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ARTS AND HUMANITIES: Columbia Museum hosts show of allegorical paintings

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By Dr. Tom Mack



Shelley Reed, *Tiger (after Landseer and Thiele)*, 2007, oil on canvas, 72 x 56 inches

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 Hondcoeter 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.

“Animal Instinct: Paintings by Shelley Reed” is on view at the Columbia Museum of Art until Sept. 14.

For more information, call 799-2810 or visit the museum on the web at www.columbiamuseum.org.

A recipient of the prestigious Carolina Trustee Professorship in 2008, Dr. Tom Mack currently holds the G.L. Toole Chair at USC Aiken.