



Lovely Daze Issue 5: Hunters + Gatherers



Animal Estates, 2008

~ fritz haeg

I have been fascinated and obsessed with animals since I was a child. I used to think I wanted to be a zoologist and spent an entire summer at the zoo everyday when I was twelve. I have been thinking about animals for a long time, and have been waiting patiently to make works that addressed this interest.

I do not cry easily, but when I do, it is usually about animals. A zoo of captive creatures, an intimate animal documentary, the death of anyone's pet, a certain gesture by a baby polar bear on the news, dogs and cats left behind by Katrina, animal cruelty cases in the newspaper, any sort of animal suffering at all can start me sobbing in a way that nothing else can. My most intense dreams are about animals. They variously involve opposite feelings of fear or friendship. I suppose animals can represent and embody any possible emotion, feeling, spirit or energy that passes through my subconscious.

In Goya's painting from 1823, "The Dog," we see all of the pathos of the animal condition depicted by a lone dog's head looking up submissively from the bottom of the canvas. In the Sopranos, it was the animals (bears and ducks) that brought out Tony's deeply repressed emotions and initiated his early panic attacks. Odysseus sheds a tear for his neglected dog as it dies in front of him after returning from a 20-year absence. George Orwell was uniquely able to comment on the state of our society when staged in the world of animals. The sun-god in Egyptian mythology was Ra, a cat. One of Matt Groening's few rules for those that write for The Simpson's, is that animals can't talk (except in dream sequences). Babar the elephant, Peter the rabbit, Winnie the Poo, Charlotte the spider, Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, Mickey Mouse, Brer Rabbit, Benji, animals are usually what we first identify with when we are young. The list goes on.

As a society we do not seem to take animals very seriously today. Any books or movies about them are typically geared toward children, as is the zoo. The related discourse and interpretive information is often presented in a simplified form that attempts to prescribe them with human qualities instead of allowing us to understand them on their own terms. Animals have a profound intelligence that we do not understand. We are at an ecological crossroads which is manifested in our twisted relationship with animals. They alternately represent a wildness, that we are afraid of in ourselves, or a freedom, that we would like to recapture.

Animals were the subjects of the earliest documented human art. In primitive cave drawings we see a reverence for the creatures with whom homo sapiens shared the land. In early cultures, animals were viewed with wonder, something sacred. Human survival depended on the hunt, which required keen observation and understanding. An intimate bond and respect develops, which is less likely in today's grocery stores full of anonymous meat in Styrofoam and plastic.

The few top males in a herd of Uganda kob each preside over a 50-foot diameter grassy stamping ground where they mate. The male cicada-killer wasp will stake out a perch on his square footage of territory above the burrow of his subterranean colony and attack trespassing creatures. The male bowerbird will make a clearing, decorate it with colorful found objects and use it as a performance stage, dancing to attract a female. Humans are one of many territorial creatures that occupy the planet, but we are the only ones who, when establishing territory, preclude the existence of most other life forms that we have not domesticated. Thus most creatures who are not a part of the human plan are either considered a threat or a pest.

As the human domination of the planet continues, animals are alternately viewed as exotic specimens to be treated as spectacle, cartoon characters that are anthropomorphized, friendly companions to be coddled, objectified resources to be exploited, inconveniences to be tolerated, pests to be eradicated or anonymous unseen creatures to which we are indifferent. *Animal Estates*, thus, intends to provide a provocative 21st century model for the human-animal relationship that is more intimate, visible and thoughtful.

Those of us living in cities today will classify most creatures we encounter as pests. In highly unbalanced urban eco-systems the natural equilibrium of checks and balances is disturbed. As natural predators are eliminated, the populations of pigeons, cockroaches, rats, ants and mice spiral out of control. In fact, this may be the only 'wildlife' remaining in most cities.

Animal Estates intends to eradicate the strict, arbitrary and obsolete boundaries that humans have established between the manmade and the wild. As animal habitats dwindle daily, *Animal Estates* welcomes wildlife back into our daily lives. Animals and their habitats will be woven back into our cities, strip malls, garages, office parks, freeways, front yards, parking lots and neighborhoods. These animals may at times be cute and welcome residents, but others may require some getting used to...

Animal Estates Model Homes for a variety of animals will be designed, installed, and tested throughout the world. In cities and suburbs, from public streets to private yards, prototype *Animal Estates* will be established in a variety of environments. At times they will be hidden from view and at others quite visible to the public. Each will be designed to attract and welcome a particular animal back into an environment that has been dominated by humans. The design for each estate will be developed with a local zoologist, ethologist, or specialist on that particular animal.

Which animals need dark and quiet nooks, or elevated airy platforms, or moist nether regions, or sunny public displays? Wildlife habitats will be grafted on to the cityscape by identifying the unique conditions throughout our built environment that are most conducive to the life of certain animals. Some possible examples include beehives for urban rooftop gardens, bat boxes for shopping mall parking lots, chicken coops for suburban front yards, ant farms for the subway stops, and falcon nests for the tops of sky-scrapers. Animals of all sorts will be back in our lives as a daily reminder of our place in the world and the other creatures that we share it with.