

Being animal: Leda and her love

The Greek myth of Leda and the Swan has inspired many artists as Leonardo da Vinci, Correggio, Rubens and Cezanne as well as more contemporary artists such as Sidney Nolan and Cy Twombly. Stripped of the mythological context and narrative, the story of Leda and the Swan, suggests the presence of some form of bestiality. Essentially, this is an encounter between an aggressively amorous male animal and a pliant naked female human. The sheer physicality and sensuousness of this couple is foremost in this most intimate of embraces. Such a coupling would be taboo in most civilisations: it is only when the myth tells us that the swan is really a man, and a god, that we so readily accept this illicit act.

However, the empathetic, emotional and physical connection and proximity between animals and humans – and particularly of humans with some animals – suggest the permeability of the boundaries between animals and humans. The myth of Leda and the Swan hints that it was ever thus.

In the relationship between an animal and a human, the issue of proximity is contemporary and pertinent. We are close to animals in our everyday life. Pets, for example, are being increasingly brought closer to humans in emotional and social terms. They share our lives, our homes, our bedrooms and, as the French deconstructionist philosopher, Derrida, observes, “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there”¹. A great number of us say ‘I love you’ to them at least once a week. We treat animals as family members and are left devastated when they die. We embrace them, stroke them and find pleasure from feeling their living, breathing bodies next to ours.

Research within both the sciences and the humanities is questioning and disassembling boundaries between humans and animals as well as between different species of animals. Ingold’s (1994) premise that “... humans and nonhuman animals share the *same* existential status, as living beings or persons ...”² is enacted in Leda and the swan myth as indeed it is in everyday contemporary life. Could the contact between animal/swan and human/Leda, in some way, have greater relevancy for twenty-first century life and issues than at first might be thought?

References:

¹ Derrida, J. (2002: [1997]) (trans. Wills, D) The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow). Critical Inquiry. 28. 2. p397.

² Ingold, T. (ed.) (1994) What is an Animal?. London: Routledge, p xxiv.

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Installation – h 15 x w 60 x l 40 cm