



BELINDA HARROW *WANT OR NEED*

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BLUE OYSTER GALLERY

DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

SPHINX'S RIDDLE



On the surface, Belinda Harrow's *Want or Need* would seem to merely provide the Oedipal answer to the Sphinx's riddle: "Man is the animal ...". Through simple juxtaposition her paintings suggests that, despite appearances, we

humans are prey to the same base desires and biologic imperatives as the lowly animal. Alternatively, we might also view this work as exploring the way the

human world encroaches upon the animal (thus aligning it with such eco-friendly works as, say, *Watership Down*, *The Plague Dogs*, *The Rats of N. I. M. H.*, *The Incredible Journey*, and *Chicken Run*). But if we think the formation and policing of territorial borders choreographically, then Harrow's placing of human and animal habitats in such close proximity may suggest something far more interesting – an improbable encounter: despite their mutually segregated and frigid movements something passes between the two kingdoms, a fleeting glance or glancing blow...

This "something" may be located in a shared sense of movement. Camper vans, mobile homes, and the receding perceptible line of the temporary housing all imply diasporic movement, an uprooting of sedentary human forms in rhythms synchronous with the nomadic movements of coyotes, bears, bison, rabbits, moose and deer. In one



of the paintings, two trailer homes “copulate” as if by contagion from the coyotes in heat below them. This is the sort of dangerous animal delirium invoked in the opening credits of the otherwise wholesome Disney classic *Escape to Witch Mountain*, where the swarming profiles of animated wild dogs mutate into a series of overlapping and blending abstract lines just as unrecognizable and strange as Harrow’s soft sculpture shapes.

Indeed, in moving from the two dimensional paintings to the three dimensional sculptures, Harrow’s animals would seem to suffer a similar deformation, themselves becoming undulating lines, a convocation of rhythmic silhouettes, faintly gleaming amorphous shapes. The sculpture’s lustrous sheen of black satin cloyingly invites us in as if by animal magnetism. In addition to Disney,

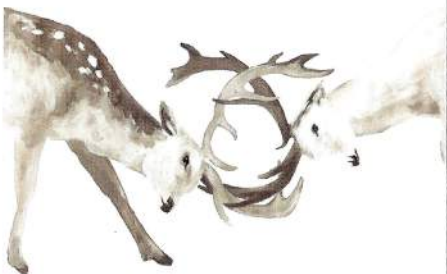
I am reminded also of one of Kafka’s stories: “And what had been so far away was all at once quite near. Jackals were swarming around me, eyes gleaming dull gold and vanishing again, lithe bodies moving nimbly and rhythmically, as if at the crack of a whip.”¹ Kafka, “Jackals and Arabs” *The Complete Short Stories*, 407. Like Kafka’s jackals, Harrow’s erotically charged soft pillow forms trace mutant abstract lines. As sculptural forms they have effectively detached themselves from any imitative or figurative function; they cease to represent the world insofar as they assemble a new type of reality.



Nevertheless, a violent abeyance of this vitalic movement can easily be effected by symbolically assimilating the mating animals into a 'primal scene' scenario, thereby reducing the work itself to a commemorative restaging of (unconscious) human fears and desires. Harrow even seems to suggest such a reading by situating her animal sculptures on a series of chairs, which are, of course, common enough domestic items. Yet the pure animal intensities enacted here effectively resist the metaphysics of anamnesis or recollection, in which the present moment is always put in the service of a prior occasion. By distancing sexuality from the human, Harrow's acrylic renderings of the literal "beast with two backs" depict not 'love making' so much as simple

biological drive, an entirely unsentimental force which at the phylogenetic level functions as a system of productive overflow and expenditure, rather than preservation. The primal scene always labors on behalf of production, not retention or recollection. As Foucault says, life is that which escapes, that which steals away...'

Coital intensity tends to dissolve rather than reinforce the borders of the self, erasing the subject to sketch pure sensation in its place. To reproduce is to lose, forget, or suffer the death of self. This is quite literally the case with certain animal species, although none are featured among these North American species. Still, in moving from the drawings to the sculptures, Harrow's procreating animals undergo a kind of death, morphing into something stranger and more unrecognizable. It has been



suggested that “no art is imitative, no art can be imitative or figurative. Suppose a painter “represents” a bird; this is in fact a becoming-bird that can occur only to the extent that the bird itself is in the process of becoming something else, a pure line and pure color.”² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 304. Thus despite the biographical details, as well as the ease with which we could read this work as social commentary – with instinctive animal behaviors employed for social commentary – something much more subterranean is also at work here.



The answer to the Sphinx’s riddle, “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?” may well be “man is the animal” (man crawls on all fours in infancy, walks upright on two legs in adulthood, and with a cane in old age), but we have yet to fully explore what alien kind of animal man (and woman) may *become* through the art process...



Rupert Wiese

¹Kafka, “Jackals and Arabs” *The Complete Short Stories*, 407.

²Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 304.

***WANT OR NEED:* BELINDA HARROW**

The humanities have expressed a growing fascination in recent years with the world of animals, in particular with the ways in which animal and human life interacts and impinges upon one another. From politically motivated animal rights activism to issues of genetic manipulation and more anthropologically inspired studies in the character of animals, contemporary art practice, like a variety of other disciplines, has looked to the animal as a subject whose study might reveal something of the human condition.

This is certainly true of the work of Christchurch based artist Belinda Harrow. Animals have been a recurring motif in the artist's practice for a number of years now, often used in a symbolic way to suggest liminal psychic spaces and delve into the realm of the unconscious. *Want or Need* however departs slightly from this modus operandi and demonstrates a more explicit interest in the animal, which now functions as a metaphor for human behaviour.

Ten paintings featuring couplings of birds, rabbits, bears, coyote and bison, rendered alongside various kinds of human dwellings adorn the walls of the Blue Oyster Gallery while soft-sculpture animals, displayed on an array of collected chairs, occupy the gallery floor. Caught in the act of copulation, engaged in aggressive rivalry or travelling together in familial groups, these creatures exhibit instinctual behaviours unfettered by convention or social expectation. Harrow's work suggests not so much a mirroring of ourselves in the animal kingdom, but rather gestures toward the way in which





the human has become confined by self imposed codes of conduct and manufactured needs. The raw and intuitive acts of the creatures drawn into Harrow's imagery represent behaviours which are similarly innate to mankind. Unlike the wild animal however, the human performance of these activities is carried out within socially defined parameters. The various forms of human habitation which occupy Harrow's paintings are of course concrete manifestations of the way in which we manipulate and re-create the world according to these conventions. Houses, campervans and mobile homes are structures that mark out our own

private spaces, or territories. These places are deemed appropriate within the social order as 'sites' for mating, and competitive rivalry here assumes the guise of a 'keeping up with the Jones's'.

The stuffed satin animal forms are drawn directly from those which inhabit Harrow's paintings, yet where the painted works offer literal representations of birds and mammals the sculptural pieces have become abstracted silhouette forms that drift into indeterminacy. There is a tantalising ambiguity to these creatures. The residual shapes of antlers or beaks signal the origins of these mutated beasts as indeed residing in the animal world but the specificity of the forms is lost to a peculiar re-figuration in which individual animals are morphed into strange undifferentiated shapes. The chairs which act as pedestals to Harrow's oddly compelling soft-sculptures are again symbols of social structure; man-made objects designed and produced to fulfil a particular human function. Like her graphic works on paper, these three-dimensional works allude to the way in which social rules and social expectation contain human experience and behaviour.

Another important theme in Harrow's oeuvre, which I think also has a strong presence here, is the artist's immigrant identity. Her use of birds and animals suggest ideas of migration or travel, notions of memory, nostalgia and the passing of time. Harrow has explored the problem of 'home' and what it means to live between

places. While perhaps not the driving force behind this newest body of work, there remains nonetheless a distinct sense of Harrow's dislocated identity as a Canadian/New Zealander. The domestic architecture, motor vehicles and animals are uniquely those of North America reminding us of the artist's affiliations with some place other than New Zealand. Notions of impermanence and a transient lifestyle are easily signalled by her renditions of kit-set houses, mobile homes and canoes, or bison and moose

on the move. Perhaps we might also conjecture, then, that Harrow's interest in the animal, the ultimate 'other', is an oblique reference to her own sense of self as being caught between cultures, both New Zealander and Canadian, and yet at the same time neither.

Barbara Garrie



PHOTOGRAPHY: SHAUN WAUGH

ARTIST INFORMATION:

Born: Christchurch, New Zealand, 1971

Educated: BA (Hons) in English, University of Saskatchewan, Canada (1993), BFA Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada (1996), MFA (Distinction) University of Canterbury, New Zealand (2005)

Belinda Harrow is a Canadian New Zealander who has exhibited in Canada, New Zealand and the UK. Harrow has held residencies with the Saskatchewan Arts Board (2002/3 and 2003/4) and the Patrick Alan Fraser Foundation, Scotland (2001). She received the Royal Overseas League Travel Scholarship representing Canada in 2000. Currently, she teaches at the Design and Arts College of New Zealand.