

North Dakota Museum of Art

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ANIMALS: THEM AND US TO OPEN AT THE NORTH DAKOTA MUSEUM OF ART

Museum Director Laurel Reuter has gathered the work of twenty-five artists from across North and South America in a contemporary exhibition *Animals: Them and Us*. The show is on display at the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks through January 5, 2009. The public is invited to a reception on November 22, 5 – 7 pm for *Animals: Them and Us*, and *Vivienne Morgan: A Sense of Place*, a landscape photography exhibition by Bemidji-based artist Vivienne Morgan. There will be a short lecture by Morgan.

According to Morgan, “After living in the United States for nearly thirty years, I still define myself as English. I almost live in two worlds, watching BBC television, listening to BBC Radio 4: all my news and sense of America is filtered through those sources. It keeps me happy to remain connected, but when I leave my house, the whole wild wooded landscape of Northern Minnesota tells me plainly: I’m not in England anymore. Of all things English, my identity is most closely tied to the English landscape.”

The biological definition of animal refers to all members of the kingdom Animalia, including humans who are only one of the nine or ten million species of animals that inhabit planet Earth. In curating the exhibition, Reuter searched for art from the complicated animal genre that exhibits contrasting and conflicting visions, points-of-view, assumptions, assertions, and historical remembrances of other members of the kingdom Animalia.

There are historical ways of thinking about animals. Henry Horenstein, a photographer from Boston, has six photographs in the exhibition that were part of his 2008 solo exhibition at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. It was part of a series designed as “lessons in looking.” According to Elisabeth Werby, Director of the Harvard Museum, Horenstein’s work continues a centuries-old tradition of natural history illustration. In such work, “Animals are often presented in shallow space with limited landscape, sometimes even against a blank page, in order to promote close examination and study of detail.”

Thomas Brummett sees his work on a continuum with the 19th century practice of cataloguing natural history. According to the artist, “This series of animal portraits is my attempt to collect specimens from the natural world for my own personal Cabinet of Wonder. My goal is for the images to be part photograph and part cave drawing, part document and part dream”

By combining traditional photographic and contemporary digital processes, Brummett creates mysterious animal portraits that leave the viewer wondering, “Is this a mezzotint, an ancient photographic work, or a transferred cave drawing?” Brummett, who lives in

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Philadelphia, names the series *Animalis* from the Latin term meaning literally “to have breath,” which is the origin of our modern word for animal.

Frank Kelly taught art at the University of North Dakota for decades. He is also a long-time bird watcher, a point-of-view that dominates his study of redpolls, *Arctic Wanderer*. Painted in the 1960s, it also resembles earlier natural history studies with its shallow backgrounds, attention to bird markings, and suggestions of flight patterns. Yet the work clearly was painted by one schooled in abstract expressionism with its lush surfaces and loose application of paint.

In her Natural History Series, Lynn Geesaman photographs the historical presentation of animals in museums. That is, Geesaman photographs dioramas in history museums, creating black and white images that are as much about illusion as is the original diorama. One must look carefully at each photo to figure out where the work of the taxidermist and the background painter overlap. What is real? What is supposition?

Other artists create art directly from their own relationships with animals; chief among them is Guillermo Hart. His family owns an estancia encompassing thousands of hectares of land in the far south of Patagonia, Argentina. Even while completing his graduate work in photography at the Massachusetts College of Art, Hart would return to the family ranch to work and to photograph. His video work documents his play with the animals: sleeping with the goats, being nuzzled by the sheep, and reading *Black Beauty* to his horse. His photographs tell the story of Argentine ranching where the stomachs of cattle are dried on fences for the cheese industry, hundreds of hare pelts are placed on racks to cure for the fur trade, and the interior of the veterinarian’s office is hung with Argentinean hunting trophies and a two-headed calf.

Barton Lidice Benes brings wit and humor to his mixed media assemblages and sculptures. Among them is an effigy of a mink wearing a mink coat, cut-outs of various fancy ladies decked out in real furs, two turtles sheltered under fur instead of shells as they set off on a race, and a ball of seal’s teeth. Likewise, Minnesota artist Albert Belleveau creates both graceful and bold animals from the materials he finds laying around. A graceful Stone Crane made of steel rod with a stone for its head, and a droll Junk Yard Dog from welded junk represents him in this exhibition.

Fargo artist Kim Bromley was invited to judge a Ducks Unlimited competition, after which he responded, “Ducks don’t have to look like this.” He went home and created his own counter-version of six-foot duck paintings that are wacky, colored any which way, and full of life and movement. In the same spirit, Mary Sprague’s portraits of elegant chickens spoof the whole idea of elegance. *Dowager Couple*, a drawing of two old chicken dames in their finest attire, and *All Dressed Up, No Place to Go*, a portrait of a gussied up, extravagantly feathered chicken, leave the viewer in stitches.

Animals were our first art and our first metaphors, as demonstrated in the exhibition by Stuart Klipper’s *Rock Art from Northern Territory, Australia*. But Klipper, a world traveler with camera, is most widely known for his work in Antarctica, a place he has traveled to

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six times as a guest of the National Science Foundation. His book, *The Antarctic: From the Circle to the Pole*, has just been published by Chronicle Books. Four exquisite exhibition

photos are taken from the book. They include basking seals on an ice floe; the blue-eyed shag shadowed by a spectacular glacier (the only member of the cormorants to venture down into the Antarctic proper); an Adelia Penguin colony; and a family of Emperor Penguins.

Roberta Paul, an artist who graduated with an M.F.A. from the University of North Dakota, took a sketchbook instead of a camera on her first trip to Africa. Back in her studio in Massachusetts, she converted her small sketches into eight-foot drawings of baboons, cheetahs, and wildebeests, and did so without losing the immediacy, the humor, and directness of the original sketches.

For several artists, there isn't a great distance between what is animal and what is human. For example, in Amy Ross's watercolors birds and animals morph into plants and humans. In Susana Jacobson's small painted portraits, the people are portrayed as monkeys as the artist successfully suggests the underlying psychology of the formal portrait sitter.

Other works in the exhibition include two gigantic paintings of a moth and a buffalo by New Yorker Kate Javens; a mixed-media *Scaredy Cat* in the form of a chicken by Minneapolis artist Ingrid Restemayer; photo montages by Thomas Allen, also of Minneapolis; polychrome wood sculptures by Wisconsin artist Don Gahr; and Vance Gellert's photos taken in Peru that are part of his much larger study of healers and healing.

Finally, Cecelia Condit's five-minute video *All About a Girl* is a deceptively charming psychological set piece, which depicts a young girl wrestling with her own imagination and fears. An ordinary game of "let's pretend" turns uncanny as, alone in the woods, she projects life, voice, and ultimately her own identity onto an unexpected surrogate in a doll's dress: a rat.

Animals: Them and Us was created as a holiday gift to the friends, supporters, and audience of the North Dakota Museum of Art. There is no admission charge. Tours can be arranged through the Education Department. Likewise, the exhibition is supported by Museum friends, Whitey's Cafe, and the North Dakota Eye Clinic, with additional funding from the Minnesota State Arts Board, the North Dakota Council on the Arts, and the North Valley Arts Council.