Beasts of England/Beasts of Ireland
VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art, Carlow
Sarah Hayden

Setting 24 works by 11 artists within the main gallery, Stephen Brandes has curated a remarkably coherent exhibition at the VISUAL. Beasts of England/Beasts of Ireland stages an interrogation of animalhood which eschews both the ecstasies of Romanticism and the easy handwringing of Ecopolitics. Instead, it solicits contemplation of four focalizing concepts: the interpenetration of humans and animals within a shared environment; our historic and ongoing conscription of these beasts into our activities, iconographies and imaginaries; the contractual obligations this confers upon humanity and, lastly, the abiding ineffability of the animal condition.

Presiding over the immense VISUAL space, Ben Long’s Horse Scaffolding Sculpture (2013) conjures airy grace from an immense solidity of paint-spattered steel and aluminium. Riderless and unsaddled, the horse rears in a display of unencumbered exuberance. A similar concern with monumental equine iconography haunts the paintings of Djordje Ozbolt. An incongruous rhino in Out with the old, in with the new (2012), mimics the classical pose of the sculpted horse in Cortes (2007)—charging forward to topple a statue in an otherwise deserted city square.

Isabel Nolan’s wall-hanging consists of a spill of fox-printed fabric beneath which a petticoat of crimson pours over the floor. The title, No One Will Be Spared (2013), has been inscribed in large appliqué letters, cut from another cloth and hand-sewn onto the familial fox clusters. This prophesy of species annihilation is borne by the envoys of a preferred, domesticated species—the letters being printed with fragments of huge cats. One of three works by Nolan on show here, what elevates this piece beyond trite didacticism is its material specificity. The narrow rectangle of serially-printed fabric evokes a small mass-produced bedspread spread over a red sheet; its palette—russet foxes amid pink and yellow flowers on a rich green ground—resonates with the garishness of ’70s interiors; the unhemmed but carefully stitched-on lettering bespeaks earnestness mixed with urgency. In this childhood bed refashioned as oddly affecting protest banner, Nolan appropriates the outraged and uncomprehending moral absolutism permitted only to children to expose as obscene the arbitrary hierarchies contrived by adults to divide those animal species we slaughter from those we pamper.

Martin Healy’s two C-prints from his 2006 series, The Sleep of Reason, depict a pair of birds of prey, each of which is isolated in high definition on a black ground. The hoods that enable and symbolize their indenture absorb the camera’s attention—inviting us to luxuriate in the glossy detail of fine-tooled leatherwork. Although the photos initially appear very similar, the differences between them generate an unsettling dissonance. Whereas—to the compulsively anthropomorphizing eye—one bird holds itself in an attitude of imperious dignity, the posture adopted by its counterpart is positively craven. Together, the behooded duo convey contrary perspectives on their shared bondage. Without any real philosophy of the animal mind, our knowledge of human-
animal interaction derives from a mix of behaviouristic observation and solipsistic guesswork. In these pieces, Healy invites us to meditate on a discourse still polarized by narratives of cross-species enslavement and cross-species collaboration.

Dan Hayes’ _Picture Box_ (2013) refers back to his _Guinea Pig_ series of the 1990s. Picturing an empty guinea pig cage tightly bounded by the perimeter of the canvas, the painting enacts a virtuoso splicing of precisionist realism and polychromatic illusionism. In the absence of the rodent it was designed both to incarcerate and protect, the empty box generates a surrogate content: a shimmering lenticular display. In this technical exploration of constrained form and redundant function, a once-useful cage is transfigured into a purely aesthetic object which, while still doomed to evoke the memory of the absent animal, realizes itself anew as a scintillating picture box.

In _Picking Progress to Pieces_ (2013), Polly Morgan remakes an _Untitled_ Sol LeWitt sculpture from 1989. To reconstruct LeWitt’s white openwork towers, taxidermist-artist Morgan has deployed 2,428 delicately flesh-painted crow femurs. The curiously resonant piece interrogates the original object’s denial of the hand and insistence on modular repetition; Morgan’s hyper-organic edifice summons not only the bodies of 1,214 crows but the corporeal acts of severing, plucking and boiling required to render down clean bones from dead birds. Owing to the fantastic regularity of its osteal components, the piece is at once an aesthetically compelling paean to LeWitt’s serial doctrine and a playfully macabre rebuke to its sterility.

Three untitled works by Alex Rose (2010), displayed at ground level, draw the eye down and the mind toward a consideration of less visceral processes. Combining images of horses and boys—fragments pulled from divers dimensions and divested of any relational congruency—these composite photographs evoke the memory’s impossible feats of suturing, conflation and dislocation. The precise, clean treatment of each separate element, whether equine of human, imbues the work with a melancholic charge which is only enhanced by the distressed grounds and the fragments of organic matter overlaying these formally eloquent collages. Via his deconstruction and recombination of two strains of affect-laden imagery, Rose produces an unsettling evocation of aesthetic consolation derived from tender rituals of recollection and psychic dissection.

Stephen McKenna’s contribution most fully represents the last of the show’s four animating concerns. Each of his four oil paintings depicts a single, static animal. Pictured in profile or three-quarter view, McKenna’s subjects seem to shrink concertedly from our gaze. Only _Bran_ (2011), the avid-eyed wolfhound, appears oblivious to his position as subject of the portrait. The donkey in _Narcissus_ (1999) is not, as his namesake would have it, gazing upon his own lake-bound reflection, but standing sidelong on its bank, his eyes cast down in a betrayal of what from both _Heron_ (2002-11) and the self-silencing _Young Gorilla_ (2012) we can only read as shame. McKenna’s animals, unlike Derrida’s cat, apprehend their own nakedness and, when forced to sit for the portraitist (and, eventually, for his complicit audience), they twist in agonized awareness of their own animal subjectivity.

Frances Upritchard’s three sculptures, _Mask Monkey, Ug Monkey_ and _Sniffing Stoat Monkey_ (all 2009) elicit a similar discomfort. Lumps of milky glass occupy their sightless eye sockets; desiccated muzzles sprout patches of hair and yellowed teeth in plaster-pink gums. Most distressingly, the fur stretched across their misshapen frames has been reclaimed from old coats, their hands and feet from old leather gloves. Finding ourselves in the company of this trio of remade creatures, we are assailed by the unpalatable logic of their bodily reappropriations. Nearby, Garret Phelan’s _Bloody Mynahs_ (Series 3, 2012) spreads arboreally across one corner of the gallery. His drawings depict a flock of birds in pen, ink and pencil; impersonators of human voices whose feet grip not branches but bleeding human hands. Yuriy Norshteyn’s animated film, _Hedgehog in the Fog_ (1975), references the cross-cultural traditions of peopling children’s stories with animal figures. Situated among so many disconcerting representations of animality, the hedgehog stands in for a bestiary of other comfortably humanistic non-human protagonists.
In his catalogue essay, Stephen Brandes identifies the source for the exhibition title in *Animal Farm*, writing: ‘One might be mistaken, given the title, in thinking that this is a show about the political relationship between two countries. It is not...it’s an exhibition about animals, though wider political implications arise in some of the works.’ While it might, indeed, mislead some prospective viewers, Brandes’ Orwellian borrowing successfully primes us to be attentive to the wide and powerful implications of this show as a whole. It prepares us for an encounter with a politics that transcends the cross-national to address the ripe problematics of cross-species interchange.

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