

Animals R Us

Orwellian writing routinely brings up a familiar theme: the social terror of utopia gone wrong, the beastly features of ardent revolutionaries turned greedy, ruthless animals. But then, there are other themes left idling behind the powerful messages. Among these themes, in *Animal Farm* we witness a skillful play of characters, the human animals – or animal humans? – a plethora of symbols, both obvious and obscure.

The Gallery Project's *Animal Farm* show forgoes the central Orwellian messages, and in that, it may disappoint a few in the audience. Instead, the curators Heather Accurso and Frank Pahl cast a wider net posing the questions, "How are we like animals?" and "What can we understand about ourselves through animals?" Animal imagery, play, and symbolism have persisted in human psyche, and the show cracks open a window into this privately-collective space. Through the phantasies of the local and (largely) Chicago (educated or based) artists we get to explore the symbolic farm of our own.

First, there is the human-animal play. No matter how quickly this play can get dismal, we are all too apt to use animals as toys (and to make our toys animal). So I experience an undeniable playful feeling for the resin pyramid of the stackable, white little square cows erected by Van Ness. Is the irony of the anonymous, immediately consumable, inanimate-animal (what a cow is to us now) obvious to me? Sure, but what feels important in the moment is to play with the object, destroy the pyramid, move the cow-cubes, have them meet each other and your friends, say "moo" for them, and arrange them in an improbable stack.

Another "toy" renders much more distress to the imagination: as I've been trying to comprehend the "function" of a cold, exacting, surgical stainless steel piece by Berlant *The Cat Restraint/Human Pleasure Device*, a series of disturbing masochistic ideas enter my imagination. All along, these are ideas of play with an animal, a domesticated play-thing. Why cat? – why not a child, a lover... Berlant's steel goes a long way.

A popular plaything – a rabbit – takes a further symbolic plunge in Spiess-Ferris's *Rabbit # 3* piece. An unbearably evil-eyed, pink-fleshed suspicious creature is really a human-beast (rather than just an unfortunate pet). The delicate, iconographic Victorian garden setting belies the danger of a foul playmate. Yet this cross, repulsive creature feels strangely intimate, ready to identify with, familiar.

For a somewhat lighter play sentiment, Poskovic's *The Catalyst in Ochre and Red* offers a masterfully printed poster of Van-Goghian Gorilla, and Patterson's *No.4* continues the animal "formal portrait" theme with a fluffy, frank, rather senatorial-looking yet sad condor. If play is not your thing and you take yourself rather seriously – well, not to worry. A few works layered with technique-content interplay are offered to your sensible art ego.

The four works by Bartone attack with their style. Presented first, the etching *Lowcountry Game* is incredibly accomplished in its precise technique. Chicago-style ultra-realistic *Breed* and *Hunger* pieces in acrylic penetrate the eye with their brooding industrial backgrounds. And the lithograph *Strike* recreates the aerial landscapes reminiscent of both early Flemish and Chinese traditions. The intersection of the format and the subject in Bartone's work engenders a complex perception: the vanitas of the "as-if" 17th century Dutch still-life deliver the contemporary judgments through the animal imagery. The ugly "beauties", the domesticated predators, the (un?)native invaders allude to the beastly features of us, humans.

The enthralling beastliness of the human form is expressed strikingly by Accurso's drawing *Girl With Pink Lungs*. A perturbing yet tranquil, exquisite and fragile, museum-like exhibit of an infant girl trapped in paper mid-air floats its saurian limbs and sinewy, visceral hair. The primal baby-beast provokes my affection, repulses me, and fills me with expectancy.

My personal favourite is Menco's *The Madonna of the Prairie*. It brings two very different paintings to my mind: van Eyck's *Madonna at the Fountain* (the blue-robed dreamy Maria against the opulent red-and-gold of brocade) and Chagall's *The Rooster* (rapt maiden sensuously straddling the rooster). The tender eroticism harboured by the mother and the rooster-babe dyad is utterly intense in its privacy (their eyes are closed) and serene; it stops time. Two other works by Menco, *Extinct* and *Laocoön Madusa* stir me with an unlikely mixture of otherworldliness and contemporaneousness. The beguiling creatures look both Judaic and Netherlandish, they encounter each other in each moment in silent un-connectedness, although tethered, almost bonded. Through these bonds, where animal starts, human continues. The otherness of a strange animal is however no more perplexing than the alienation of a human.

A few more works strike an intriguing thought: Berlant's *Felis Domesticus Skull*, Lowly's *Mother Humming Bird*, Jenkins's *Hang II*, Spiess-Ferris's *Holly's Dream*, Pahl's & Mountain's *Forward comrades! Long live the windmill! Long Live Animal Farm!*

Come see for yourself. See what U R.

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