of binding is divided and arranged in a natural manner it will become accessible. The only question he leaves is which classification to use. Lane's Map of Human Knowledge is too sparse so from the many systems proposed and then re-categorized under Dewey's universal library I'll turn to 192 B47. This is commonly called Bentham's 'Chrestomathia', a name he coined from two Greek words to mean, 'conducive to useful learning'. Or at least that is Bentham's story.

Chrestomathia sets out an educational system that was to be housed in a Panopticon in Bentham's garden. Regardless of the end product of this system the underpinning categorization saw art and science as interlinked. Avoiding a simplistic dichotomy Bentham defined something as art or science in terms of what was most conspicuous; what is done or what is known.

Art is associated with the doing and science with the knowing. But what is done with knowledge when taxonomy accosts a model?

Instead of classification I offer an approximation by anecdote. A model constructed with flaws; the scene is set at the site of a Gilbert and Sullivan rehearsal for the premiere of their new production *The Mikado*:

Nanki-Poo asks his beloved Yum-Yum whether she loves Ko-Ko,

"Alas, no!" she replies.

"Rapture!" he exclaims, a little too enthusiastically to this limited comfort given that Yum-Yum will be marrying Ko-Ko and not him.

Gilbert shouted "Modified rapture" from the balcony. Thinking it was the line and not the tone that was being corrected the tenor dutifully sings "Modified rapture!" in the reprise which elicited a laugh and so the line stuck.

What is done is the recounting of a straightforward tale. What you may not have known is that Darwin never used the word evolution in *The Origin of Species*. This is not immediately obvious from the modification of rapture but then you should not watch the *Mikado* to learn biology. The context of intersection between evolution and *The Mikado* is one of Stephen Jay Gould's many pieces of popular science writing.

Taking Gould's poetic connection as a rationale for using *The Mikado* to explain scientific knowledge can lead anywhere. The flexible model of modified rapture is also suited to Queen Victoria's foray into mathematics. She wrote to Charles Lutwidge Dodgson in praise of Alice in Wonderland and requested more works by him. Wanting to distance himself from the frivolous pen name Lewis Carroll he sent back A Syllabus of Plane Algebraic Geometry. Dodgson denied this so a flaw emerges; we are not modelling a discovery but an invention that had its origin in Time magazine 1928.

The ability to model the distant concepts of Victorian royalty, pure mathematics and Darwinism turns modified rapture into a farce.

Anything can be predicted so nothing is known.

What is most conspicuous is what is done to link anything together. The understanding which is courted is the reordering of classifications and remaking of models; give them new names and do it all again.