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They Speak For the Animals, and Through Them

by Edward M. Gomez
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YEARS ago Dr. Dolittle boasted that he could talk to the animals. Today scientists clone them. Meanwhile, greeting cards, children's books, cartoons and pet food commercials tend to romanticize subjects that purr, bark, chirp or roar. They draw from — or impose on — animals an aura of noble innocence. Even well-meaning eco-activists use cute images of pandas to help sell the causes of protecting the environment and saving endangered species.

By contrast, as each day's headlines remind us, humans lost their innocence, real or imagined, a long time ago. Bolstered by religious teachings that grant them dominion over lesser life forms and emboldened by scientific discoveries that have revealed the secrets of life's physical substance itself, humans have built, battled and polluted their way into a quandary, often endangering animals as well as themselves.

But who speaks for the animals? The answer is an increasing number of contemporary artists working in a diverse range of media — or so the exhibition "Symbols of Survival: Images of Animals in Recent Sculpture" suggests.

The show, which opened on Tuesday and runs through Dec. 23 at the Dorsky Gallery in SoHo, features sculptures by 18 well- known and emerging artists, including Gillian Jagger, Christy Rupp, David Mach, Leslie Enders Lee, Sarah McEneaney and Kiki Smith. Their creations may be seen as extensions of a recent postmodern trend in which artists have used the human body as a "site" for metaphorical or literal considerations of politics, history or spiritual themes. Now it is the animals' turn. They are serving as springboards to contemplation of a spirituality that might be called their own or of a spiritual connection that may be sensed between us and them.

"I think sometimes artists may want to distance themselves a bit from ideas that are very intense, especially regarding the environment, so they may pick an animal to carry the theme," said Margaret Mathews- Berenson, who organized the Dorsky Gallery show with Michael Klein. Ms. Mathews- Berenson is a former director of the Drawing Society in New York and a longtime independent curator; Mr. Klein was an independent curator in New York and now lives in Seattle, where he is in charge of Microsoft's corporate art collection.

"We've been seeing more and more animal imagery in art," said Mr. Klein, recalling his background research for the show, which he began developing a few years ago. "Maybe it has to do with artists' maturing and looking beyond themselves, getting older and becoming more interested in their relationship with nature, especially urban- based artists."

If an urban-pastoral subtheme can be detected in some of the works he and Ms. Mathews-Berenson have selected, so can a penchant for aestheticizing an animal's personality or ineffable essence. In doing so, some artists in the show transform their materials in striking ways.

HOUSEHOLD safety matches with tips in various colors were used by Mr. Mach to fashion the imposing head of his recent "Saber Tooth Tiger." Ms. Lee makes sheets of copper appear as supple as origami paper in "War Horse" (1998); in this wall-mounted piece's few gentle folds of metal, she creates an abstracted equine head.

And Ms. McEneaney used ceramic and casein to honor three long-limbed cats in languorous poses in "Sam," "Stanley" and "Topaz," three related sculptures made in 1998.

These works evoke the raw power, grace or unaffected dignity of animal life, much of which is absent in a city dweller's limited or antagonistic contact with ambassadors of the wild like cockroaches, rats and pigeons. But "Symbols of Survival" also features works that more directly call attention to what their makers recognize as the unmistakable vulnerability of both wild and domesticated animals in our time. And there is nothing cute about the conditions to which they allude. The sculptures by Ms. Jagger and Ms. Rupp offer emblematic examples of this point of view.

"What I connect with in animals is their muteness, their pathos that seems very pure; they have no guile," Ms. Jagger said during a recent interview at her spacious studio on the top floor of an old dairy barn in Ulster County in upstate New York. "In referring to animals, I don't make up something heroic about them. I find it in them. They know something. It's in their growth, in their not giving up, in their somehow surviving even when they get crowded out."

Ms. Jagger, who moved to the United States from Britain decades ago and shows her work at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in SoHo, primarily uses found materials from farm fields and rural woods. To make her assemblages, which are of theater-set scale, she hauls large sections of fallen trees into her studio, as well as rusty, castoff bits of farm equipment like old dairy cow stanchions, whose ominous, spiky forms bring to mind the painful way such devices confine animals to their stalls.

Ms. Jagger's art emerges from her placement and limited alteration of her materials — a daub of red paint here, a saw cut there — in arrangements that can seem at once decidedly monumental and surprisingly delicate, despite their roughness and heft. Sometimes held up by heavy chains that dangle from the ceiling, they exude a raw, outdoorsy energy and a whiff of danger.

Given the Dorsky Gallery's limited space, Ms. Jagger is represented by "The Cry" (1997), a small, slightly modified chunk of tree trunk mounted on a stubby iron I-beam. "It resembles a horse's head reaching up, yearning," she said. Ms. Jagger, who teaches sculpture at Pratt Institute and is a visiting critic at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, said "The Cry" reminded her of a church steeple, "with its strong verticality."

Ms. Rupp, who divides her time between Manhattan and a home in Delaware County in upstate New York, gives physical form to the threats that animals face today and that have altered their bodies. Those hazards are often man-made toxic chemicals that enter the atmosphere and can take many generations to decompose. "What's a pesticide like dieldrin look like?" she said. "I try to make something visible that is theoretical. So I literally build a model of the molecular structure of a chemical that is damaging some form of life, and you see it in my sculptures."

Constructed of handmade colored papers applied to metal-rod armatures, her sculptures, like "Dieldrin Molecule + Snail" (1999), offer a perverse and chilling representation of nature's beauty. "Chloroform" (1998-99), which depicts a ghostlike or angelic double emerging from an endangered frog's suffering body, is a vivid portrait of a dying creature's evanescent transformation.

Ultimately, Mr. Klein suggested, representing animals and trying to convey a sense, through art, of how they exist in their environment or contend with it may be a subject that comes easily to artists. "After all," he said, "we all watch animals, and they don't mind if we watch them — how they move, how they live, how they die. Maybe it's a metaphor for us." Then he recalled his reaction when, in the course of his research for this show, he encountered a group of bobbing, sometimes pushy penguins at a zoo. "It was like being in a crowd at an art opening," he said. "I felt right at home."

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