



NEW YORK SEATTLE



Section: Art & Museums

Hear from the animals at TAM exhibit

ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI; Staff writer

It may start very innocuously with horses, but by the time “The Secret Language of Animals” gets around to giant squirrels on glass nails and elephants as sex symbols it’s starting to say a whole lot more.

The newest exhibition at Tacoma Art Museum, organized by the museum and pulled largely from its own collection, is not just fun eye candy – it also delves deep into symbolism, aesthetics and human nature.

First, the horses. This extensive exhibition is in two separated galleries, and it’s good to start with the least complicated. In the museum’s lowest-level gallery is the part of “Animals” that’s just too big to fit into the rest – three gorgeous horse sculptures by Deborah Butterfield, paralleled by historic horse images.

Butterfield not only captures the external power and grace of these animals, she describes the complex internal bone and muscle structure using woven (bronze) branches or intricately welded found steel. “Uha’Ula’Ula” rolls delightfully on the gallery floor while “Maluhia” extends a curiously sympathetic neck, and the third untitled horse stands aloof. Life-size or bigger, these sculptures bring to three-dimensional life the historic images near the walls: the tranquil beauty of George Stubbs’ bay, Delacroix’ warlike steeds or the crackling energy of Remington’s bronze horse and rider.

Up the corridor in the large Weyerhaeuser gallery is the rest of the show, popping off the walls with video and streaks of color. The title makes it seem like a children’s show, and it’s true that kids would enjoy it (at least until they come to John Baldessari’s enormous photograph of a dead mouse, perhaps.) But it’s more than just cute animals. Organized succinctly into animal types, the exhibition contrasts historical and contemporary humanity via artwork – a lot of it Northwest-based – that isn’t seen that often.

Winston Wächter Fine Art, Inc.

530 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 **TEL** [212] 255 2718 **FAX** [212] 255 2719 **EMAIL** nygallery@winstonwachter.com www.winstonwachter.com

Winston Wächter Fine Art LLC

203 Dexter Avenue North, Seattle, WA 98109 **TEL** [206] 652 5855 **FAX** [206] 652 5856 **EMAIL** g.gallery@winstonwachter.com www.winstonwachter.com

The historical contrast is most distinct in the cow section. Amid serene pastoral scenes by von Zugel and Birch of cows doing their duty sits Vanessa Renwick's "Longhorn." The nine-second video packs a punch: Renwick's steer gazes directly into the lens, made powerful by the camera's upward angle and the stark snow-and-sky background. The animal's not violent but it is the master, unlike the trudging cows with respectfully lowered eyes. Nods to the painterly tradition of the "peaceable kingdom" come from Elizabeth Sandvig, whose colorful animals have no eyes at all and so mutate into symbols of peace and diversity.

Next comes the dog section, and predictably "Leroy the Pup," TAM's famous cardboard icon by Scott Fife, holds center court. But around him are some interesting comments on the human-canine relationship: William Cummings' haunting black shadow, Maurizio Cattelan's creepily taxidermied Jack Russell, and Fred Muram's clever, stomach-churning video of a man and a dog sharing the same bowl of cereal, with identical slurping sounds. Other sections seem to have their own characteristics, whether by curator Rock Hushka's design or pure coincidence. The birds are, to a feather, absolutely beautiful, whether ethereal botanic watercolors by Justin Gibbens, shining engravings by Audubon or the sweeping series of glass plates by Joey Kirkpatrick and Flora Mace, feathery and liquid at the same time. There's more historical commentary here, as Whistler's nostalgically Impressionistic pigeons are juxtaposed with Malia Jensen's bronze pigeon "Tower," a totem pole to urban life.

The elephant section is, unexpectedly, poetic. Jeffrey Mitchell's elephants either pile up in pillows like tragic corpses or trundle meaninglessly toward the dead-end of a circus. Joseph Park throws a well-aimed dart at contemporary sexuality and aesthetics with his sensuously shadowed elephant in "The Grand Odalisque." Richard Hart's painted commentary on teenage angst, meanwhile – an elephant in the backpack – sets the tone at the show's entrance.

The only really annoying aspect of "Animals" is the sound. Although the country do-or-die song is perfect for the images in Vanessa Renwick's ironic shoot-em-up video "Red Stallion's Revenge," it's incredibly irritating while following you around the gallery. Maybe a partition or lower volume might work here?

The horse theme continues with some beautifully wistful watercolors by Claire Cowie, among others.

But it's the rodent wall that really hits you where it hurts. Costumed mice watching a fellow mouse die in the trap, blown up super-large scale? Thank you, John Baldessari. Mice in a suburban living room watching "Tom and Jerry"? That's Bill Scanga. Kids as rabbits (and what does that say about the parents?) from Joseph Park. And as the final philosophical comment, Erich Woll's fragile, painful sculpture of a glass squirrel reclining on a bed of glass nails, thinking "It's better to Regret Something You Have Done than Something You Haven't Done."

If by this stage you haven't cottoned on, Hushka's spelling it out for you. This show isn't really "The Secret Language of Animals." It's "The Secret Language of Humans," and if you're just there to entertain your kids with a cardboard dog, then you'll get quite a surprise – and a few smiles, too.

Rosemary Ponnekanti: 253-597-8568
rosemary.ponnekanti@ thenewstribune.com

What: "The Secret Language of Animals"

Where: Tacoma Art Museum, 1701 Pacific Ave., Tacoma

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wed.-Sun., 10 a.m.-8 p.m. third Thursday through June 27

Also up: "A Concise History of Northwest Art," "The Movement of Impressionism"

Admission: \$9/\$8/free for five and under, third Thursdays free

Information: 253-272-4258, www.tacomaartmuseum.org

