



Animals as Allegory

2 February – 9 April 2006

Teachers' Resource

Exhibition Concept

Animals as Allegory considers how artists employ animals or animal motifs metaphorically within their work as symbols for larger concerns. From artists who draw on Dutch and Spanish still life traditions to taxidermy used to investigate culture and the environment, to artists exploring folk tales and metaphorical stories, the exhibition celebrates the variety of ways contemporary artists are transforming and reconsidering historical ideas about nature and the natural world. The exhibition draws on the QUT Art Collection as well as works by contemporary Australian artists, and features a variety of mediums including photography, painting, taxidermy and sculpture.

Artists include: Marian Drew, Maria Fernanda Cardoso, Joachim Froese, Sharon Green, Lucy Griggs, Pamela Mei-Leng See, Dennis Nona, Kenneth Thaiday Snr, Louise Weaver and Michael Zavros.

Themes

Across the exhibition there are a number of sub-themes, including:

- still life
- taxidermy and animal specimens
- cross-cultural stories, indigenous stories and folk tales

Across these sub-themes interesting relationships occur between works which draw on domestic animals, wild animals or insects. Insects are often viewed as trivial and inconsequential within our daily lives, and yet they too have an important role within the natural order of the world. A number of artists, such as Joachim Froese, utilise insects within their work to explore grandiose ideas. Further, numerous artists employ wild animals which are usually viewed in zoos or aquariums and thus surrounded by a certain exoticism. This presents an interesting contrast with the natural world featured in Marian Drew's photographs, which draw upon flora and fauna familiar to most Australians.

Looking at the Overlooked

Moral Tales and Still Life

While still life and moral tales have been overlooked and considered outmoded throughout the twentieth century, recent years have seen a revival of still life reworked in contemporary forms by a number of prominent Australian artists, most notably Ricky Swallow, who represented Australia at the Venice Biennale 2005.



There is a lineage of artists throughout art history who have utilised animals and the natural world to indirectly relay allegorical stories, often with ethical undertones. Moral tales were particularly prevalent in the Dutch and Spanish still life tradition, where animals, fruits and flora were depicted to convey various notions including abundance, greed, wisdom and mortality. Further, animals appeared in Renaissance painting as metaphors for many subjects, including innocence, longevity and wealth.

Artists such as Graeme Peebles, Marian Drew and Joachim Froese draw on a long tradition of *natura morte*, or still life, using animals and fruits as metaphors for humanity, mortality and existence. Froese adapts the historical Dutch still life tradition of rhopography (the study of trivial things) in his contemporary photography. Employing insects and decaying fruit, Froese sets up theatrical tableaux that speak about humanity and the cycle of life and death.



Top: Marian Drew, *Possum with five birds* (2003), archival pigment ink jet printed onto cotton paper. Sheet 72 x 90cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Joachim Froese, *Rhopography #15* (2000), Three silver gelatin photographs, selenium toned. Each sheet 35 x 29cm. Collection of Black Tie Productions.

Michael Zavros takes up the themes of abundance, excess, wealth and greed through his photo realistic paintings of Onagadori, a rare bird similar to chickens. However, unlike their common cousins, Onagadori are prized for their extravagant non-moulting tail feathers that can reach up to 12m in length. Zavros comments, "Onagadori have links with the myth of the Phoenix, a bird prized for its feathers' magical properties, and they were often given to the [Japanese] Emperor as a living ornament, much like a bonsai. Perfected creatures, these birds are both genetic anomalies and elaborate follies and are still bred in parts of Japan and Europe... These birds are decadent ornaments; decoration for the sake of decoration."



In a similar vein, Sharon Green investigates decadence in human history. One series of photographic work shot in Europe focuses on baroque interiors, with *Red birdie* in particular focused on baroque wallpaper and its use of oriental birds and plant life to signify the 'exotic'. Green has also employed live and taxidermy animals in her photographic exploration of the 'fallen woman' as a figure that occurs throughout history from Eve forth.



Top: Michael Zavros, *Forever* (2005), oil on board, 18 x 28cm. Private collection.

Bottom: Sharon Green, *Red birdie* (2003) From the Jeleni Studio Residency, C-type photograph, 125 x 125cm. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Manton Art.

Taxidermy and Animal Specimens



The customary goal of taxidermy is to make animals look as lifelike as possible. Works which employ taxidermy or lifeless animals encourage us to look at the natural world at a remove, and suspend our disbelief to view the subjects as full of vitality and life. Taxidermy is an archaic art predominantly based in Europe, with little focus in Australia. There is a certain kitsch, yet abject quality to taxidermy, which lends a strange air to people's fascination with the art. Further, while traditional taxidermy itself remains relatively unpractised in Australia, a number of artists are reworking the technique in a new context with contemporary means. Louise Weaver works against the reality of taxidermy through the inclusion of obviously unnatural features, such as bright colours and sequin accessories. Weaver's works simultaneously repulse and attract the viewer, for they have a certain grotesque history, whilst engaging notions of glamour. Weaver presents these glamorised animals as metaphors for transformation, evolution and the state of the environment.



Top: Louise Weaver, *Squirrel* (2003), synthetic fibre, cotton, polyester, textile paint and enamelled aluminium over high density foam, 42 x 16 x 8cm. Private collection.

Bottom: Maria Fernanda Cardoso, *Butterfly drawing* (2004), synthetic polymer paint, archival butterflies, Perspex and metal, 122 x 122cm. Winner, 2004 Conrad Jupiters Art Prize. Gold Coast City Art Gallery Collection.

Stories and Folk Tales across Cultures

A number of artists employ animals within larger narratives from fairy tales to folk stories. Lucy Griggs in her 'Willow' series works cross-culturally, depicting the Asian love story drawn from the blue and white style Willow china, where two forbidden lovers are transformed into doves. The Willow pattern was imported into England from China in the late 18th century and has been in production in varying forms ever since. By depicting a traditional Chinese story that has been appropriated into Western culture Griggs' raises questions of cultural ownership. Similarly Pamela Mei-Leng See investigates the different readings of the same animal in two cultures: Australian and Chinese. See's work *Cane Toad Dreaming* (2005) plays with the symbology of the cane toad which is an auspicious symbol in China but a definitive pest in Australia.



Charles Blackman in his work *Hi diddle-diddle the cat and the fiddle* depicts characters from the title's well-known rhyme. By comparison, Madeleine Kelly's paintings appear to illustrate historical myths, but are actually metaphorical constructions of the artist. For example, the deer in her works represents water, often quenching literal fire that symbolises the fires of consumer culture.

Indigenous works from the collection present another way artists utilise animals as metaphors to convey meaning. Works by artists such as Dennis Nona *Awai tithuyil (The pelican constellation)*, Djambawa Marawili and George Milpurrruru depict traditional stories or employ animals to exemplify the importance of the natural world to Indigenous life. For example Marawili's *Gany'tjurr ga balin at Burraltja (Heron and skinny fish at Burraltja)* incorporates a sacred clan design with balin (burramundi) a totemic fish of the area.



Top left: Madeleine Kelly, *Hydration tactic* (2003) oil on gesso board. Private collection.

Top right: Pamela Mei-Leng See, *Cane Toad Dreaming*, detail (2005) paper, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Heiser Gallery.

Bottom: George Milpurrruru, *Magpie geese* (1994) colour screenprint, edition 39/99. Sheet 80.5 x 120.5cm. Purchased 1999. QUT Art Collection