

Animal Matters

Animal Matters examines issues pertaining to human relationships with animals, primarily focussing on the ethical nature of these relations, particularly the exploitation and commodification of animals. The work explores the contradictions inherent in relationships with animals which allow us, on the one hand, to identify and bond with some species and, on the other hand, to detach and disconnect from others. This exhibition derives from the artist's long-standing parallel interest and involvement in both the arts and the cause of animals which, until recently, have been kept separate.

Domesticated animals, such as cows and horses, have had a long continuing association with humans. Since our early ancestors first depicted them on cave walls, these animals have represented, for us, a complex mix of symbolic, metaphoric, religious and cultural meanings. Farm animals, in western culture, are consigned a commercial value, which compounds the exploitative relationship we have with them and, therefore, colours our perception and treatment of them. Cows, horses and chickens, for instance, are the source of a multitude of products we use daily: food, clothing, bedding, face creams and hormone replacement therapies among numerous other items. Yet we seem less moved by this reality than might be the case if cats and/or dogs were the origin of these commodities.

Hence the works in this exhibition explore the question: Why, in our consideration and treatment of animals, do we make ethical and moral differentiations between species of animals? The work ventures into issues relating to animals that bring into play those areas of moral and emotional meanings, which the philosopher Midgley (1994) claims are "... vast and, by their very nature, threatening, so they are hard to explore." Their visual exploration has thus the potential to interrogate cultural and visual stereotyping and its concomitant symbolic and metaphoric connotations.

The focus of Animal Matters is the animal. This embraces not only the form and appearance of the animal itself, but also their actual material or substance, such as feathers, hair or bone, produced as industry by-product or waste. In essence, the associative aspects of real animal matter are fertile and hence maximise questions about the exploitative nature of animals' lives. The reality of the material is more powerfully evocative of the sense of the animal, of which the material was once a part, than deliberately representational strategies.

Humans share this planet with animals; they do not have irrevocable rights to it. Thus the term *matter* in this exhibition's title references multiple meanings of that word. *Matter* does not just pertain to the *substance* derived from animals (feathers, hair, fur and skin) but to *issues* and *concerns* that centre on our ethical relations with and exploitation of animals.

Barbara Dover 2003