

Lions and Tigers in Art, Oh My!

Written by Wendy Doscher-Smith -- BT Contributor
January 2013

The Art Basel scene really was a zoo this year



If my name looks familiar it's because I'm a veteran *BT* contributor. So you are not growing feeble of mind. No need to reach for that cognitive flashcards deck just yet. That's the good news.

The other news (not necessarily bad) is that I have swapped roles. Instead of documenting random oddities 'round town like I did as the *BT*'s "Miami at Large" correspondent, I'll be documenting random oddities -- as well as relaying trends, behavioral and medical information, advice from experts and organizations, and unfurling the ball of writerly yarn -- exclusively in the service of all things animal.

I say "animal" because this column is now devoted not just to domesticated animals and pets, but also to animals that have never set paw (or claw or fin) in a house, as well as to the environments in which these animals live and breed, including the ocean, the bay, and the Everglades.

I was all ready to write my inaugural column about an incident that occurred a few weeks ago, but then an idea struck me: Art Basel Miami Beach had arrived. And for all the hoopla we hear about Art Basel -- unfortunately, a lot of it has to do with the parties, as opposed to the art --

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what I see very little of is any mention of the current trend in art as it relates to animals. Thus this month's topic: animals in art.

I thought this topic to be a particularly timely one because, by the time you read this, Art Basel and all the related art fairs will have typhoned their way through town, leaving in their wake tons of garbage, amazing street art (in Wynwood), some high-figured art sales, and a glimpse into what is trending in the art world. Or at least what gallery owners believe will sell.

It's important to note this difference between what artists are driven to create -- which is usually based on their thoughts regarding the current state of the world -- and what the people who sell their work think will make them rich. So in reality, the pieces that make it to market, especially at high-ticket venues like Art Basel and the satellite fairs, may not be representative of all trends, just the sellable ones.

Casting that detail aside for now, everyone knows that visual art mirrors popular culture. We can look to art to get an idea of which issues are affecting people on a basic, raw level. Or rather, which issues are affecting artists, who may be a little more sensitive or tuned-in than average people. It's the manifestation of this insight that everyone else calls "art."

After spending nearly a week attending Art Basel, Art Miami, Context, Scope Miami, Art Asia, Pulse Miami, Design Miami, and some smaller side shows in the Design District (I tried to see them all, but I simply could not), the one overall trend I noticed that seemed sort of new, or at least more prevalent than in the past, was the use of light as a way to alter viewers' perceptions.

These "light bright" techniques included projections, mirrored or otherwise reflective surfaces, and even video cameras incorporated into a piece or, in some cases, directly into a sculpture.

Also popular were multidimensional materials and techniques used to create optical illusions. These included lenticular vinyl, layering multiple photographs on top of each other, and using hundreds of small objects to make up one large object.

This came off as either an enhancement or a distraction, depending on the piece. As always, art

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is in the eye of... well, you know. So depending on which way you viewed the art (literally and figuratively), many pieces appeared brilliant or merely gimmicky. One thing is for certain: Many artists seemed keen on forcing viewers to take a look at themselves.

Computers have also wormed their way into the art world. At some booths, the art literally was on computer screens. Gone are the days of the paint, paper, and marble oligarchy. It's not that works in these media are nonexistent; they're just now exhibited shoulder to shoulder with computerized images and 2-D formats.

This light bright trend extended, to a degree, to what I saw represented in the art, including animals. When I say art including animals, I mean any kind of medium (sculpture, installation, painting, illustration, collage, photography, videography, textiles) in which animals are used literally or symbolically to get a point across, make one think, or to elicit emotion.

Besides the light bright overall trend, there were animals used as taxidermy, in either a real or faux manner. (If a piece incorporated animal parts, such as teeth or horns, resin molds were sometimes used.) San Francisco area-based artist Scott Hove, whose work was shown at the Scope art fair, for example, utilized animal teeth in his humorous and eye-dazzling pieces, which included fake cake sculptures.

I also saw entire animals being utilized as art, usually embellished by or enclosed in various materials and accompanied by other animals, stuffed and otherwise. One example was Japanese-born Kohei Nawa's *PixCell-Red Deer*, which was an entire deer encased in reflective bubbles, in which people could also view themselves. That one drew big crowds at Art Basel.

The other dominant trend was the anthropomorphic use of animals in work that commented on the abuse and inevitable ruination of the planet by humans. Some of the art featured a bear or rabbit representing a person. Then there was the piece featuring an animal made up of several different taxidermied animal parts. The end result was a bird-like creature... thing.

Also present were hides and feathers, often utilized as a statement on the practice of using animals in furniture manufacturing. At Pulse, Alan Rath's *Absolutely, Positively* sculptures were composed of feathers, fiberglass, aluminum, custom electronics, and motors. The combination struck me as a motorized feather fan, which is ironic, since birds don't require manipulation by

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anything or anyone to fly.

And, unlike the artist, they certainly don't require permission from the art world to exhibit their talents.

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