BARRY LOPEZ

Landscapes *of the* Shamans

Artists look at animals in a new way

I RECENTLY SPENT a few weeks at the Penland School of Crafts, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. The artists and artisans who secure residencies to pursue their work here are among the best in the country, visionary people producing museum-quality work in glass, steel, clay, wood, and other materials. Most are in mid- or early career and I found them at work in their studios—in front of coal forges, easels, jewelers' tables, and lathes—at every hour of the day and night.

It was here that I first encountered the creations of Sylvie Rosenthal. The piece that initially drew me in was a large black wooden rabbit. The fore- and hindquarters were carved and finished realistically; connecting the two was a loggia, an airy, furnitureless, roofed corridor suggesting an isthmus.

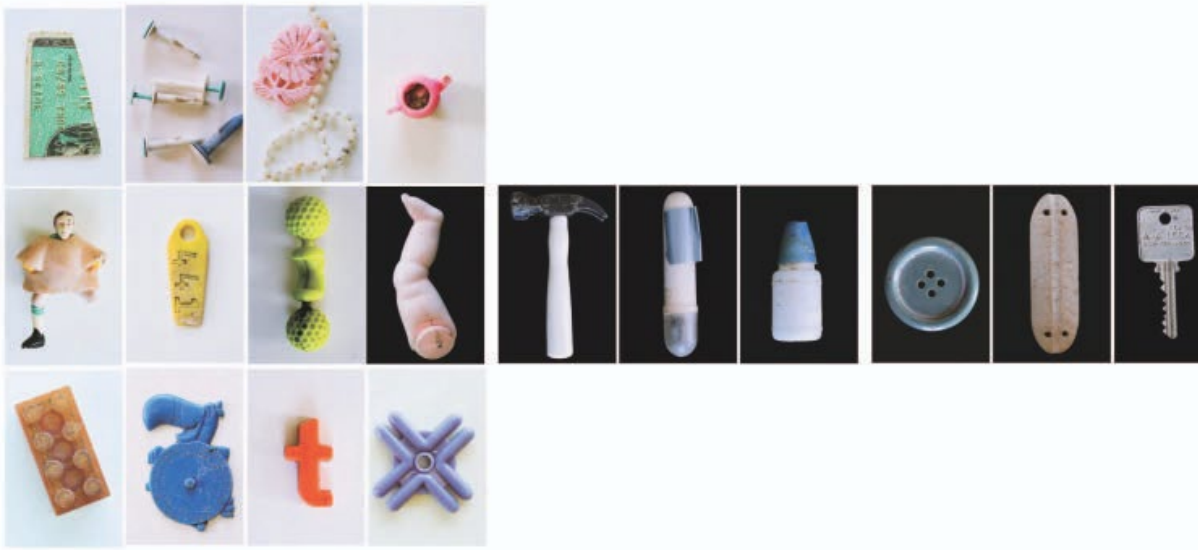
Ms. Rosenthal showed me photographs of some of her other large works—a baleen whale, a giraffe—in which she'd combined realism and invention to suggest both the animal's underlying nature and its possibilities in a world where, for many, wild animals are little more than opaque objects.

This wasn't the first time I'd been startled by an artist's insight into the conceptions we have about creatures different from ourselves. It was the first time, however, that the effort to do so struck me as culturally significant, comparable in its potential impact, I thought afterward, to that produced in the 1980s by the introduction of chaos theory.

A COUPLE OF YEARS before my encounter with Rosenthal's work, I received a set of images in the mail from an acquaintance, the photographer Lukas Felzmann. They were selections from his *Gull Juju* archive, showing the remarkable range of objects he'd removed from the entrails of sea gulls washed up on the northern California coast: toy soldiers, used syringes, tampon applicators, golf tees. I assumed many, or perhaps all, of these gulls had been killed by ingesting these things they had mistaken for food. Felzmann's arrangement of these objects on a piece of cloth suggested both human indifference and ethical complexity.

Another, much less alarming set of images, made by Wayne Levin, was sent to me at about the same time by a mutual friend. Levin had been photographing aggregations of *akule* (big-eyed scad) in the waters of Kealakekua Bay, on the leeward coast of the island of Hawai'i. In a comment on the back of *Akule*, a book of these photographs, I wrote that Levin's work revealed a genuine appreciation of akule life, and that he had reopened "the door to a world that much of humanity long ago turned its back on in order to pursue forms of wealth far more perishable, less elegant, and more banal." For me, some of the power behind his photographs came from the way he invoked clouds of interstellar gas in the cosmos and the yearning that many people have to live in a community that can cooperate.

For a decade or more I have been intrigued as well with the work of another artist intent on pushing deep into the borderland between the human and the nonhuman, the painter Tom Uttech, who lives in Wisconsin. Consider *Mamakadjidgan*, a recent 91 x 103–inch oil painting on linen, in which Uttech takes up what is for him a familiar theme. We're looking into a section of the North Woods, a remnant forest of tall, spindly evergreens, all of which seem to be dying. A black bear sits on a log in the foreground, amid a crosshatching of subdivision roads. His back is to us. This melancholy scene, with its suggestions of abuse and domestication, is brilliantly relieved, however—and counterbalanced—by loose flocks of a dozen or so species of birds flying through. The birds might have passed this way days before, or even months ago, but Uttech has gathered them together in a single moment.



LUKAS FELZMANN • *GULL JUJU*, 2013

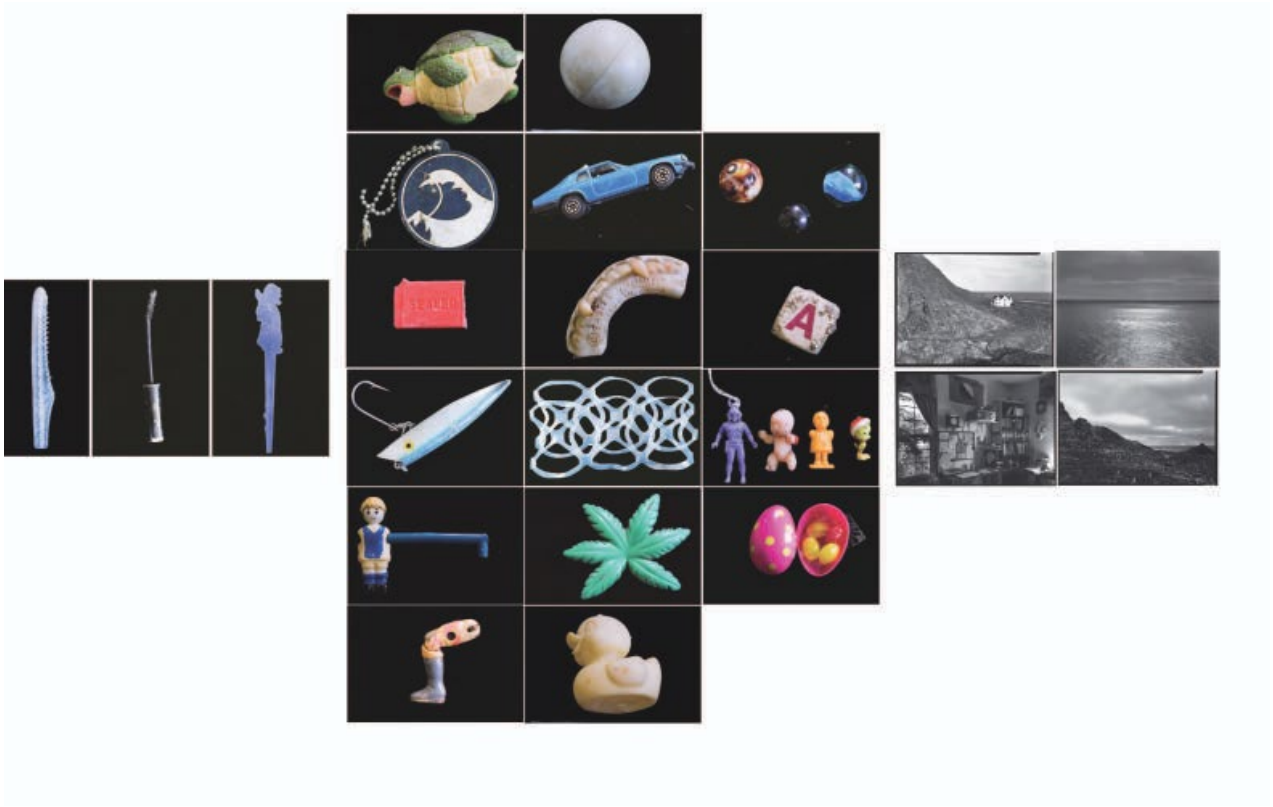
Among many other contemporary artists exploring the nature of animals, our perceptions of them, and our own animal natures, I'm also thinking just now of the South African installation artist Jane Alexander. For a recent show at the Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia, she mounted *Infantry*, a brigade of naked white men with the heads of African hunting dogs, marching during the days of apartheid, their heads cocked sharply to the right, a troop of jackbooted *Schutzstaffel* passing a reviewing stand and raising the fascist salute.

I've selected these particular artists — Rosenthal, Felzmann, Levin, Uttech, and Alexander — as being broadly representative of an emerging sensibility in contemporary art about animals, about the nature of our sensory and philosophical perceptions of them, and about our being related to them. My sense is that this group is now quite large and, too, international. Their collective work — again, in my view — urges us to expand even further the boundaries of troubling questions about social justice struggling for political traction today in America. And by engaging with this work freely, it's conceivable to me that our imaginations might be freshened.

I first began thinking seriously about new ways of looking at animals in the late 1960s, when I came upon a series of portraits of large African cats made by John Dominis for *Life* magazine, in 1967. Around 1974 I was given a set of photographs of zoo animals taken by Ilya, work commissioned by *Life*, I was told, but which it declined to publish because the animals appeared deracinated and impounded in her pictures, like patients in a mental hospital. Around that same time I also read John Berger's seminal essay "Why Look at Animals?"

How we imagine wild animals today, during the Sixth Biological Extinction, came more sharply into focus for me in the 1980s, when I became familiar with the photographs of Frans Lanting and, later, Michio Hoshino; and when I became acquainted, in the early '90s, with the collaborative work of Susan Middleton and David Liittschwager.* Lanting and Hoshino, it seemed to me, gave wild animals back their dignity and mystery, obviating years of wildlife photography that was merely decorative,

*The author wrote about Middleton and Liittschwager's photography in the Winter 1994 issue of *Orion* and about the late Michio Hoshino in the Winter 1997 issue.



pointedly "family friendly," or reductively iconic. Middleton and Liittschwager, by exploring animals' complex morphologies and pointing to their vulnerability, pushed us deeper into a consideration of animals' differing personalities and their tenuousness.

At this point a reader might feel compelled to suggest the work of many others—choreographers, musicians (e.g., Paul Winter), installation artists, visual artists (e.g., photographer Colleen Plumb), filmmakers, performance artists (Deke Weaver), and composers (John Luther Adams)—as being relevant to this discussion. Further, it's neither my place nor my wish in the examples I've offered to speculate about what Rosenthal or Uttech is really up to; and I want no part of identifying a formal movement that confines artists like them to a "school," or which collapses their unique visions into a similar meaning. It does seem to me, though, that there are legitimate, unifying threads in all this work, that each of the artists on these pages is hostile to the idea of the animal as an object and is suggesting that we are in deeper water than we think when we dream of animals, attempt to cast them as exemplars, set out to describe their unsettling or disruptive behavior, or refuse any longer to eat their flesh.

As I tour galleries today or find myself on a studio tour with a painter like Walton Ford—someone at the forefront of reimagining what is animal, what is human, and what is real—I'm struck by the variety of approaches and the range of provocation in this work. An art critic might say that it's all part of contemporary artists' ongoing rejection of scientific reductionism, or the deadening of the human imagination that came with the despiritualization of nature. But it's enough, surely, to put it more simply, to say that artists, too, are highly attuned to endangered species lists, habitat destruction, episodes of human barbarism glibly described as "bestial" by television commentators, and to qualities of "the marvelous" hidden within "the real," the foundation of magical realism in literature.

What animals signify, and how our perceptions of them shape our relations with them, has long lain at the core of human art, from at least the time of the cave paintings at Chauvet. Native American artists especially have (*continued on page 40*)

SYLVIE ROSENTHAL • *WARREN*, 2010

(*continued from page 35*) continued this ancient tradition, and its foundational imagery is now apparent in a bewildering range of modern expression. It's a species of art characterized by a keen awareness of the many crossover points at which human and nonhuman nature merge. To my mind, contemporary Native American art calls out to artists to explore the nonhuman further, to work the boundary between animals and humans, and to promote discussion of which ethics now apply here, in this liminal landscape of the shaman. Among the many inspiring contemporary Native American artists conceptualizing in this area, I think right away of the Wiyot painter and carver Rick Bartow, whose massive sculpture poles were recently installed at the entrance to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, in Washington DC.

Perhaps it's necessary in putting all these thoughts forward to emphasize that works of art are not generally intended to function as political or social statements. Many artists, however, are reacting to social and political realities when they're creating, so their work often informs us though it sets out no agenda. During the time I spent interviewing artists at the Penland community, I found deeply affecting the degree to which artistic excellence, not political or social comment, was the primary focus. How a particular work might later be interpreted seemed not to be much on anyone's mind.

Those who devise the social and economic policies we're all asked to support and abide by as citizens encounter little or no art in their deliberations. This is an unenlightened, not to say counterproductive, approach to solving human dilemmas like the collapse of near-shore fisheries, the pollution of groundwater with synthetic hormones, and the desperate drive to profit financially at any cost, which is behind, for example, the marketing of oil from Alberta's tar sands. The thinking that artists provoke in us, about the meaning of life or what constitutes reality, about the inutility of war or the venality of longing for material wealth, are crucial to our understanding of, and our planning effectively for, a viable future.

If we are able to listen to the artist today as attentively as we listen to the spellbinding orator, how can we not help but become a wiser country?