

BUZZES AND CHIRPS

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ZOO LOGIC

LAKE GEORGE ARTS PROJECT, COURTHOUSE GALLERY, THROUGH AUG. 14

ANIMALS ARE EVERYWHERE: AS PETS, on the grass margins of our highways, and as meat on a dinner plate. Over the past few decades, theorists from Peter Singer to Donna Haraway have convincingly argued that how we relate to animals is crucially important morally. Many have pointed out that we humans are also animals. Artists have always been fascinated by animals' beautiful and varied forms, and increasingly, animals have taken a central place in art, often as symbols of environmental crisis.

Lake George Arts Project tackles animal themes for a second time—their first show about animals, *Zoo: Artists Look at Animals*, was in 2005—and this new incarnation is a mostly successful look at some of the issues raised by those furry, scaly, and crawly creatures in our midst. It's also a showcase of some impressive talents. It's a bit of an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink show, as curator and the Project's director Laura Von Rosk explained: It morphed, from an

annual call for submissions, into something bigger when she discovered the animal theme.

With our anthropomorphizing of animals as cute cuddly likenesses in popular movies like *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* and now, God help us, *G-Force* (with talking guinea pigs), it's difficult to get at anything resembling their truth, and different artists take varied approaches to the problem. Some make use of irony, as with Adelaide Paul, whose fascinating porcelain sculptures (here a small pink dog on a heart-shaped pillow, *Bitch II*, and an untitled standing horse) are often covered in stitched leather, and Mary Kenny, whose small mounted animal heads bring to mind taxidermy and toy animals. Both are thought-provoking, although they don't



Dreamworld: a still from Chalmers' *Safari*.

approach the apocalyptic animal rights visions of, for example, Sue Coe.

Also darkly ironic are David Isele's four wonderfully wacky, sinister boxes posing animals as daffy constructs. In his *Making Ducks* (2007), ducklings are yellow dime-store puffballs framed by tree bark; in *A Dinosaur Goes to the Museum* (2007), a cartoon dinosaur visits its metal-boned forbears. The overall effect is like a box Joseph Cornell might make after taking acid and watching *Night at the Museum*.

Related to these gestures of the absurd, animals are objects of fantasy in Amy Ross's surreal watercolor collages of "bird-shrooms" (birds with the heads of mushrooms, realistically rendered). And three masterful paintings by Patricia Bellan-Gillen explore animal symbology: in *Stealing God*, a gorgeous white monkey floats on an equine inner tube, while in *Crossing/After Patinir* (2008), Renaissance-styled saints row a boat on a textured sea of smoky pinks alongside turtles with torches on their backs.

Still in a dream world, but taking a turn for the more conflicted, are Jason Bronner's small nightscapes of snarling canids and Andrew Johnson's collaged images of gazelles confronting helicopters. Here we get glimpses of animality—a quality of violence we think of as coming from the beasts but which might be just as much human. Beauty and terror were most satisfyingly embodied in videos from Catherine Chalmers' superior American Cockroach project: Cockroaches

survive in *Gas Chamber*, while *Safari* plunges viewers underwater to watch a white frog devour a bug whole—the camera is so close, we can almost feel the frog's digestive processes begin. The soundtrack (cockroaches whisper and giggle; antennae beat like drums) enhances the effect.

Others approach the subject of animal life with Zen-like reverence: Catherine Hamilton's ink drawings of a rabbit and a squirrel are so whispery-soft and precisely realized you could easily think they were in pencil. Similarly, Barbara Moody's charcoal drawings of goats (*Moving On*, 2008) and rabbits (*Should We?* 2007), would be at home in a lushly printed children's book, while Ann Lovett's close-up color photographs, framed by ocular circles fading to black, evoke, somewhat heavy-handedly, vanishing species. Reet Das' beautifully detailed 80-inch wide collages of anatomical hearts and a skeleton intertwined with rats, woodpeckers, and schools of fish argue for human-animal interdependence.

With 15 artists jostling for attention in one room, unevenness is inevitable. And without wall text, context is often lost: Looking at Deborah Brown's oil paintings, for example, you might not know they're part of a larger series envisioning animals in places that used to be their habitats. A video from Michael Pestel's Ornithology Series, in which he creates music for and with birds, needed more background. While it's less provocative than it might be, given that the exhibition tries to do several things at once (please a popular audience, showcase contemporary artists, think about animals), it does an admirable job. ■