

Wild Animals Invade New York Art World

Feng Shuo, Yinka Shonibare, Paula Rego, **Stefano Cagol**, Gaston Phoebus, Cai Guo-Qiang, Chris Scarborough, Alexis Rockman.

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NEW YORK—Maybe there's some deep-seated ecological guilt in our post-millennial zeitgeist, but suddenly New York's galleries and museums seem thronged with creatures of the natural world who are, let's say, far from happy. Whether they derive from children's books, cartoons, the history of art, or observation of the natural world, these animals range in character from the simply odd to the downright scary. Tigers shot through with arrows, exploding squirrels, and poisonous rats are all here, making for one of the most unsettling Editor's Picks I've ever come up with.

Feng Shuo, "Citizens" (2007)

Let's begin at Marlborough Chelsea, where Feng Shuo, a Chinese painter having his first U.S. show (through May 17), conjures a cast of mostly chimeric characters out of some of the most remarkable paint handling I've seen recently — the direction of his brushstrokes seems utterly irrelevant to what they depict — and whose content is even more memorable: Precisely what kind of orgy has this shame-faced rodent been disturbed in the midst of?

Feng Shuo, "No Fear" (2007)

And what is this creature? He has a human body, certainly. But is that a dog's head, or a cat's, or something else entirely? And look at his feet, trying — not too successfully — to still that slithering snake. His apparent emotional uncertainty matches his physical monstrosity. Feng's pictures are like the greasy snapshots taken at some drug-fueled after-work party organized by a gang of dissolute fairy-tale characters. I highly recommend this show.

Yinka Shonibare, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Asia)" (2008)

Goya seems to be everywhere I look these days, cropping up here and here and here. At James Cohan Gallery through May 17, my compatriot Yinka Shonibare transposes Goya's etching "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" into a suite of five stunning photographs. In my opinion the stuffed creatures that surround the traumatized-looking artist are every bit as alarming as Goya's: Look at the eager malevolence on the face of the owl prodding the artist's arm with a paintbrush.

Paula Rego, "The Vivian Girls at the end of the World" (1984)

One of the best things in the much-discussed show "Dargerism: Contemporary Artists and Henry Darger," on view at the American Folk Art Museum through September 21, (apart from the wonderful Dargers, of course) is this early Paula Rego. In Darger's outsider art fantasies, his child-heroine Vivian Girls are pursued by terrifying human adversaries. In Rego's reworking they find themselves in the less-

than-comforting company of mutating birds and sea creatures, while their ship sinks in the background.

Stefano Cagol, "Rat Game" (2008)

The bunny slippers worn by one of Rego's Vivian Girls at the American Folk Art Museum give way to rat candies in Stefano Cagol's solo show "Guinea Pig" at Priska Juschka, on view through May 17. In this artist's paranoid universe, artificial additives and manipulative corporate interests are a constant menace — and we, it turns out, are helpless, foolish guinea pigs. These candies, for instance, are laced with rat poison. They might be the cutest of the creatures I've included here, but they are also the most dangerous.

Gaston Phoebus, "Wild Cats" (c. 1407)

"Illuminating the Medieval Hunt," on view at the Morgan Library through August 10, is an amazing little show. Among the illuminations included from the 15th-century hunting treatise "Livre de la Chasse" are several depicting hunters' potential quarries. Like this one, "Wild Cats," they offer a wonderful, unwitting cocktail of knowledge, misunderstanding, and sheer fantasy.

In this respect, and in their tendency to gaily anthropomorphize the creatures of the natural world, these 400-year-old pictures fit happily alongside the contemporary works that make up the rest of my picks...

(Courtesy Faksimile Verlag)

Cai Guo-Qiang, "Inopportune: Stage Two" (2004), installation view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008

...particularly this one.

At the Guggenheim as part of Cai Guo-Qiang's gloriously over-the-top "I Want to Believe" exhibit — and in line with his willfully confused art, which seems to have a particularly unhappy relationship with the natural world — these wild cats have already had a fateful confrontation with hunters. Like creatures from a bad dream (or bad movie), they still seem to seethe with angry energy. Though perhaps this is appropriate in the art of a man who, with his fondness for setting off explosions, is a one-person ecological disaster. On view through May 28.

Chris Scarborough, "Swallow" (2008)

In "Warbabies," Chris Scarborough's current exhibition at Foley, on view through May 31, animals can cause explosions, too. The show presents Scarborough's super-precise pencil drawings of objects, people, and animals emerging from or disappearing into exploding clouds of dust. I wondered why this drawing of squirrels is called "Swallow." "Because the squirrels are about to be swallowed up in the explosion that they've set off by fighting," I was told, matter-of-factly.

Alexis Rockman, "Food Chain" (2008)

And finally, an image from Alexis Rockman, whose show at Leo Koenig Gallery closed on April 26. This artist ventured to the Antarctic for the landscape, but once there he became so concerned about the fragility of the polar ecosystem that he came up with this — an imagined moment in a natural world turned in on itself.