

# SEARS·PEYTON·GALLERY

## NEW YORK·LOS ANGELES

### Shelley Reed

#### CV

##### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 *In Dubious Battle*, Visions West Contemporary, Denver, CO
- 2018 *Second Nature: Shelley Reed*, University of Maine Museum of Art, Bangor, ME
- 2017 *Shelley Reed*, Lux Art Institute, Encinitas, CA
- 2017 *A Curious Nature: Paintings by Shelley Reed*, Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA
- 2016 *Shelley Reed: Up Close*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2015 *Tiger in the Living Room: Work by Shelley Reed*, Beard and Weil Galleries, Wheaton Galleries, Norton College, Norton, MA
- 2015 *In Dubious Battle: Paintings by Shelley Reed*, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, WY
- 2014 *Animal Instinct: Paintings by Shelley Reed*, Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC
- 2013 *Shelley Reed: In Dubious Battle*, Danese/Corey, New York, NY
- 2010 *Something is amiss amidst all this beauty and delight*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2009 *Paintings: Shelley Reed*, Clark Gallery, Lincoln, MA
- 2007 *Shelley Reed*, Gibsone Jessop Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 2007 *Caught in a Net*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA
- 2005 *Golden Age*, Mario Diacono Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1993 Gallery NAGA, Boston, MA
- 1992 Zoe Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1991 Bannister Gallery Rhode Island College, Providence, RI
- 1990 Bess Cutler Gallery, New York, NY
- 1989 Zoe Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1989 Chapel Gallery, Newton, MA

##### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *Winter Selections*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2018 *The Pollinators*, The Cahoon Museum of American Art, Cotuit, MA
- 2018 *High Summer*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2018 *Touchstones, Totems, Talismans: Animals in Contemporary Art*, Brattleboro Museum, Brattleboro, VT
- 2017 *Ref\*er\*enced*, Danese/Corey, New York, NY
- 2017 *We Dream/Beauty Beyond and Beneath*, Suffolk University Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2017 *Animal as Metaphor*, Miller Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA

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- 2017 *Paperwork*, Clark Gallery, Lincoln, MA
- 2016 *Fertile Solitude*, Mills Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2016 *Natural Wonder*, Museum of Art, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH
- 2016 *Drawing Conclusions: Works on Paper*, Danese/Corey, New York, NY
- 2016 *Van Dyck, Rembrandt, and the Portrait Print*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 2013 *Pedigree*, New Art Center, Newton, MA
- 2013 *Still Life Lives*, Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA
- 2012 *Captured: Specimens in Contemporary Art*, Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA
- 2011 *Animal Instinct: Allegory, Allusion, and Anthropomorphism*, Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
- 2011 *A Live Animal*, Root Division, San Francisco, CA
- 2011 *A Debt to Pleasure*, Montserrat College of Art Gallery, Beverly, MA
- 2011 *Achromatic Variations*, Jane Deering Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA
- 2010 *Other as Animal*, Danese Gallery, New York, NY
- 2010 *Black and White*, J. Johnson Gallery, Jackson, FL
- 2010 *Black & White 1918–2010*, Beth Urdang Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2008 *I wonder if you know what it means*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2008 *Free Reign*, Clark Gallery, Lincoln, MA
- 2007 *Other Visions + Strategies*, Jane Deering Gallery, Montecito, CA
- 2007 *Approaches to Narrative*, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA
- 2007 *Ferragosto*, Sears-Peyton Gallery, New York, NY
- 2006 *Going Ape: Confronting Animals in Contemporary Art*, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln MA
- 2006 *Ars Botanica*, Loyolla University Museum of Art, Chicago, IL
- 2006 *Summer Frieze*, Jane Deering Gallery, Gloucester, MA
- 2006 *Artist's Resource Trust Grant Winners*, Trustman Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2005 Ogilvie/Pertl Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2005 *New Faces, New Visions*, Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, MA
- 1998 Starr Gallery, Newton, MA
- 1994 *New England, New Talent*, Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA
- 1993 Boston Center for the Arts, Boston, MA
- 1993 Drawing Center, New York, NY
- 1992 *Boston Master Drawings*, Thomas Segal Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1992 *Post-Modern Baroque: Contemporary Painting and Photography*, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA
- 1992 *Gifts of Compassion*, Miller/Block Fine Art, Boston, MA
- 1991 Zoe Gallery, Boston, MA

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## NEW YORK·LOS ANGELES

- 1991 Bess Cutler Gallery, New York, NY
- 1990 *Flowers*, Harrison Gallery, Boca Raton, FL
- 1990 *Critical Revisions*, Bess Cutler Gallery, New York, NY
- 1990 *Boston 1990: the Sixth Triennial*, Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, MA
- 1990 Chapel Gallery, Newton, MA
- 1990 *Fears and Scruples*, The Arno Maris Gallery, Westfield College, Westfield, MA
- 1989 Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
- 1989 Scollay Square Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1989 Zoe Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1988 Stamford Art Association, Stamford, CT
- 1988 *Future Earth*, University of Massachusetts Medical Center Gallery, Amherst, MA
- 1988 Helio Galleries, New York, NY
- 1988 Viridian Gallery, New York, NY
- 1987 Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA
- 1986 Riverside Studios, London, England
- 1986 Chelsea Manor Street Gallery, London, England
- 1983 *Painters' Progress*, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Boston, MA

### AWARDS

- 2017 Lux Art Institute Residency, Encinitas, CA
- 2015 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant Recipient
- 2015 Berkshire Taconic Artists' Resource Trust Grant
- 2013 SMFA Traveling Fellowship
- 2012 Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship Finalist
- 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant Recipient
- 2005 Maud Morgan Award Boston Museum of Fine Arts
- 2005 Berkshire Taconic Artists' Resource Trust Grant
- 1985 The Winsor and Newton Young Painter Award London England
- 1983 Boit Competition School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston MA

### PUBLIC AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

- The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA
- National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, WY
- Fidelity Investment Corporation, Boston, MA
- Wellington Management Company, Boston, MA
- Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA

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## NEW YORK·LOS ANGELES

Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, MA  
DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA  
Bank of Boston, Boston, MA  
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Artist: Workshop, Austin R. Williams, *Dynamic Theft: Borrowing from Paintings of the Past*, 2012  
100 Boston Painters, Chawky Frenn, Schiffer Publishing, 2012  
Boston Globe, Cate McQuaid, *Present, Evoking the Past*, March 23, 2011  
Harper's Magazine, image on page 25, November 2010  
Arbus, Wesley Grissom, *Back to Black*, September/October 2010  
Empty, Australian Art Magazine, Issue 19, 2010  
Wild Apples, In Praise of Animals, Issue 5, Spring/Summer 2010  
New American Paintings, Open Studios Press, MA 2008  
New American Paintings, Open Studios Press, MA 2006  
Tab, Ed Symkus, *Paint it Black (and White)*, December 1, 2005  
Boston Globe, Cate McQuaid, *Painter Forsakes Color to Contrast Beauty, Emotion*, November 30, 2005  
Boston Globe, Catherine Foster, *Painter takes Morgan Prize*, November 16, 2005  
Boston Globe, Cate McQuaid, *Double Vision*, August 12, 2005  
Art New England, Shirley Jacks, *Women Whose Loves Span the Century*, August/September 1998  
New American Paintings, Open Studios Press, MA, 1996  
Art in America, Miles Unger, *New England: New Talent*, August/September 1994  
Boston Phoenix, Cate McQuaid, *Shows and Tell*, June 3, 1994  
Worcester Phoenix, Leon Nigrosh, *Come Out, Come Out*, April 22, 1994  
New American Paintings, Open Studios Press, MA, 1993  
Boston Globe, Nancy Stapen, *Nature's Role in a Man-Made World; Women in Black, White and Gray*, May 20, 1993  
Lincoln Journal, Marty Carlock, *DeCordova Hosts Baroque and Nudes*, May 7, 1992  
Boston Globe, Nancy Stapen, *New Artists Go for Baroque*, April 30, 1992  
Boston Herald, Joanne Silver, *Artists Find Positive Outlet*, April 24, 1992  
Boston Globe, Nancy Stapen, *Art that Lays Bare the Pain of Loss*, April 10, 1992  
Art New England, Miles Unger, *Boston 1990: The Sixth Triennial*, February, 1991  
The Wayland-Weston Town Crier, Marty Carlock, *Exhibit Features Lush Black Oils*, January 19, 1989  
Boston Globe, Christine Temin, *Reed and Gibson Paint the Familiar, Darkly*, January 19, 1989  
Boston Herald, Joanne Silver, *Artists Develop Old Forms into New and Vibrant Pieces*, January 13, 1989  
Boston Herald, Joanne Silver, *Reed Takes New Look at Old Art*, November 17, 1989

### EDUCATION

1984 School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Diploma, Boston, MA  
1980 Brandeis University, Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, cum laude, Waltham, MA

# SEARS·PEYTON·GALLERY

## NEW YORK·LOS ANGELES

**Shelley Reed**

### **Artist Statement**

A painter who uses art history as a point of departure, Shelley Reed is represented by Danese/Corey and the Sears-Peyton Gallery, both in New York, as well as Visions West Contemporary in the Midwest.

Reed was an artist-in-residence at the Lux Art Institute in 2017. She was awarded Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grants in 2015 and 2006, as well as Berkshire Taconic Artist's Resource Trust Grants in 2015 and 2005. In 2013, Reed traveled to Europe on a Traveling Fellowship from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and was a finalist for a Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship in 2012. She was the recipient of the Maud Morgan Award from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2005.

Reed's work can be found nationally in public and private collections including: The Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Columbia Museum of Art, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Fidelity Investment Corporation, Wellington Management Company, 21c Museum Hotels, Bank of Boston, Rose Art Museum, Danforth Museum, and the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park.

## Visualizations of Contemporary Paranoia: Shelley Reed's *A Curious Nature*

By Candice Bancheri

*Big Red and Shiny*

June 8, 2017

Paranoia has a way of creeping up the spine and burrowing into the brain. Like a tick in the woods waiting for the right moment to latch onto its next host, it feeds—gorging itself on suspicions of falsehoods, naivety, and manipulated truths.

Digesting Shelley Reed's paintings felt a lot like discovering that tick on the back of your leg hours after a jaunt through the woods. With the utmost conviction, the tick quietly clung to its chosen host, fastened itself within the layers of fleshy epidermis, and fed until its swollen body pulsed with excess. Fortunately, Reed's paintings do *not* carry Lyme disease or Rocky Mountain spotted fever. However, they infect the viewer with something much more revealing of its source and equally uncomfortable to contract. Contextualized by the looming crescendo of the information age, Reed's exhibited work at the Fitchburg Art Museum begged the question: are curiosity and paranoia two sides of the same coin?

Just recently closed, *A Curious Nature* was comprised of regional artist Shelley Reed's most recent work. Predominantly consisting of her enormous grisaille paintings on canvas and paper, the work contains specific characters and imagery deriving from the likes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painters such as Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Alexandre-François Desportes, and Melchior d'Hondecoeter.

With meticulous visual description, Reed's paintings oscillate our attention between her elaborately composed allegorical scenes, such as *In Dubious Battle*, and her dramatically isolated subjects, as seen in *White Horse (after Grant and Stubbs)*. The two styles of composition are diametrically dispersed throughout the galleries. Organized by curators Lisa Crossman and Mary Tinti, the intuitive layout accentuates the artist's varying narrative structures, almost as a means of psychologically zooming in and out of each painting's proposed perspective. The combination of this visual and narrative tactic makes it all-too-easy to forget the fact that most of Reed's subjects are in fact animal, *not* human—each containing their own palpable psychologies to be reckoned with.

If the “zooming in and out” of a zoo full of allegorical paintings and depictions of highly emotionalized animals wasn’t disorienting enough, try looking one of her subjects in the eyes. The theatricality and intensity of their staged interactions seem to pause for only a brief moment as the viewer takes a loud gulp and experiences the nagging feeling that—*perhaps*—Reed’s subjects have been observing the viewer, as much as the viewer has been observing them. These encounters feel alarmingly intimate, yet arouse a suspicion of psychological espionage that goes beyond the dusty tradition of allegorical painting and speaks with contemporary instinct and foresight.

Reed’s chosen art historical sources reference what was a budding interest in nature, science, and the animal world specific to Northern European art of the time. Allegorical depictions of animals transformed each animal into symbolic characters capable of narrative. For instance, peacocks (another character Reed utilizes) were often used to represent vanity. Recontextualized by the artist’s deliberate manipulation of scene and scale, Reed’s appropriated characters experience new life and new meaning. With every reimagined feathered wing, tensed hind leg, and foaming snarl, the artist’s “borrowed” subjects are transformed into tangible beings liberated by their depictions of autonomous personality and agency. In this vein, Reed’s animals are both plucked from their art historical sources and thoughtfully recontextualized as their historic symbolism grapples with their current context.

Possibly her most ambitious exhibited piece, *In Dubious Battle* wrapped around two perpendicular walls in the left-hand corner of the gallery. Spanning forty-seven feet, the eleven connected canvases depict a chaotic narrative starring twenty-two animals all engaging in various moments of emotional intensity, conflict, and crises. But what was most alarming is that their distress is so acutely consistent with aspects of human psychology in the face of crisis, making the experience of these visualized scenarios all the more poignant.

In the center of this scene of chaos stands a white horse tangled in its lead rope. Seemingly startled by the shooting blaze smoking behind it, the animal is depicted pulling on its own muzzle in a panic. Despite its terror-stricken expression, the horse’s frozen pose resembles historical sculptures of steeds carrying celebrated war heroes. I found myself contending with American pop culture images of wild horses galloping through Montana pastures and starring in Chevrolet commercials. The image of the horse is historically associated with romantic notions of freedom. Does Reed knowingly play with these associations? If so, what does the contemporary viewer make of this panicked horse, both tangled and stoically posed? Freedom, as depicted here, has been harnessed, humbled, and humiliated by its less glamorous history of domestication and exploitation, which—like this giant white horse—is no longer small enough to sweep under the rug.

Adjacent to the white horse are two hounds, sheepishly looking at their entangled costar. One hound looks back with guilt as the other focuses on a conveniently placed rifle—perhaps considering it as a means to put the stallion out of its misery. Their painted expressions uniquely evoke human admissions of guilt and abandoned responsibility, intimately confessed or otherwise. Historically associated with the English tradition of fox hunting, the hound is symbolic of both the sport of hunting and demonstrations of fidelity. Do Reed's animals represent a larger narrative specific to the contemporary context in which they are viewed?

Confronted by Reed's various depictions of psychological chaos, one could eerily be reminded of our own contemporary "dubious battle," regarding the nauseating tilt-a-whirl of America's climate of paranoia, speculation, and misinformation. Set in a digital vacuum of ever-accessible (and interchangeable) fact and opinion, allegations of fake news and information hacking are carelessly spun about as more informed methods of social participation dissolve into the internet's information overload. Reed's characters and intense visual scenarios ask the viewer: how do you participate in *your* unfolding narrative? As one reconciles with the increasing appetite to partake in the chaotic "fox hunt" of our time, perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to feel like Reed's entangled horse pulling on its own muzzle or the repentant hounds questioning their part in the mess. Revealing suggestions of mass participation and exploited paranoia swell the contemporary mind, as *In Dubious Battle* echoes the psychological infrastructure that engenders the current chaos of our contemporary narrative.

To watch or to be watched? *A Curious Nature*, camouflaged in a historicized aesthetic, harnesses a particular paranoia and chaos specific to the contemporary experience. Reed's work relates to relevant contemporary themes of appropriation in the digital age, implications of increased social voyeurism versus the depleted effectiveness of more "authentic" forms of participation, and the bastardization of informed skepticism deriving from the ruthless entanglement of misinformation, spectatorship, and surveillance—all of which have reached a pinnacle point in both socio-political arenas and in the art contemporaneously being made in reaction to it.

With such insight, clarity, and a hint of incredulity imbedded in their theatricality and scale, Shelley Reed's paintings pulse with vivacity, emotion, and best of all paranoia... saturating the viewer's thoughts as the tick begins to feed.





## Never-Ending Painting: An Interview with Shelley Reed

By Amy Rahn

*Artsy*

June 7 2016

Artist Shelley Reed excerpts small details from Old Master paintings, expanding and re-contextualizing them in her often large-scale black and white paintings. On a recent sunny morning in Brooklyn, Amy Rahn spoke with the artist about the origins and intentions behind her work, the time-traveling potential of representation, and her current exhibition at Sears-Peyton Gallery.

Amy Rahn: What were your early experiences as an artist?

Shelley Reed: After getting a degree in Psychology, I went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to study art, and had unlimited access to the museum. I painted fifteen hours a day, just painting non-stop. I painted with tons of color then.

They teach you how to paint, but then the question becomes *what* to paint. I moved to London and went to museums all the time. I painted a tiny detail from a [George] Stubbs painting; I picked out a tiny detail and made it huge. I limited my palette to monochromes.

That painting was the beginning of what I've been doing for decades—using art history, a limited palette, and thinking about how art history relates to today.

I love to seek out old books, old bookstores, and when I got back to the U.S. I spent hours and hours in the stacks of the library of the Fogg Museum at Harvard, where they have an incredible collection of art history books. Thousands and thousands, and all these images of paintings in black and white.

AR: I'm struck by the fact that you are painting from *representations* of paintings, printed in black and white, and so your paintings excerpt not only the original paintings, but also their reproductions in books.

SR: Yes! The fact of how we often see these paintings in reproduction. I became fascinated with the way that artists, before photography, were trying to paint animals from memory. Sometimes the animals were quite exotic—animals the artists themselves had never seen before. A rhino, for example; one artist would have seen one and then told someone else about it, who would try to paint it, so it was like a game of telephone. The animals from this time before photography are painted naturalistically, but they're also strange—they're partly imaginary. They pass on an idea of knowledge.

In the beginning, I'd take passages of paintings I found reproduced in art history books and isolate them on blank white canvasses, but in the last ten years or so I've been creating mash-ups of isolated images from paintings created around the same time, combining little details of several paintings to create a new narrative or series of narratives.

AR: Has anything surprised you as you've developed these works?

SR: How often these artists used the same images over and over again! Melchior de Hondecoeter painted the same peacock repeatedly. You'll see the same peacock in painting after painting. It's interesting to think why that might be; was it because he was commissioned and it was what the patron wanted? Was it because he could save time and creative energy for other parts of the painting?

Another thing that surprised me is that artists were all borrowing from each other. You'll see part of one painting lifted and placed right into someone else's painting. Now we'd call that "appropriation," but then it seems to have been an accepted practice that wasn't intended primarily as conceptual.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, originality was seen as being so important, but I'm more interested in reusing and reinterpreting what already exists to comment on our own evolution— cultural, political, etc.

The animals I paint aren't stand-ins for human figures, but they are emblematic of our great potential and also of our worst characteristics. They embody both their own histories and what they've been made to signify about human behavior. They suggest open-ended narratives that can be interpreted in many different ways.

AR: Can you talk about the installation of your current works at Sears-Peyton? How does it affect the way viewers might perceive your work?

SR: In an individual large painting, there's something specific happening, but I was interested in what might happen if I brought different scenes from many paintings into a consistent landscape. I wanted to see them bigger, on a wider stage. I conceived of making a continuous landscape by making individual scenes that could be continuously rearranged—that could scale to different spaces, that would invite different arrangements. I wanted to make a landscape that could keep going—a painting that never ends.

AR: Do you envision this never-ending painting in bigger and bigger spaces?

SR: Yes! The individual works are like fragments that can be put together with the possibility of change; if you move the pieces, you create a new narrative. It remains in the tradition of painting, but introduces movement. Movement and re-interpretation are built into the painting. The image isn't static; it is always changeable. The painting can grow like a living thing.

There are hints of human presence in these works—architecture, domestic touches—but these only emphasize human absence. There's an ominous element; are humans a threat to the animals that exist in their absence? The domestic and the wild exist in dangerous proximity. You see animals that were bred to be domestic, and you see animals tearing each other apart. There's a hint of aggression—as if violence could break out at any time. There's a hint of something sinister.

AR: Is there something you want to paint, but haven't yet?

SR: I've been painting for a long time, exploring a specific landscape in a deeper and deeper way. I look forward to seeing how it develops. There's a certain line of art history that I want to explore. By thinking of all the connections between all these past environments, these past images, I'm creating my own world to live in, to walk around in, to experience, to perpetuate.

To return to the show at Sears-Peyton, there's a huge wall of the gallery with a cluster of what you could consider portraits—isolated images from art history, still life images, plants, bottles, fabric, etc. They're all like actors that can appear in bigger paintings in the future. They're character studies; they look right at the viewer. These works engage the viewer as an "other." Each painting is a one-to-one encounter, but they're also a cluster. There are interrelations between them; a tree branch echoes the horns of a stag, predators are beside prey. Their gazes, the way they look right at the viewer, puts the viewer in relation to each piece, and to the whole.

I title my works with the attributions of the source paintings from which they came, so if a viewer knows art history, they can see echoes of paintings they've seen before, but if they're unfamiliar with the reference, there's still a sense of kinship, a relationship with the subject. There's a hint they come from somewhere else.

AR: In a sense, you're working in the heart of the academic tradition—copying from Old Masters. What about that methodology remains so fresh for you, despite its long history?

SR: I've found that the issues that were important back then are still relevant today. It speaks to our existence as cultural and political thinking beings that these works are still so available to us, recognizable to us.

There's something about the realistic image that endures. My work makes use of negative space; in many ways it's abstract, but there's a clarity to the image—a will to communicate across time.

AR: Why do you work in black and white?

SR: I'm simplifying, heading towards complexity via intense simplification. Instead of color being the main thing that attracts a viewer to the work, I distill form and create contrast by simple means. Somehow when you simplify, the whole world opens up.

I believe what my works really address is the universal condition, which is always fraught.

Despite the variety of nature—all the different species—the unifying element is the soul, is life, existence. That's what we share with the animals. I'm looking for that moment of recognition.

# Aiken Standard

## Columbia Museum Hosts Show of Allegorical Paintings

*Aiken Standard*

June 4, 2014

Since the beginning of recorded history, animals have been used to represent certain basic human attributes and impulses. Thus, someone can be said to be stubborn as a mule or meek as a lamb or proud as a peacock.

Over time authors have exploited the allegorical potential of animals in stories and longer literary texts – consider Aesop’s fables and George Orwell’s “Animal Farm.”

For their own thematic purposes, visual artists have also used animals as ready-made shorthand; place a dog in a portrait painting, for example, and the average viewer immediately associates the image with the concept of loyalty.

At no period in the history of Western art was the popularity of animal allegories more evident than during the 17th century, the period of the great Dutch masters and their European counterparts. Melchior de Hondecoeter, for example, garnered a host of mercantile patrons – this was the time that Holland became the richest nation in the world thanks to trade – because of the artist’s affinity for creatures of the sky.

The prosperous middle class wanted paintings to adorn their walls, and they gravitated toward De Hondecoeter’s lavish depictions of birds, especially exotic varieties in vibrant interaction, or works by his Flemish contemporary Frans Snyders, who specialized in scenes of the hunt and the eventual confrontation between predator and prey.

Until September 14, the Columbia Museum of Art pays homage to the great allegorical paintings of the Old Masters by hosting an exhibition of 26 paintings by contemporary American artist Shelley Reed. A graduate both in psychology from Brandeis University and in painting from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Reed has combined her training as psychologist and painter to probe the human psyche by means of animal allegories.

“I spend a lot of time in libraries looking at old art books,” admits the artist. “Right now I’m looking at painters from the late 1600s, who are documenting life around them.”

Reed takes inspiration from that time period by appropriating images from those paintings and recombining them in an effort to connect to a contemporary audience the way that artists like De Hondecoeter and Snyders spoke to theirs.

What differentiates Reed's work, however, from the old master paintings that serve as her inspiration is her decision not to use color in her work. She argues, in fact, that color often distracts the viewer from focusing on content. Thus, her paintings are in black and white, a choice that she believes allows her to hone in on the "psychological aspect – the gaze, the violence, the interpersonal dances."

Visitors to the CMA's first-floor galleries can perhaps find clearest evidence of this intention in a work Reed entitled "Tiger."

The central, snarling figure in this 2007 painting, measuring about seven-by-five feet, appears to gaze over its shoulder, one eye trained on the viewer. At first glance, we note Reed's masterful rendering of the ferocious carnivore, but upon closer examination, we also yearn to get inside the big cat's head. What is it doing roaming at will the European countryside?

Indeed, Reed has taken the tiger out of its original context – this particular figure first appeared in an 1847 painting by Edwin Landseer, who was commissioned by Queen Victoria to depict animal trainer Isaac van Amburgh during one of his now-notorious performances.

The first to stage a wild animal act in the circus, Amburgh was known as "the Lion King" for his ability to dominate the big cats in his show.

In an 1833 account of one of his appearances in New York City, a reporter noted that "the effect of his [Amburgh's] power was instantaneous. The lion halted and stood transfixed. The tiger crouched."

The tiger in Reed's painting, however, is no submissive beast. Amburgh, even at the height of his popularity, was sometimes criticized for his brutality; he would bait the members of his menagerie to get them to react and then beat them into submission. Reed, however, has liberated the tiger from Amburgh's grip and placed it front and center in a landscape inspired by yet another artist, 17th-century German landscape painter Johann Alexander Thiele. By letting the tiger roam free in an otherwise domesticated setting, Reed has turned the tables on Amburgh's audience and her own.

In short, there is much to see and reflect upon in the current show. Visitors will especially want to spend some time contemplating the monumental forty-seven-foot-long painting entitled "In Dubious Battle."

Covering two walls, the eleven panels, each seven feet high and each composed of elements taken from classic European paintings, demand visitor immersion.

On my recent visit to the museum, I found myself walking the length of the painting from left to right, reading the work like the pages of a book.

The mural's thematic trajectory takes the viewer from neoclassical settings, in which exotic animals and birds serve as the trophies of Western exploration and commercial interest, toward an manicured landscape wherein a pack of hunting dogs bedevil a roaring lion.

Will South, the CMA's chief curator, argues that the painting's essential meaning might be unlocked after considering the source of its title. In "Paradise Lost," John Milton makes reference to God's victory over the Devil "in dubious battle upon the plains of Heaven."

Perhaps, South theorizes, Reed is expressing her hope that somehow humankind can find a way to defeat or at least temper the animal instincts that lurk beneath the veneer of civilization.

# SEARS·PEYTON·GALLERY

## NEW YORK·LOS ANGELES

### Shelley Reed

By Nick Capasso

Shelley Reed deftly melds aspects of painting, theater, and cinema to create complex narratives rich with beauty, drenched in mystery, and fraught with anxiety. In her large canvases, on the scale of history painting, small incidents are writ large and stultified allegorical systems are transformed into dynamic images of great emotional substance and subtlety. Reed magnifies the power of these paintings by taking full advantage of the human fascination with animals, our biological and existential Other.

As a contemporary painter, Reed is in part a *bricoleur*. A great deal of her imagery is borrowed from art historical sources, sometimes wholesale, sometimes from details of other paintings, and sometimes cobbled together and fully recontextualized. During the last few decades, Postmodernist appropriation artists have been concerned with the integrity of authorship and originality, epistemology, the deconstruction of images to reveal structures of power and control, the mechanical reproduction of images, and satire and irony. Reed's work obliquely raises these issues by virtue of the very fact that she appropriates. But they are by no means her major concerns. This artist is sincere and serious in her quest to resuscitate images for their enduring eloquence, and for their potential to create new meanings.

Reed is particularly attracted to artists that only the most ardent students of Northern European Baroque painting would recognize: Melchior de Hondecoeter, Jean-Baptiste Oudry, and Franz Snyders (among others) – all famous in their day, now languishing in the dustbin of Art History. She applies their animals, arabesques, and architecture to her own aesthetic, where they are enlarged, recombined, stripped of color, set on new stages, and rendered with the bold expressive brushwork that has energized Baroque, Romantic, and Expressionist painting throughout the Western tradition.

The paintings are literally attractive. Viewers come close to admire the painter's bold blacks and whites, the delicately modulated tones of grey, and the masterful compositions of fluid, sinuous shapes. The images are fecund with ripe fruits, lush garlands, intricate decorative detail, and the unabashed charm of the animals themselves.

But something is amiss amidst all this beauty and delight. Reed carefully crafts a shallow theatrical space that is somehow neither indoors nor outdoors, a product of culture rather than nature. Why are animals here? And what is it, exactly, that they are doing? Their confrontations with each



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other, and the viewer, seem much more human than animal with their unsettling anthropomorphic postures, gestures, and gazes. This drama is intensified by cinematic effects. The point of view in most of Reed's paintings is from far below (like a movie theater), and the action looms almost threateningly above the viewer. The darkening sky, used to such great effect in a host of black-and-white films, helps to establish a moment pregnant with uncertainty. The calm before the storm is about to end, the flowers will be cast to the winds, the piles of fruit will topple, and the animals will scurry for cover.

Three hundred-odd years ago, when Hondecoeter *et al.* were thriving, their animals were understood quite differently. Then, the visually literate subscribed to a nominal symbolic system in which rabbits = lust, dogs = fidelity, owls = wisdom, etc. Within this cultural code, animals were actors in morality plays. In Shelley Reed's paintings, animals are actors in performances that are considerably more ambiguous. Specific signifiers of virtues and vices take on broader roles as they express a wide emotional range that involves the intricacies of danger and desire. The artist frees Allegory to become Metaphor, and allows animals to agitate our imaginations as well as our souls.

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