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Simen Johan

Yossi Milo Gallery

Of particular impact at Simen Johan's recent exhibition were two sculptural pieces featuring a wolf and a deer, each the product of taxidermy. Both confronted the viewer with their odd and dislocated character. Since Johan has never exhibited sculpture before, these objects are difficult to place within the context of a photographic career that spans more than a decade.

The stuffed body of the wolf is covered with long, shiny, silver-colored hair extensions tipped by colorful beads that drape down to cover a glittering pedestal. Yet the fearsome reality of its snarling jaws sharply contradicts any playful quality. Similarly the stuffed head of a deer adorned with a long mane of flowing hair contrasts with its mounting on a lavishly sized wooden support. This treatment is more like a trophy than sculpture. However, in contrast to the wolf, which maintains a cer-

tain nobility, the deer conjures somewhat pathetic associations with the tacky interiors of 1960s travel lodges.

This peculiar combination of taxidermy, grooming, and style lingers somewhere between human and animal, natural and artificial, sublime and ridiculous. Both pieces convey the idea that the invasive power of human intervention aspires to alter animal nature for the sake of human pleasure. In addition, Johan's exploitation of taxidermy, beautified to the level of iconic representation, carries connotations of the transfer of emotional attachment from people to animals. Johan also mocks the pretentious character of museum displays and their institutional power of classification.

By using a biblical title for this exhibition, Johan alludes to the Kingdom of God, where, after the day of Revelation, everything is said to again be one. However, until that day, the possibilities for artistic

imagery are endless. Although he has never exhibited sculptures before, Johan creates the scenes for his well-known tableau photographs of children. In these works, he deliberately contrives his settings, as exemplified in the series "Evidence of Things Unseen" (2000) and "Breeding Ground" (2002). Each group of photos features suburban domestic interiors, filled with piles of wrecked toys and hanging paper cutouts of scary animated characters, assembled by the artist. In one image, a child is depicted gleefully pulling a stuffed baboon behind his bike. Like the digital manipulation that Johan employs to choreograph his scenes, his use of taxidermy blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is artifice.

Johan made another unusual departure in this show. After initially sculpting the body of a llama, which he shaved in a manner akin to the grooming of a poodle, he then photographed it against the backdrop of a bucolic landscape. The monumentality of the animal was emphasized by the camera's low view-

point, the form of its silhouette, and the reshaping of its fur. Johan is now populating his photographs with sculptures that in turn become *objets d'art* in their own right. The process of orchestrating the scene and alluding to the unseen allows Johan to juxtapose multiple realities.

In these new works, Johan seeks to prove that the boundaries of reality can be expanded and the falsity of life stretched to an extreme verisimilitude. He also has an overriding message to impart, which speaks of human responsibility for nature in a time when the effects of technological intervention on the environment have become unpredictable.

—Yulia Tikhonova