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Animal imagery showing up in contemporary art

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The Kansas City Star

A pack of 99 wolves arcs through the air toward a collision with a glass wall at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

A hyena snarls atop a stack of wood beams, and a giraffe hangs by its neck from a ceiling fan at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College.

A huge portrait of a brown bear by L.A. artist Jill Greenberg will soon go on view at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

Animal imagery is one of the hottest things going in contemporary art.

Certainly it's a trend among Kansas City artists.

In his recent show at Review Studios Exhibition Space, Davin Watne memorialized his 2006 highway collision with a deer in large paintings and a dramatic installation featuring taxidermy deer and smashed autos.

Life-size deer, fabricated over taxidermy forms, also played a prominent role in a recent installation by Kansas City Art Institute alums Carolyn Hopkins and Stewart Losee at the Fahrenheit Gallery.

Kansas City artist Lee Piechocki attributes the trend to the "global realization that we've distanced ourselves from nature, and we need to get back to it."

Piechocki, an Indiana transplant who recently was awarded an emerging artist studio from the Urban Culture Project, frequently employs animal imagery in his work.

A striking painting portrays a dead deer suspended over a white lab table stocked with plastic containers and other items. It was inspired, he said, by "Dutch still life painting, where you had these big oak tables overflowing with the bounty of the harvest, animals and deer and pelts."

But the piece is also somewhat tongue-in-cheek, a nod to the trendiness of animal imagery, "not only in the fine arts world but into design and (consumer) products."

"I use it, but I sort of doubt it," he says.

Other Kansas City artists leave no doubt about their concern for the fate of animals, but they also use them as a window onto human and environmental concerns.

The dead squirrels she sees regularly on her way to work at Rockhurst University inspired Anne Pearce to create a series of small stain paintings she calls "Squirrel Spirits," in which the paint seeps like blood across the page.

"My motive really has to do with how careless we are in terms of life," she said. "Beyond the squirrels, there's this general glossing over the disposability of life — we're sending all these people off to war, (we're killing) the polar bears — because it's not in our immediate line of sight."

Locally Pearce was the first to focus on the way area artists use animal imagery in their work. In January 2007 she organized a group show titled "Beasts" at the Greenlease Gallery at Rockhurst University.

Several months earlier the Kansas City Art Institute's H&R Block Artspace opened "Cryptozoology," an international exhibit filled with animal hybrids, mutants and fantasy creatures. The show argued for a serious rethinking of the relationship between humans and nature.

Considering all the pharmaceuticals being flushed into our drinking water and the pesticides applied to many of the foods we eat, it's not surprising that the mutant theme endures with artists.

Anna Buckthorpe, a senior in the sculpture department at the Kansas City Art Institute, weighed in on the topic with a series of porcelain animal sculptures titled "The Tragic Effects of Thalidomide on the Offspring of Your Pets."

The pieces, shown in April at the KCAI Crossroads Gallery, are made from vintage 1950s and '60s molds of cats and dogs from the Fresno, Calif.-based Duncan Ceramics company.

Inspired by her readings about the thalidomide scandal of the same era, Buckthorpe used the molds to create "composite" animals — cats and dogs with two heads, joined bodies and multiple limbs — glazed in bright primary colors.

"I'm juxtaposing these serious things with these cutesy memorabilia artifacts," she said. "I'm turning them into monstrosities and commenting on that era."

But the works also speak to the present.

"They're reusing thalidomide as an anti-anxiety medication," Buckthorpe said, "which kind of brought it into the contemporary sphere."

Unlike the wolves and leaping tigers in leading Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's retrospective at the Guggenheim or Bharti Kher's hyena and giraffe works in the Nerman's current show of contemporary art from India, the cats, dogs, deer and squirrels favored by Kansas City artists reflect their immediate encounters with animal life.

Susi Lulaki's one-person exhibit at Pi gallery earlier this year featured dozens of images of guinea fowl based on her friend Emily Hunter's guineas in rural Kansas.

"Over the last couple of years I have taken photos of the herd running through the prairie grass, snacking on insects, roosting on Emily's porch," Lulaki explained in her artist's statement for the show. "The large dotted bodies are tasty targets and the flock dwindles."

Lulaki credits her longtime work with children's art programs for her loose approach to media.

Her guinea artworks include digital inkjet prints embellished with paint and mounted on wood. Her guinea paintings feature backgrounds activated by sgraffito (scratchings) and rubber stamps of bees or butterflies.

Their naïve, quasi-folk art style conveys her intimacy and familiarity with the birds as well as her identification with them.

"This is a story of being vulnerable," she says. "I love their predators, too."

Brian D. Collier focuses on a bird at the opposite end of the survival spectrum. Encompassing photographs, videos, constructions, maps and a Web site (www.teachstarlings.societyrne .net), his "Teach the Starlings in Kansas City" project examines the ecological impact of the introduction of the European starling to North America.

The perpetrator was a man named Eugene Schieffelin, whose release of 60 pairs of starlings in Central Park in 1890 had unforeseeable and disastrous consequences for native species.

The deforestation of the East Coast made the land all the more hospitable to starlings, which prefer open spaces. Today the starling population has reached about 200 million.

Presented in April at Paragraph Gallery, Collier's project attempts to make the starlings agents of environmental awareness, exploiting their parrot-like talents to teach them to say the word "Schieffelin."

To this end, he has designed feeding stations and nesting boxes wired with audio devices that repeat the word and has mounted a campaign to engage collaborators in this massive venture to "Teach the Starlings."

Part ornithology, part theater of the absurd and part "metaphor for colonialism," according to the Charlotte Street Foundation's Kate Hackman, Collier's venture lampoons the consequences of ill-considered intervention in the natural world.

"Certainly, there is a long history of artists employing animals as surrogates to address human folly," said Nerman Museum director Bruce Hartman. "And considering the dangerous follies humankind is currently

engaged in, I don't find it surprising to see a resurgence of animal depictions in art. It is perhaps a more palatable way to illustrate our behavior — and force us to see the consequences of our actions."

@ For a slide show including more examples of animal imagery in contemporary art, go to **KansasCity.com/Entertainment.**

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