Burden of Beasts

Ksenya Gurshtein, History of Art, University of Michigan

The premise of Galley Project's *Animal Intelligence* show is simple enough: Animals are smart. Trying to puzzle out how or whether the works in it come together leads one to another border-line clichéd conclusion: What we see in animals tells us at least as much about ourselves as it does about them. As we try to speak about them, the language we use, for instance, betrays our own values. One surely cannot call neutral a description of female baboon social structure in terms of "Machiavellian intelligence," particularly when the interpersonal terrain that these primates negotiate is likened to that of *The Sopranos.* Moreover, despite the show's enthusiastic embrace of the idea that the Earth is full of all manner of clever creatures which deserve our respect, there is surely something unnerving in learning, for instance, of our close evolutionary relatives born into a rigid hierarchy which they may try to manipulate but cannot really alter.

There is, indeed, a subterranean unease to this show, a certain uncertainty as to how one ought to think of "nature," relate to it, fit into it. The inescapable necessity of "predator-prey relationships" in the co-evolution of moose and wolves on Michigan's Isle Royale, as studied and narrated by John Vucetich, is anything but sentimental. Rick Pas' painted hyperrealist artifice sums up visually the particular animal intelligence of a suspicious human mind. In his *Stalk,* a reflection in a car's side-mirror suggests the precariousness of the peaceful coexistence of a casual voyeur and the animals she may admire. In *Robin Over-pass,* the inexplicable anxiety present in another set of reflected eyes seems to have something to do both with the intrusion of a bird into our world and of ours into his. That there is a Greyhound bus speeding perpendicular to the robin's path of flight further drives home how much more comfortable we often are with the *idea* of animals and their powers rather than their actual presence.

The mix of fascination and apprehension that the knowledge of animal intelligence might arouse and the indistinctness of the boundary between "us" and "them" that it implies is only amplified by the curatorial decision to exhibit visual material collected as "hard" documentary scientific data alongside self-consciously artistic work. This choice does make for some lovely visual parallels – such as the echo between Nancy Seefelt's *Rock Egg* in an actual cormorant nest and Diane Farris' dreamlike montage *The Guardian Crane.* It also reminds us how strongly our metaphoric language and thought are bound to natural phenomena: one need not be a professional poet to wish to ruminate on mortality when she sees John Vucetich's striking photograph of a black raven sitting upon white snow in front of a bloody moose carcass.

What's problematic about these pairings, however, is that the much more obvious and studied aesthetic appeal of the artistic largely subsumes fascinating stories (in the cases when they are narrated at all). And yet it is the stories that at least to this viewer suggested the need for a studiously held distance at which due respect can be given based not on perceived likeness to what we love best in ourselves (Vincent Musi's admittedly beautiful photographs try to do for animal celebrities what Richard Avedon did for human ones), but on the awe and even fear at the number of possible experiences so alien to our own. That this alienness, as well as the possibility of overcoming it, holds us in its thrall is attested to by the half-dozen references to camouflage one finds as a motif in the show, as well as by the insistent question of the recognition of others by animals both within and outside of their social groups (an issue discussed insightfully in the March 2008 *National Geographic* article "Minds of Their Own: Animals Are Smarter Than You Think," for which Vincent Musi's portraits were created).

It is perhaps because of the strong suggestion of the returned gaze that the work I found most arresting was Britta Jaschinski's photograph of a beluga whale. From behind a sheet of corrugated metal, in murky, dark water, a glowing white creature peeks at us. It looks like an apparition, a magical trope from a Fellini-esque sequence wherein the whale's mysterious half-smile might any second result in uttered words of wisdom. And yet the series of which the image is part – the photographer's capturing in stark black and white of moments in the lives of zoo animals – has a hard documentary edge that excises excess florid prose. Nor does it strive to demonstrate, per se, the presence of remarkable intellect and concomitant nobility in its subjects. Its power lies in the words that I heard a fellow gallery visitor say to one of the show's curator, Rocco DePietro, upon hearing some of the works' stories: "Thank you so much for stopping me."