

Here be Beasts

In preparing this work for the Graffan Gallery, a venue dedicated to the natural world, I have had cause to reflect again on the uncertainty with which the fine art world views wildlife art. The feeling that wildlife is somehow a light weight subject, not really appropriate for serious art has always puzzled me.

It seems to me this is connected to the way the natural world has been viewed in western thought. Traditionally man has some kind of ownership of nature, either because God gave it to him or simply because feels he is inherently superior. Since Darwin this idea has reinvented itself in the notion that man is somehow the highest achievement of evolution or, indeed, the purpose of evolution itself. Either way a line is drawn between man and the rest of the natural world, he exists in isolation and may do with nature as he sees fit without consequence.

We are not the first civilisation to learn that there are after all consequences to acting on this vision of the world.

Given all of that you might be forgiven for thinking that no one would then go to the time and expense of putting an image of a lion or a bat or a squirrel onto their building. But if you look up in certain parts of Belfast city centre, you would find you are mistaken! Likewise fine art abounds with images of animals, incidental to a portrait or narrative or in many cases the central subject, all the way back, of course, to the birth of Western Art in the caves of Altamira and Lascaux. Clearly nature and images of nature have been and remain in some way vital to us.

I believe there is something else going on, that we understand deep down that the traditions of Western thought are insufficient, leaving us uncertain how to judge the value of the natural world, that we have an inkling that there is not really any line between us and the rest of the biosphere. There is the potential within us to think differently about our place within nature and our dependence on it.

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Inspired and informed by (among others and with thanks):-

Mary Midgley 'Animals and Why they Matter',
'Beast and Man'

John Passmore 'Man's Responsibility for Nature'

Richard Dawkins 'The Ancestors Tale',
'Climbing Mount Improbable'

Jared Diamond 'Collapse'