

# Master Rabbit I Saw

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Shortly after my first visit to the Berlin Zoo in 2004, a story appeared in the news of Juan, an Andean spectacled bear who'd paddled across a moat using a log for a raft and then scaled a wall, finally commandeering a bicycle in an attempt to escape the zoo. It was a bid for freedom that haunts me to this day. "Spectacled bears eat both vegetables and meat but children tend not to be on their menu," the zoo's deputy director Heiner Kloes assured the public. Unlike me, he was not otherwise concerned.

My artistic work is often informed by animals and is shaped by their appearance in various genres of writing—ghost stories, tall tales, mysteries, myths, fairy tales, jokes, poems, essays, and memoirs. *The Private Life of the Rabbit*, my most recent exhibition, is no exception. It's a ghost story, a tall tale, a mystery, a myth, a fairy tale, a joke, a poem, an essay, and a memoir.

It began with an invitation by Jonathan Middleton (director of Vancouver's Or Gallery) to create an exhibition of new work for his series *The Troubled Pastoral*, co-produced with Mark Lanctôt (curator of Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain).

My take on the pastoral genre is absurdist. Everything I know about it I learned from Monty Python. I, like them, consider "England's green & pleasant Land" (as William Blake called it) the setup of a surrealist joke. I access the image of the rural good life via their mad, intertextual stream of consciousness.

*The Private Life of the Rabbit* borrows its title from R.M. Lockley's book of the same name, which recounts the life history and social behaviour of wild rabbits in Wales. Lockley wrote it in 1964, basing his insights on five years of painstaking field observations. I happened upon the work while researching Richard Adams' classic children's story *Watership Down*, which is indebted to Lockley's account of rabbit life.

*The Private Life of the Rabbit* is a mash-up of Lockley's popular work of natural history, Adams' fantastic and dystopian view of the English countryside, and John Berger's 1977 essay "Why Look at Animals?" The show features a gigantic pair of rabbit ears made of high density foam and resin and a modernist rabbit hutch to go with the ears. Documentation of these in-progress pieces bookend the following series of photos taken at the Berlin Zoo. All photo-caption text on pages 54-64 is borrowed from Berger's essay (from his book *About Looking*), which examines how the relationship between man and nature has changed over time.

*Images courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery*









As frequent as the calls of animals in a zoo are the cries of children demanding: Where is he? Why doesn't he move? Is he dead?



The apology runs like this: What do you expect? It's not a dead object you have come to look at, it's alive. It's leading its own life. Why should this coincide with its being properly visible?





Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises.  
They came from over the horizon. They belonged *there* and *here*.



The image of a wild animal becomes the starting-point of a daydream:  
a point from which the daydreamer departs with his back turned.



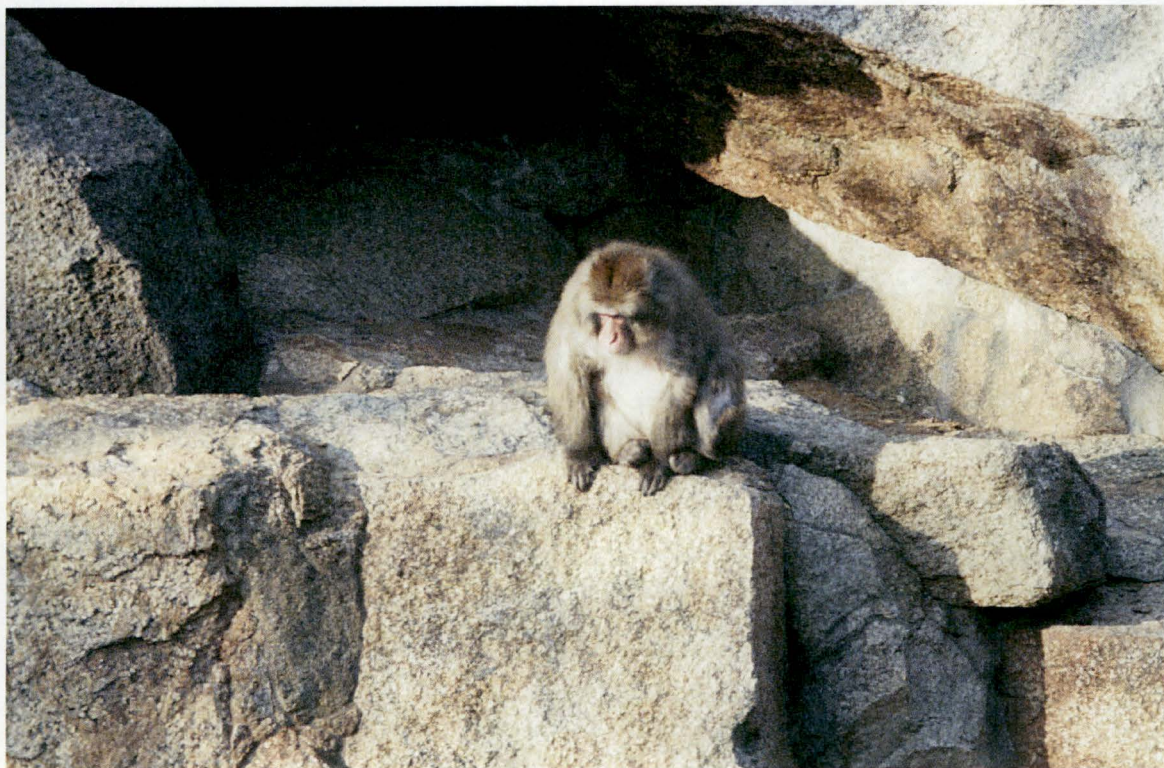


Homer describes the death of a soldier on a battlefield and then the death of a horse. Both deaths are equally transparent to Homer's eyes, there is no more refraction in one case than the other.



The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary. The same animal may well look at other species in the same way. He does not reserve a special look for man. But by no other species except man will the animal's look be recognized as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look.





At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mathematically. They have been immunized to encounter.



The cultural marginalization of animals is, of course, a more complex process than their physical marginalization. The animals of the mind cannot be so easily dispersed. Sayings, dreams, stories, superstitions, the language itself, recall them.





The animals of the mind, instead of being dispersed, have been co-opted into other categories so that the category *animal* has lost its central importance. Mostly they have been co-opted into the *family* and into the *spectacle*.



“We seem to have made a bad error of judgment. We have always regarded the lioness as perfectly safe.”





What were the secrets of the animal's likeness with, and unlikeness from, man? The secrets whose existence man recognized as soon as he intercepted an animal's look?

