Emilie Clark, MT-P37

“Rare Specimen: the Natural History Museum Show”
The Arsenal Gallery in Central Park, through Apr 12 (see Elsewhere)

Before moving to its current palatial digs in 1877, the American Museum of Natural History displayed its collection in Central Park’s Arsenal (now HQ for the city’s Parks Department). The landmark building is still home to a gallery, where curator Clare Weiss has organized a scattershot but appealing group show, featuring nine artists who take natural history—from dinosaurs and dioramas to the skeleton of a hairy armadillo—as their muse.

Walton Ford’s etching Bangalore puts a dark environmentalist spin on Audubon’s familiar formula, picturing a colorfully plumbed Kingfisher about to swallow some hooks attached to a fishing lure it has mistaken for grub. Botanical drawings are likewise invigorated: Emilie Clark’s semi-abstract, washy watercolors are portraits of carnivorous plants, based not on the artist’s direct observation, but on naturalist Mary Treat’s writings. A pencil drawing by Wes Lang, titled Rambler Gambler, depicts a Native American man wearing a headdress of eagle feathers and holding a peace pipe—but he is also wearing a plaid Western shirt and smoking a filtered cigarette, as much Marlboro man as Indian Chief.

The 19th-century naturalist Charles Darwin considered himself “a sort of machine for observing facts and grinding out conclusions.” The artists in “Rare Specimen,” however, are skeptical about claims of objectivity, aware that meaning shifts with context. Take the headdress in Lang’s drawing, beaded with swastikas. The emblem of Nazi evil is also a Navajo symbol for good luck. —Emily Weiss