

Pincus, Robert L. "Animal Kingdom." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 19 March 2009, p. 25-26.

ART REVIEW

ANIMAL KINGDOM

The featured artists in SDSU exhibit bring eclectic perspective and talents to the show

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

You look at a portrait of someone and the subject stares at you. This can have a powerful effect, but it's not all that unusual as a pictorial convention. When an animal stares back at you, it does seem out of the ordinary. This happens more than once in "Animalkind," a provocative and haunting exhibition at SDSU's University Art Gallery featuring 13 artists, most with wide reputations and long exhibition records.

Melissa Miller's paintings depicts groups of animals, rendered with the precision of a realist but the mind-set of an artist intent on creating visual allegory. In "Sheep," a pair of them look at the viewer, as does a cow standing behind them; so do a donkey and a sheep on their right. They look our way with expressions that blur the line between them and us.

Cows appear again, their heads enlarged, in large photographic prints by Lewis Stein. He has photographed them in disparate locales — Switzerland,

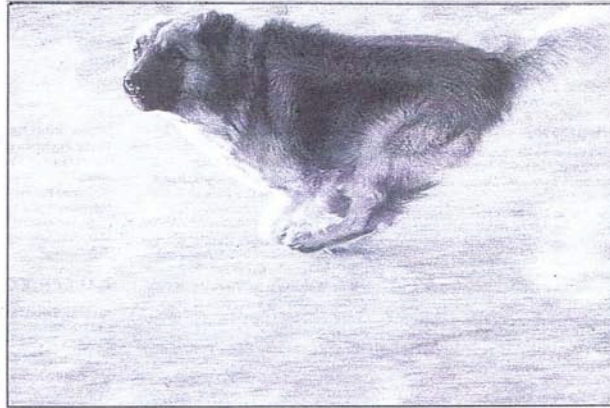
Colorado, Indiana and Ireland — and remarks on their curiosity about people. Looking at these faces, you believe him.

Miller and Stein focus on the psychology of animals and our mental relationship to them in one way; William Wegman does the same in another.

For a long time, Wegman has been amusing people with the stunts he stages with his Weimaraners on video. Many of his brief vignettes are laugh-out-loud funny because they are wonderfully dumb: a dog in bed, head on pillow, sleeping through an alarm, or the artist getting a group of dogs to play baseball.

What's funny is the ridiculousness of dogs being asked to follow human conventions. They have no need or awareness of them, try as Wegman does to get them to follow his plans. But in less slapstick ways, isn't this what we do with our own dogs, attributing human behavior to them and even dressing them like people (as with doggie sweaters)?

The featured artists, as a whole, are an eclectic group. In John Divola's arresting photographs, dogs aren't symbolic of anything. They become



John Divola's photograph is from a series, "Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert." John Divola / Gallery Luisotti

energy made visible in his series "Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert." And his statement from his book by the same name offers one of the best self-deprecating sentences ever written by an artist: "Here we have two vectors and velocities, that of a dog and that of a car and, seeing that camera will never capture reality and that a dog will never catch a car, evidence of devotion to a hopeless enterprise."

Perhaps not hopeless, but no doubt absurd.

This show, curated by gallery director Tina Yapelli, also contains artifacts from one of the most sublimely absurd art projects of recent decades: Jeffrey Vallance's "Blinky the Friendly Hen."

Master of deadpan high-jinks, Vallance bought a frozen chicken and took it to the Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park to see if they'd give him the same burial plot as one could purchase for any pet. They did.

He documented the process, from the buying of the chicken to its burial, in photographs, and a few years later made a video work with Bruce and Norman Yonemoto about Blinky and his exhumation.

This became the prank that outsmarted the artist, as Vallance writes: "Over time I came to believe that Blinky was an archetype of sacrifice. I saw serious correlations between Blinky's sacrifice, suffering, death, burial, exhumation and cultification."

On view are reliquaries with vestiges of Blinky and a small coffin with a rubber chicken. And, like all of Vallance's

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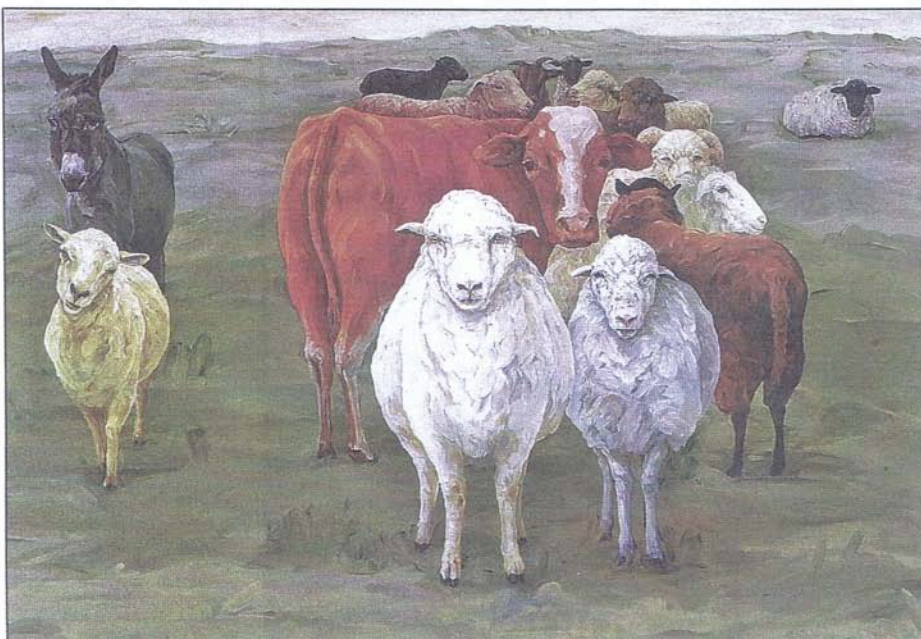
DETAILS

"Animalkind," works by 13 artists
When: Through May 6 (closed March 28-April 5)
Where: University Art Gallery, San Diego State University, College area
Tickets: Free (parking permits available at the gallery)
Phone: (619) 594-5171
Online: sdsu.edu/art

ARTIST-ACTIVIST COE TO PRESENT LECTURE

Sue Coe is the artist as muckraker and activist, internationally known for her paintings and books on everything from apartheid in South Africa to the American meat industry. She'll be presenting an illustrated lecture at San Diego State University to coincide with the opening reception of "Animalkind." The lecture, at 5 p.m. Saturday in Nasatir Hall 100, is followed by a 6:30 p.m. reception in the University Art Gallery.

Information: (619) 594-5171 or sdsu.edu/artgallery.



The crowd in Melissa Miller's "Sheep" looks curious about whoever or whatever is in front of them. Catherine Howell

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work, this piece navigates a razor's edge between droll humor and anthropological seriousness.

Sue Coe's paintings from her "Elephants We Must Never Forget" series are harrowing to consider and handsomely rendered. She's been raging for many years against abuse of animals in her art and these paintings look back to the days of Barnum & Bailey and other early circuses and zoos, including a moment when Barnum reunited a dead, stuffed Jumbo with his mate in the big top. He even dressed her in a widow's costume.

Coe's work sears our psyches more than any other work on view, but most of the art challenges conventional behavior toward animals, whether humorously, quietly or confrontationally. But Americans and Europeans aren't as collectively callous toward animals as we were in the days of P.T. Barnum. We seem to have developed an increase in compassion and empathy for other creatures — at least toward the species that continue to survive our general dominance of the globe.