



Et Tu, Animal?

by Alison Locke Perchuk

In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell simultaneously satirizes and critiques Stalinist Communism by reimagining the Soviet project as a rebellion of animals against the human who operated the farm where the animals lived. The animals' cooptation of their human-created environment, so promising at first, devolves into dystopia as the animals prove themselves even less virtuous than the farmer they replaced. In one area, however, the animals excel their former master: in their deployment of symbolic communication. The animals' rhetorical skills enable them to rewrite their social compact incrementally, transforming an egalitarian and utopian project into one that naturalizes inequality.

In *That Great Rock Mass is Called The Earth*, Luke Matjas gives us a much happier vision of a world in which animals have mastered symbolic communication. In lieu of the political discourse now known as Orwellian double-speak, Matjas' animals focus their competence on human artistic traditions. The condors, bighorns, and diamondbacks that inhabit the Great Rock Mass configure their world according to the genres of history painting and portraiture established by the French Academy of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. They also demonstrate themselves to be keen observers of visual patterns, transforming and deploying motifs from Persian ceramics and Greco-Roman architecture, and skilled users of diagrams and typography. The resulting works convey the nobility of their existence and an optimism for their future.

Optimism is necessary because, as in *Animal Farm*, the effects of human presence on the Great Rock Mass are not benevolent. Humans themselves may be absent from this Earth but their plastic is ubiquitous; chairs and



Lost Ship of the Desert (Red Cooler), 48 x 48 in. Digital/Analog Drawing, 2015



coolers and containers and cones litter the landscape, supplanting mineral formations and forcing vegetation to conform to the small spaces left open for growth. But conform and grow it does. A vine threads its verdant way through elementary-school orange chairs, poppies bloom behind a tattered turquoise recliner, succulents find purchase in overstuffed coolers, laurel emerges from impossibly green detergent bottles. The desert escape pods of the *Lost Ship of the Desert* series airlift plastica, fauna, and flora to destinations unknown.

Unlike Orwell's creatures, these animals recognize that an understanding of history is necessary to their future survival. The scavenged desert schooners in which they seek their fortunes have been transformed from conventionally utilitarian coolers endowed with shovels, garden hoses, and pressure valves to custom rides embellished with intarsia, California Mission tile work, and bear's-head antefixes. Aesthetic history meets natural history in the animals' use of the cooler airships to preserve not only native California species but also the geological layers of the Great Rock Mass as evidenced in numerous cutaways revealing mineral variation and magma,

as well as the occasional light-averse passenger.

This is not to say that propaganda is absent from Matjas' animal world. The small bobcat of *Lost Ship of the Desert (Red Cooler)* (2015) sits high atop its rising vessel, staring into the distance like some Washington or Liberty leading a rag-tag bunch of quail to their destiny, the California Bear waving proudly in the breeze. Allegory likewise structures *Learn to Know*

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Your Hawks (2015) as red-tailed hawks pp. 22-23

in three different degrees of coloration rotate within their communal nest of plastic chairs like three avian Graces. A fourth hawk stares to the left, the direction of Matjas' animals' future, oblivious to their charms. *El Condór de California Pasa* pp. 32-33

(2016) renders the pregnant moment of history painting. An abandoned La-Z-Boy offers No. 58 a perch on which to unfurl her feathered glory in a gesture that simultaneously expresses her dominance over the plastic-infested desert landscape and her leftward flight to found a new Earth. Part Kantian sublime, part Bob Seger cliché, part Battlestar Galactica quest, the painting's message is clear: the animal spirit cannot be overcome, from the detritus of this world a brave new one shall be born.

This heroic optimism is conveyed most fully in two portraits rendered in vertical format and vaguely reminiscent of David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1805) in their subject matter of an animal laden

with a human(-created) burden triumphing nobly over a dramatic, even hostile environment. Part biography, part allegory, *Study of the Dynamics of Habitat Fragmentation* (2011) memorializes a desert bighorn whose demise pp. 6-8

occurred in part through the agency of the electrical cord that encircles its muzzle and drapes gracefully over the tips of its horns like some sort of horrible jewelry. Even as animals turn against each other in the struggle to survive in a diminished wilderness, the bighorn looks optimistically to the left

as it seeks to sidestep elegantly the attacking cougars and carry its animal, vegetable, and plastic cargo to a new home.

Study of Landscape Connectivity in Urban Island Environments (P-18) (2015) immortalizes P-18, a 15-month-old male mountain lion killed in August 2011 while attempting to traverse the 405 freeway en route to seek new territory and possibly a mate. His tracking collar, trading-post saddle blanket, and escape pod customized like a 1970s camper-van mark him as a voyager, sun-bleached antlers souvenirs of conquests made along the way. The half-leafed tree with its plastic bundle and blend of living and ersatz birds signals P-18's hybrid world, a long-necked red gas can hinting at his automobile-effected end. P-18 shoulders this burden nobly, accepting of his fate while the rainbow diagram that swirls above his head signals future hope.

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The animals' firm belief that they will not only survive the Anthropocene but replace it with the Theriocene, a new, animal-driven geological era, is announced in *Rare is the Mammal Which Disputes the Right of Way with a Diamondback (Caduceus)* (2015). The spike of a rotating sprinkler forms the staff of Hermes/Asclepius, its writhing serpents half western diamondback, half PVC hose. An Audubon's oriole perches joyously on the sprinkler's nozzle, attracted by the consonance of color between its plumage and the rotating apparatus yet also providing the wings that complete the Classical motif. The healing rod appears against an elaborate background in which animals internalize and enact the refined patterned paradises of Persian ceramics or Renaissance brocades; hoses and cones take their places amid rabbits and squirrels, acorns and lizards and bighorn sheep skulls. Ecology and history intertwine; this time, let the animals' optimism be not betrayed.

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