

ARTslant

Our Origins

by Abraham Ritchie

[Our Origins](#)

Jason Lazarus, Aspen Mays, Alison Ruttan

Museum of Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago, 600 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605

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If there was one thing that “Our Origins” lacked, it certainly wasn’t ambition. Confronting the big human questions within the curatorial statement, like “Where do we come from?” among others, Curatorial Assistant Allison Grant was not afraid to take on the most difficult questions. The resulting exhibition was far-flung, with “Our Origins” coming to mean both human origins and the cosmic origins of the Earth.

The exhibition proved to be at its best when focusing on human origins and it is that artwork that begins the exhibition. Alison Ruttan shines in several works of hers that are given prominent locations of the first floor gallery. Two multi-panel pieces from Ruttan's *Four Year War at Gombe* series dominate one wall, depicting humans acting out vignettes sourced from Jane Goodall's observations of primates in the Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania. (Ruttan's *Dean Sequence*, 2009, seen at top.) Though clearly staged, *Murder Sequence—Dean* was devastating, mirroring actual incidences of violence that happen all too regularly in Chicago and the United States. The work challenges humans to reject their violent animalistic nature, while dialectically showing how embedded that nature is.

The cosmic side of "Our Origins" indicated that, like a science experiment, curating needs a tight focus to yield fruitful results. Several of the works on view seemed to deal more with scientific instruments themselves and the images they produce, rather than their investigations into origins. SEMICONDUCTOR's *Black Rain* took images from a NASA camera on the same orbit as Earth, with the notable aspect being the lack of majestic space images (like those from the Hubble Telescope) and the inclusion of digital "artifacts" or noise. Likewise Julia Büttelmann's cardboard microscope exposed the inadequacy of the instrument but didn't link up to the larger questions.

Very interestingly, "Our Origins" completely avoided anything that faith or religion might have had to say about the topic, though religion was mentioned in the curatorial statement. Without addressing what religion has to say about origins the exhibition felt incomplete. The exclusion of religion seems like an oversight rather than an affirmation of James Elkins' 2004 thesis in *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (that is, it does not really have a place in contemporary art). Though challenging to address, it would have deepened and broadened the scope of the exhibition. The photography of Jill Frank would have been an excellent departure point, especially *Shiva* (2009) and *Sistine Chapel* (2007), which could have provided a window into two major faiths from a skeptical point of view.

Even if "Our Origins" had its flaws, it's refreshing to see a curator take aim at the largest human questions, and it's good for Grant's first exhibition ever. I admire that ambition and hope Grant will continue probing those deep questions, since for as many artists as there are investigating consumerism and commodity culture, there are just as many examining the hard philosophical and scientific questions.

-Abraham Ritchie, Senior Editor ArtSlant: Chicago