

'A Modern Bestiary (While Darwin Sleeps...)'

5th May – 1st July 2006

Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art

"Here begins the book of the nature of beasts."

Yuri A, Tom G. Adriani, Ebony Andrews, Paul Bush, Dawn Hannah,
Bryndis Erla Hjalmarsdottir, Kate McLeod, Robert Morgan

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

'A Modern Bestiary' is the first of two exhibitions exploring our relationship to the natural world – here through 'fauna' and subsequently through 'flora'. The following exhibition in July is entitled 'Pleasure Gardens'. A 'bestiary' is a medieval illuminated manuscript – a picture-book – describing both real and imaginary animals. Bestiaries, produced by monks mainly in the 12th and 13th centuries, became one of the most important types of book in the medieval world. They were in effect catalogues of every type of known and fictional animal, described in order to draw moral lessons from their habits or propensities.

Each of the eight artists here either create their own fantastical, imaginary species, or else reorder the animal kingdom into unexpected categories where imagination triumphs over instrumental reason. In the artists' hands, animals – including man – are subject to extraordinarily metamorphoses and mutations. The artists might be seen to parallel our modern attitudes to the animal kingdom, swinging between sentimental attachment and seeing living things in terms of their use-value.

Metamorphoses and cross-breeds between humans and animals are central to western art and literature from Egyptian and Greek mythology and Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' in pre-Christian times; to Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland'; and to Franz Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' and 'The Fly' in the 20th century.

In the United States in particular, there is fierce debate as to what should be taught through the state education system about the natural world, and the animal kingdom. On the one hand, many subscribe to the theory known as 'intelligent design'; for others Darwinism exhaustively explains every feature of the natural world. The artists' purposes here include complicating these existing terms.

Dawn Hannah presents a wall text which challenges the Enlightenment mind by proclaiming that 'Monsters do exist'.

Tom G. Adriani's short film 'The Boy Who Chose Sleep' mixes fantastical pencil drawings with still photographs to tell the story of a skeletal animal which, through one boy's imagination, comes to life.

Bryndis Erla Hjalmsdottir's animated taxidermied animals create a tragicomic 'theatre of the absurd'. They recall WB Yeats' line that "Nor dread nor hope attend a dying animal / A man awaits his end, dreading and hoping all."

Robert Morgan's short film 'The Cat With Hands' is a modern take on Grimm's fairy tales, combining comedy and gothic horror.

Paul Bush's film 'While Darwin Sleeps...' reveals the infinite variety of the insect kingdom. The video displays 5000 different insects in natural history museum collections in just five minutes of footage, seen for one frame each.

Ebony Andrews' transforms taxidermied animals into extraordinary ornaments and functional objects which resemble existing commercial uses of fur, leather as well as aristocratic adornments.

Yuri A's short film 'Unk' is a catalogue of man-made beasts, ordering hundreds of toy and souvenir animals into a sequence which is both alarming and comic.

Kate McLeod's plaster sculptures are human-canine cross-breeds akin to the mythical creatures described in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'.

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Dawn Hannah

'Monsters Do Exist' 2006

Dawn Hannah's work is concerned with the darker recesses of the human imagination and the great themes of gothic literature – nightmares, guilt, fear, deviancy and monstrosity. It is, however, shot through with an absurdist black humour. Hannah's text work asks us, with half-serious / half-comic intent, to believe in a world of the imagination rather than that offered to us by instrumental reason. Hannah's works are provocations asking us to suspend disbelief in an alternative world; she invites us to unfetter our imaginations and make the impossible possible. Whilst we imagine we know the world's workings through modern science, can we really be certain that our own ideas will not appear as unfathomable as our predecessors', in centuries to come?

The medieval world's belief in witchcraft, monsters and fairies is mostly seen as child-like superstition. But as Michel Foucault and novelist Jorge Luis Borges have argued, our modern worldview is both fragile and fallible. Both have pointed to a Chinese encyclopaedia whose apparent arbitrariness actually highlights the fact that all systems of classifications are arbitrary: "animals are divided into being (a) belonging to the Emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) tame ones; (d) sucking pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those included in the present classification (i) those that tremble as if mad..."

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Tom G. Adriani

'The Boy Who Chose Sleep' 2005

Video projection: 5 minutes

"The artist's struggle... is in trying to create something that 'lives'..." Emile Zola

Tom G. Adriani's short films combine still photography with pencil drawings to create dream-like gothic fantasies. Adriani's stories adapt the very oldest type of storytelling: sequences of rhyming couplets. 'The Boy Who Chose Sleep' begins by introducing a boy called Frankie who, living in a repressive tower-block surrounded by rules and regulations, prefers the life of his imagination to that of the outside world. As Adriani remarks, "despite Frankie's best efforts to entertain himself in his gloomy surroundings, his frustration with the mundane restraints of a 'no loitering', 'no ball games', 'you are being watched' society overpowers his thirst for waking life. He escapes to the one place he knows to be limitless... the land in his head." There, he is able to be anything he wants and go anywhere he feels without a chorus of governing bodies instructing him (and us) the do's and don'ts of existence. In doing so, Frankie explores his 'adopted' city, where places such as the Isle of Dogs or Braintree Alley are everything their name promises.

In his world we meet to very different characters. Firstly, we encounter 'Solomon', an anxious young spider from Spindle lane; secondly is 'Mrs Malone', a lonely old lady from Relic street. Solomon continually frets about the frailty of existence, to the point where he builds an enormous protective web around his life. This web or nest attracts the attention of a passing female spider, who interprets it as a glorious future home. On the other hand Mrs Malone is unable to move on from the past after the death of her husband 'Stew'. After finding a collection of bones while gardening, she builds a figurine in homage to Stew, which through her care and love is brought to life.

'The Boy Who Chose Sleep' is composed of photographs merged with hand-drawn illustrations. Adriani's approach blurs the line between reality and imagination; familiar, seemingly mundane environments are transformed into places of fantasy and curiosity.

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Bryndis Erla Hjalmarsdottir

"Nor dread nor hope attend / A dying animal;
A man awaits his end / Dreading and hoping all."
WB Yeats, 'Death', 1933

Icelandic artist Hjalmarsdottir uses real animals to test where the borderline is between beauty and repulsion in our responses to the animal kingdom. We might initially perceive her sculptures as playful or intriguing, like children's toys, Victorian automata, or as though the animals were acting out Buster Keaton-type pratfalls. In 'reanimating' deceased animals, her works become uncanny. Sigmund Freud remarked, "something is uncanny when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one, or an animate one becomes too much like an inanimate one." In Hjalmarsdottir's work, both cases are true. The artist's animals, being condemned to an eternity of repetitive labours, appear both comic and tragic. Indeed Hjalmarsdottir's animals most often seem like characters in a Samuel Beckett play like 'Waiting for Godot' – allegorical figures whose fortunes symbolize those of humanity as a whole. Doomed to repeat meaningless tasks endlessly, they are trapped in a story with no beginning and no end. Hjalmarsdottir, like many artists and writers in the 20th century from Beckett and Yeats to Francis Bacon, is concerned with the distinction between man and beast, and how humans are distinguished by virtue of our awareness of our own mortality. WH Auden's poem 'Address to the beasts' also recalls Hjalmarsdottir's work: "Distinct now, in the end we shall join you (how soon all corpses look alike); But you exhibit no signs of knowing that you are sentenced. Now, could that be why we upstarts are often jealous of your innocence, but never envious?"

Here the magpie in 'Hover' has dug tracks with its claws into its platform, seemingly trying to escape not only from its platform, but also from its earthbound weight.

WH Auden 'Address to the beasts': "Distinct now, in the end we shall join you (how soon all corpses look alike / But you exhibit no signs of knowing that you are sentenced. Now, could that be why / we upstarts are often jealous of your innocence, but never envious?"



Bryndis Erla Hjalmarsson, 'Hover'

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Robert Morgan

'The Cat With Hands' 2003

Video projection from 16mm film: 3 minutes

"Like flies to small boys we are to the Gods; / They kill us for their sport."
from 'King Lear'

Trained as an animator, Robert Morgan produces short films which explore the darker sides of human nature – and our animal natures. The artist's films are akin to gothic fairy tales where inanimate objects come to life, the dead are revived, and creatures shape-shift between one species and the next. As in classic gothic stories like Frankenstein or Dracula, 'The Cat with Hands' is based around a monstrous creature which is half-human, half-animal whose behaviour combines predatory violence with supernatural powers. For Morgan, the animal kingdom seems characterised by chaos, bestial aggression and malevolence rather more than beauty or harmony. Characteristically, Morgan's tale renders a charmingly domestic animal into a savage, brutal one. 'The Cat with Hands' exploits the fact that, as the art historian EH Gombrich puts it, "we all believe in image-magic" – that we wish to suspend disbelief in what we know to be unbelievable.

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Paul Bush

'While Darwin Sleeps...' 2006

Video projection: 6 minutes

"People are beginning to see that the first requisite to success in life is to be a good animal."

Herbert Spencer, 'Education', 1861

Paul Bush's video 'While Darwin Sleeps' is composed of nearly 3000 still photographs, each recording a different species in the collection of Walter Linsenmaier in the Natural History of Luzern. The photographs are animated into a six-minute long sequence, where each animal is seen for 1/24 second only. As thousands of different species flash past our eyes, the film seems to document a single species morphing from one phase in its history to another. It is though we are watching a time-lapse film taken charting the entire story of evolution. As each insect follows the other, frame by frame, they appear to unfurl their antennae, scuttle along, or flap their wings as if trying to escape the pinions which attach them forever in their display cases. 'Persistence of vision' tricks the eye into believing that these dead creatures are still living and that we are watching the genetic programme of millions of years condensed into minutes. The work is akin to a nightmare or hallucination where natural life is sublime, uncontrollable and beyond man's powers of comprehension. Bush's implication is that the explanations of the course of animal life offered by both Darwinians and fundamentalists are inadequate to account for the immensity of variety on display. The bewildering profusion of life which viewers encounter defies the logic of both and demands an alternative hypothesis.

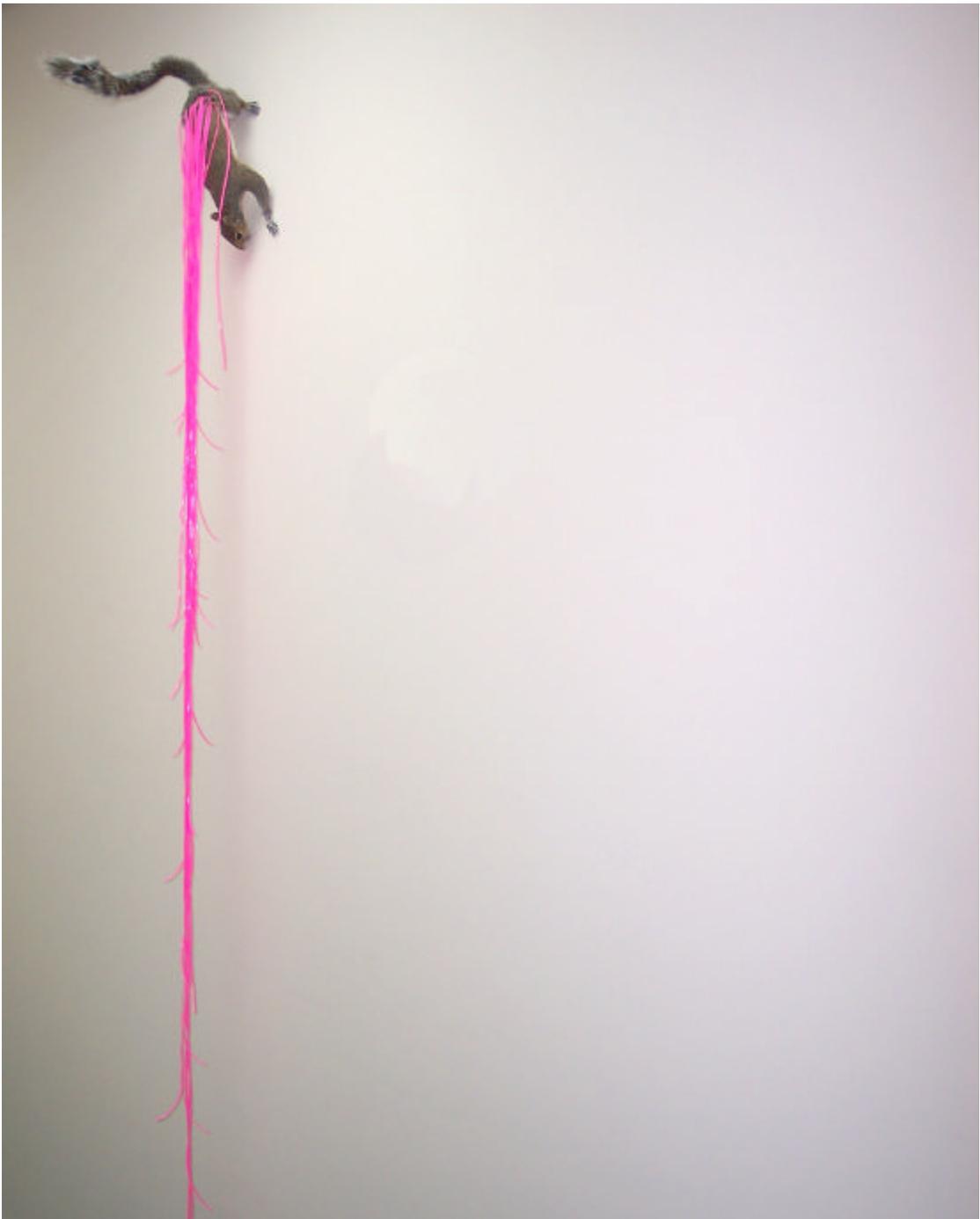
'A Modern Bestiary.'

Ebony Andrews

"Animals, whom we have made our slaves, we do not like to consider our equal."

Charles Darwin, Notebooks 1837-8

Ebony Andrews examines our contradictory attitudes towards other species, and how we classify them. Andrews only slightly caricatures the polarised ways in which we view animals – whether as objects of sentimental attachment and 'cute', or as industrial products whose body parts – skin, muscle tissue – either feed us or else serve ornamental purposes in our homes and on our bodies. Andrews reminds us that the division between 'domestic' and 'agricultural' animals is less secure than we imagine. Other European countries eat the meat of rabbits, frogs, and horses; in China dogs and cats are both staples at the dinner table. In our own country, leather shoes are so commonplace that we forget the skins were once part of a living, sentient being. Andrews' shoes combine the skin of cows with the heads of rabbits – to be half-'indoor' (furry) slipper, half 'outdoor' walking shoe. Her acid-pink squirrel is a parody of the sentimentalised, powder-pink attitudes towards species which are sometimes seen as vermin and at other times as charming. Andrews' sculptures ask us how – and why – we classify animals in the way we do, and what functions – practical and imaginative – they serve for us.



Ebony Andrews, Squiff Two, 2006

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Yuri A

'Unk' 2005

Video projection from 16mm film: 5 minutes

"All animals, except man, know that the principal business of life is to enjoy it."

Samuel Butler, 'The Way of All Flesh', 1903

'Yuri A' is a Japanese artist based in Switzerland who creates films about our relationship to our animal nature. Her short films are 'comedies of errors' in the style of advertising for children which sway between being hilarious, mesmeric, and frightening. Yuri A celebrates the anarchic, worthless, and bizarre. 'Unk' is a burlesque 'catalogue' of man-made animals, intentionally lacking in logic or order, which is a counterpoint to 'While Darwin Sleeps...'.

Paul Bush's work looks at the natural world under scientific observation, and preserved in perpetuity via the museum. 'Unk' by contrast tackles the cheapest and most disposable man-made objects – the 'junk culture' of mass market plastic toys. Bush approaches the animal kingdom which has been meticulously catalogued and ordered with scholarly labels, for our public benefit and erudition. Yuri A's purpose, however, is to reveal the ingenious, wonderful and preposterous variety of creatures mankind has manufactured for its own entertainment. Seen on a loop, 'Unk' might be seen as a modern update of Samuel Beckett's 'theatre of the absurd', where nothing happens, repeatedly, and forever. Whilst the comic sounds of the animals are initially funny after several minutes they can seem grating or disturbing; upon extended viewing they become horrifying or macabre.

'A Modern Bestiary.'

Kate McLeod

'Becoming'2006; **'Becoming'**2006; **'Becoming'**2006

"All animals are equal – but some animals are more equal than others."
from 'Animal Farm', George Orwell, 1945

Kate McLeod's half-human, half-canine creatures are modern reworkings of classical sculptures and statues. The central grouping references the battle scene 'Samson and the Philistines' by Vincenzo Foggini, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. McLeod notes that from antiquity to the present day, stories in our culture have been based around the transformation of human beings into bestial creatures and vice versa. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, was written in the year 1 AD, though based on stories from the 6th century BC; in our own time *The Fly* and Franz Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' examined similar themes. Unexpectedly, McLeod combines human anatomy with greyhound facial features. For her, the greyhound can act as a symbol of an animal bred by man to solely entertain and distract us. Unlike other animals, it is not seen as a domestic pet, nor a beast of burden, nor bred for food, nor does it exist 'in the wild'. Moreover, the greyhound's slender, attenuated shapes makes it an implicitly feminine animal: "its' shape is thin though womanly, the chest is enlarged and round, it has a nipped in waist and slender legs. Its' proportions fit surprisingly well with or onto those of the human form." McLeod uses female figures in the poses of (male) Gods from classical statuary. She notes that, traditionally in sculpture, female bodies are often idealised or eroticised whilst being tantalisingly covered – whereas male bodies are exposed. McLeod reverses the terms of the equation between the sexes to give her female protagonists positions of threatening power.

