Painting Animals

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Front Cover Image: Walton Ford, Tale of Johnny Nutkin, 2001, six color hardground and softground etching, aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint on Somerset Satin paper, Edition of 50, 44 x 30 inches, 111.8 x 76.2 cm, Courtesy the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery
Is painting the most troubled medium in contemporary art? The death of painting has been announced with regularity at the beginning of each of the past four decades. Nevertheless, a number of artists like Gerard Richter, Lucien Freud, Francis Bacon, Jenny Saville, Peter Doig, David Hockney, Chris Ofili, June Leaf, Cy Twombly and Joseph Condo, just to name a few, have demonstrated through their creative reinventions of the medium’s boundaries, scope, purpose and ambitions that the opposite may indeed be true. What role has thus far painting played in the animal revolution led by the visual arts? What does contemporary painting have to say or what can it do about our relationship with the non-human?

This and the next issue of Antennae will be entirely dedicated to the practice of painting—at times, animals will appear in the frame, at others they may not. The aim of this exploration will not be that of attempting to draw conclusions on the matter, but to focus on a specific medium in order to understand how medium specificity can aid, address, envision or suggest new human-animal relations. This is an enquiry Antennae began with the previous issue on animals and literature and it is one that will be continued over the next few years over a number of instalments. In the case of painting, both issues will not present a conceptualised selection of contributions but will instead aim to maintain a very open mind about the intricacies that painting animals may unveil. Resisting a thematic curatorial approach, both issues will however provide a departure from classical representational tropes in which the non-human has for centuries been symbolically objectified. How objectification is prevented or subverted in panting is something the selected works and texts featured in these instalments will aim at mapping.

To open this first instalment, I have composed an image essay, which gathers together a number of rather well known (and some obscure) paintings that are not usually productively understood from a human-animal studies informed perspective. I have deliberately ignored some classics that have already been at length discussed by myself and other colleagues in previous publications (Stubb’s Whistlejacket being one of the most prominent examples). Thereafter, this first instalment deliberately goes back and forth between figuration and abstraction, and past and present in order to provide as many different perspectives as possible.

As per usual, this is a very rich issue gathering a number of contributions from established and emerging academics, researchers, curators and artists. Special thanks go to all those who have contributed to the making of this ambitious project.

Giovanni Aloi
Editor in Chief of Antennae Project
5 Painting Animals
This image essay consists of a selection of eight paintings from mainstream art history. Some are extremely well known, some are considered masterpieces, whatever that may entail, other are a little less popular with wider audiences. None of the selected works have been painted through a human-animal studies lens, however all, as it will be argued, can provide interesting insights in human-animal relations as unearthed by the medium of painting.
Text by Giovanni Alo

22 On the History and Symbolism of Animals in Art and Society
Director for the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World, Clive Adams proposes a concise account of the history of animal representation from the Palaeolithic to our time. It very much is a crash-course, for those who have yet to read the key texts or need to refresh their memory. A great opener for our double issue on painting!
Text by Clive Adams

27 Ornithology and Allegory: Walton Ford
Walton Ford has had a strong interest in art and the natural world since childhood. A graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, he is the recipient of several national awards and fellowships including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. His first major one-man show was at the Brooklyn Museum in 2006. After living in New York City for more than a decade, Ford and his family have settled in the southern Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts.
Text by Barbara Larson

33 Promethean Boldness
The store-room of the Natural History Museum Berlin, houses an amazing collection of birds, witness to the collection mania of the 19th century. To be confronted with this plethora of specimens, dead animals, evoking life-like – is quite an unsettling experience. The paintings and drawings pursue a poetic potential of natural history that is inherent in the practice of collecting and scientific research: the accompanying desire to revivify the mass of dead animals which were categorized and to create a self-declaratory communion with the animals.
Text by Nikola Imre

37 The Materiality of Painting and the Suffering Animal
André Krebber looks at the work of Zhonghao Chen in which the relationship between material and content, meat and decay is explored through painting. In this particular instance, Krebber focuses on a series dedicated to paintings of chicken for the purpose of highlighting the relevance and currentness of painting in human-animal studies debates.
Text by Zhonghao Chen & André Krebber

46 Picturing the Pig in Pork and Porky
I had recently offered a feature on animals in children’s film, and decided to work up an article on pigs in the cinema – well, not actually in the cinema – but on the big screen. I wanted to consider a selection of “family” feature films, and the familiar blind spot between the affectionate pig tales produced in the cut and splice of the editing suite, and those rendered in the slicing and dicing at the deli counter.
Text by Jane D’Sullivan

50 Two by Two
July 10, 2007. A procession of black-clad figures in animal masks parades down Bourke Street mall. Giraffes, elephants, pigs, wolves – or what passes for them – follow Noah through central Melbourne, much to the delight or dismay of passersby. Their white-bearded leader encourages them along in booming voice, staff in one hand and stereo in the other. After all, the animal apocalypse needs a soundtrack, too.
Text by Matthew Chrulew

55 Two Characters in Search of a Title
Collaborations between artists have been a part of the process of making art since art first started being made. Whether at a lower level of the conceptual and creative process, when many of the contributing artists should more rightly be described as assistants rather than real participants, or at a higher level, when a balance of the work and creativity is evident, there have been many examples of art produced by two or more people that have benefited from multiple insights and inputs.
Text by Scott Canterreas-Koterbay

62 The Neo-Pop Animal
Mohamed Kahouadji was born in Algeria in 1979. He has two-headed passion, being painter and house surgeon. By night, he’s a passionate painter spending the remainder of his time creating vibrant neo-pop inspired works. The work of Mohammed Kahouadji oscillates between humor and irony. Constantly playing with the famous personalities from our society—rock stars, politicians, cartoon characters, but still these paintings are never mere caricatures, let alone the mechanical reproduction of a situation.
Images by Julian Mohamed Kahouadji

66 Heads or Tails: Gericault’s Horses and Painting of (Natural) History
The horse, it might beclaimed, is one the few, if not the only animal who has, throughout the ages, been deemed worthy of historical representation. In visual records of assistants rather than real participants, or at a higher level, when a balance of the work, and creativity is evident, there have been many examples of art produced by two or more people that have benefited from multiple insights and inputs.
Text by Kari Weil

82 Border Crossings
Border Crossings crosses ornatic disciplines of painting and poetry. In the process lines are blurred between the conscious and subconscious, and ultimately between others and self. What began as me creating a series of paintings in response to particular poems has led to writing poems in response to each painting, creating a cycle rather than series. The paintings themselves are a combination of layered Venetian plaster, poured acrylics and India inks. The poured bodies themselves resemble rivers and maps. What seemed to be a simple exercise has become an exploration of not only my connection to those creatures, but also to the multiplicity and essence of who I am.
Text and Images by Patricia J. Goodrich
Walton Ford uses the visual language of early naturalists to comment on the various ways in which humans see animals and birds through their own cultural lenses. That includes the perspective of the scientists themselves, their interpretation of fauna to mass audiences, and the formidable legacy of their ideas on subsequent generations. Some of Ford’s sources have been primate dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York with their patriarchal and traditionally gender-based organization; the illustrations of Audubon with their sometimes manic qualities (as if verging on the moralizing anthropomorphic tales of Aesop, Beatrix Potter, or J. J. Grandville), and western settings for the display of exotic, geographically displaced creatures willfully pried from their natural habitat for the edification of the west.

The intensive detail of the creatures he renders and a frequent tendency towards life-size scale make Ford’s recent watercolors and related prints nearly as riveting as one might imagine a first-time close-up encounter with a stuffed gorilla for the uninitiated and appear to take on the history of specimen display. On closer inspection, secondary creatures or activities also claim our attention, with a hint of dark narrative. Animals and birds might be beset by other creatures or engaged in destructive behavior within a species group. Because many of Ford’s creatures are now extinct, there has been a tendency to interpret his work as a strident chastisement of human destruction of habitat. In fact, his works are far more complex than that: Some of his prints and watercolors complicate received ideas about nature and the scientist–heroes that have shaped our understanding of natural history, some suggest alternative scenarios for creatures that defy our expectations, and still others are metaphors for human foibles.

Ford has been most interested in naturalist–artists whose illustrations recognize a hostile nature, the case with Edward Lear or Audubon. La historia me absolverá (hand-colored etching with aquatint and drypoint, 1999) features the now extinct small Cuban macaw which disappeared in the middle of the nineteenth century. Perched on a broken branch and peering over a shoulder from an oblique angle as if to maximize the impact of its spectacular appearance, it immediately
La Historia Me Absolverá

Walton Ford
La Historia Me Absolverá, 1999, six color hardground and softground etching, aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint on Somerset Satin paper, Edition of 50, 44 x 30 inches, 111.8 x 76.2 cm, Courtesy the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery
 evoke the classic Victorian “bird–and–branch” illustrations employed by many early ornithologists and perhaps more specifically the book of rare parrots Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots (1830—32) that launched Edward Lear’s career. Lear was one of the first to work from captive live models rather than specimens, but the allusion to native habitat is reminiscent of Audubon. Yet closer inspection reveals not so much details of tropical flora, but a series of traps and snares. Like Lear’s most celebrated parrot “Red and Yellow Macaw” (Scarlet Macaw), Ford’s similarly colored variant of the genus ara cannily eyes the viewer as if revived from extinction and considering a strategy to escape the hunt. Cursive script suggests the tendency of both Audubon and Lear to make personal notes on color and landscape in early stages of illustration, but this text partly reads “…woe to the misguided creature that dares to test [their] efficacy…”, which comes from W. Hamilton Gibson’s Camp Life in the Woods and the Tricks of Trapping of 1881 (originally published as The Complete American Trapper in 1876). Revealing a still dense nature where clever traps could result in heaps of skins, feathers, and food, the guide for woodsmen followed a late American frontier mentality. Further text beside the macaw suggests that Ford’s doomed bird is a personification of Castro, the “red” dictator, a would–be victim of numerous attempts at assassination. The title of the work is a reference to Castro’s famous statement, “History will Absolve Me”, before being jailed in 1953 (later released and until recently president of Cuba). A final inscription refers to the American naturalist Thomas Barbour, author of Birds of Cuba and self–declared “devoted friend of the land [of Cuba] and its people” who makes mention of a missing specimen from Havana of one of the last of the Cuban macaws.

While the parrot has long fascinated humans by their brilliant plumage, longevity, cleverness, and ability to imitate human speech, the ibis was tied to human culture though its mythological, sacred status. In Compromised (hand–colored etching with aquatint and drypoint, 2003) a Sacred and Glossy Ibis from different genera (Threskiornis aethiopicus and Plegadis falcinellus respectively) interlock in an impossibly placed thrust of heads and legs. Such acts of violence with sharp–focus detail are frequent in Audubon’s work as in plate seven from Birds of America (1827—38) where two red–tailed hawks engage in bloody combat over a hare. Both ibises once populated the shores of the Nile, but their geographical histories changed in the nineteenth century. The light–colored Sacred Ibis, formerly venerated and even mummified by the dozens through its association with the god Thoth, disappeared from Egypt over a century ago. Ironically, individuals kept as pets in Europe subsequently formed feral populations there and are currently considered a damaging invasive species that has decimated populations of terns, egrets, and even cattle. The Glossy Ibis is thought to have expanded its territory beyond Africa to South America in the nineteenth century. Their ranges and migratory routes were changing even as Victorian adventure–seekers like Alexander Kinglake, referred to through a quote on the print, were undertaking dangerous travel routes through Egypt. Fear of the plague brought by those on long–distance journeys could result in the same ruthless termination of life (as in being instantly shot for breaking quarantine laws noted by Kinglake in a text that appears on Compromised) as habitat competition among kindred species. Unlike the Cuban macaw, the Sacred and Glossy Ibis have ultimately survived through changing their circumstances.

In the nineteenth century, populations of passenger pigeons were so dense and fecund that their eventual extinction was unthinkable, a fact alluded to in Visitation (hand–colored etching with aquatint and drypoint, 2004) and Falling Bough (watercolor and gouache, 2002). In Falling Bough the “bird–and–branch” genre becomes a nightmare of over population and self–destruction as a packed branch of passenger pigeons hurtles to earth. In Visitation pigeons blanket a field strewn with corn, hazelnuts, acorns, and fruit, gorge themselves, and
Walton Ford
Compromised, 2002, six color hardground and softground etching, aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, drypoint on Somerset Satin paper, Edition of 50, 44 x 30 inches, 111.8 x 76.2 cm, Courtesy the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery
appear to die by the dozens. Both works refer to Audubon’s experience of having witnessed billions of migrating pigeons at one time in the fall of 1813. Quoted at the top of the image are the words of colonist Thomas Dudley, seventeenth-century governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who, upon seeing a seemingly endless migrating flock of passenger pigeons that blackened the sky, wrote “What it portends I know not.” Having just written about his small colony’s harrowing experiences of survival in the new world, Dudley’s superstitious fears would ultimately be resolved in the direction of white territorial expansion and the destruction of habitats of both Native Americans and the once plentiful passenger pigeon. In the lower center of Visitation one pigeon feeds another with an impossible cornucopia of food, a direct allusion to plate sixty-two of Bird of America in which a female passenger pigeon fills the beak of a male. While the grotesque world of overwhelming numbers and plenty is not apparent in the Audubon illustration in which only two birds appear, Ford's image is closer to Audubon's written description, “Whilst feeding, their avidity is at times so great that in attempting to swallow a large acorn or nut, they are seen gasping for a long while as if in the agonies of suffocation. On such occasions, when the woods are filled with these Pigeons, they are killed in immense numbers, although no apparent diminution ensues.” Ford has noted an allegorical aspect of this image is that humans tend to blame victims for their own destruction.

Some ornithologists preferred not specimen–like images that filled the picture plane or scenes of violence, but a peaceable, domesticated representation of fowl as is the case with John Gould. While Ford’s The Tale of Johnny Nutkin (hand–colored etching with aquatint and drypoint, 2001) has perhaps a point of departure in an illustration like that by Joseph Wolf and H.C. Richter of an eagle owl who presents a small, dead creature as a meal for trusting offspring that claim the foreground of a plate for Gould’s Birds of Britain (1862—73), Ford’s owl takes anthropomorphism into the realm of stories for children. With one eye swollen and having just been startled into dropping the intended meal, squirrels distract the adult, and one of their own kind approaches the nest of the as yet unsuspecting offspring. While Beatrix Potter’s Victorian animal story which provides the title is a moral tale of respect for hierarchical order (the owl bites off the squirrel’s tale to teach it a lesson), Ford’s print suggests a different scenario where many small creatures in a united group effort appear to be capable of toppling the mighty. Featuring a Barred Owl with one wing lifted to reveal the stripes and soft edges of each individual feather, the print also recalls Audubon’s own Barred Owl from Birds of America, which not only is in a similar animated posture, but incorporates a squirrel which it closely inspects. The squirrel, a late addition and originally a separate painting, appears to “grin” at the owl, seemingly
unconcerned with its approach. As dusk approaches in Ford’s print, events may actually be about to change. Audubon wrote of the relationship of the barred owl and the squirrel, “I have observed that the approach of a squirrel intimidated [the barred owl] if one of these animals accidentally jumped on to a branch close to them, although the owl destroys a number of them during the twilight. It is for this reason that I have represented the Barred Owl gazing in amazement at one of the squirrels placed only a few inches from him.”

Ford began his natural history studies based on a childhood fascination with Audubon’s illustrations and writings. As a mature artist he found in this celebrated and well-known French–American scientist along with other naturalist–illustrators a valid entry into a discourse with historical representations of nature. His many subsequent paintings of mammals never displaced his fascination with ornithology; Ford continues to regard this branch of naturalism as one of the most vital sources of his work.

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