

Dan Bainbridge, *Bestiary*

Visiting Dan Bainbridge's studio in Brooklyn's East Williamsburg, one enters the strangest of worlds. It is crammed with figures of toy-like animals that at a closer examination appear increasingly bizarre. Some are drawn from nature while others only resemble real animals or have origins in mythology.

What amazes the viewer is the mimetic perfection: the artist's ability to render them true. The treatment of animal figures – employing various fabrics on metal wire frame, fitted with all sorts of objects: doll legs, prosthetic fingers, drill bits, plastic bottles, LEDs – is at the same time distortive and faithful. A signature example is *Lyuba* (2014), a re-creation of a 42,000 years old mummy of a baby mammoth, discovered in 2007 in Russia's Arctic Yamal Peninsula. Bainbridge's work makes us marvel at the exactitude with which the artist renders a mummified body, echoing its distortions and facial grimace, making it look both grotesque and tender to produce an effect of utmost vulnerability.

His *menagerie* reminds of a medieval bestiary where no distinction was made between species native to Europe, exotic animals, and imaginary beings. Dragons, unicorns, basilisks and griffins were depicted among deer, lions and elephants. In Dan Bainbridge's studio, standing next to *Lyuba* we find *Doberman Pincher* (2014) – a pinkish dog with beak-like muzzle made of prosthetic fingers, and a humanoid rear leg taken from a doll. It is as if the artist began by imitating nature, and then abandoned the original, creating this hybrid directly from imagination. A healthy dose of grotesque pushes the issue of materiality to the extreme in Bainbridge's droll transmutations of zoo-morphological creatures, many of them mythical. In *Unicorn* (2013), a glowing crystal is thrust into a pink stuffed pony, its tip sticking out garishly from its forehead. Glowing crystals also figure as teats of *She-Wolf Reading Light* (2013). *She-Wolf* sculpture (2014), the artist's take-off on the founding myth of the ancient city of Rome and its most famous representation in art, with teats made of whipped cream canisters, revealed its transformative potential during the artist's performance in 2014 when whipped cream was dispensed for the audience consumption. In a yet another version, an assemblage *She-Wolf and Swan with Romulus and Remus* (2015), the artist added two figures of special significance to him – in place of the twins.

When proposed the title *Bestiary* for his exhibition, the artist responded with an additional twist to his body of work and was inspired to replicate in large scale drawings his three-dimensional 'zoo'. The drawings quickly became assemblages which, in addition to the multitude of materials used also display Bainbridge's exquisite compositional skills and exceptional ease in portraying natural and imaginary features of animals. Confident in working in large scale, he introduces an animal with great symbolic power in American culture – the bison (*Paco*, 2015). Treated as in classical portraiture, it evokes Picasso's *Minotaur* – a mythical creature the Spanish artist identified with.

Inspired by nature and mythology and using found images and objects, Dan Bainbridge created a compendium of beasts. Artists before him made their own bestiaries, among them Leonardo da Vinci, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec or Saul Steinberg, not to mention creators of fantasy computer games. [Yet,] for all their whimsy and absurdity, there is something deeply unsettling about Bainbridge's inscrutable creatures. Most of them are beautiful and repulsive at the same time. He uses grotesque as a means to convey irony and melancholy. But we also sense lurking evil, covert eroticism, and latent cruelty. Is what Bainbridge explores the tension between gentleness and aggression? Does his interest lie purely in distortion or, rather, in human capability to perceive innocent works of nature as good or evil, possessed of beauty or ugliness? Or is it human nature itself, capable of innocence, perversity and inner conflict?

One steadily recurring motif can shed light on this question: a figure of a boy in a mask with a lurid, wide open mouth and unseeing eyes. The doll "huffing" paint from a plastic bag (2006) was inspired by a documentary film about Romanian street children, and stands for the lowest rank of existence, for utmost humiliation, for the most vulnerable of human beings. Street children, whoring, sniffing chemicals, mentally damaged, deprived of childhood, are happy only when high.

Dan Bainbridge reflects on double meaning of *Monkey Mop Boy*: "There are still a couple of strips of duct tape stuck to Boy's head that were originally used to attach a plastic bag filled with a bit of paint. The bag is gone, but his hand is still miming the gesture. The "huffing" bag is gone... now his gesture implies "blowing." There is a connection between this sexual connotation and the "hand-to-mouth" economic situation. Addicts (...) and hookers are close cousins to victims of economic slavery. The big red lips ready to suck... blood suckers, parasites, paint huffers? The eyes are closed... [...] The

Boy is a whore; but he is enigmatic like Cinderella or St. Therese. He is pathetic but the boy is experiencing a transfiguring state, a window into which he catches a glimpse of ecstasy. There is something extraordinary about him".¹

A figure of exploitation, **Monkey Mop Boy**, straddles the murky ground between innocence and evil. Possibly the artist's alter ego, he insinuates himself into other works, invading their space, as in, for example, Bainbridge's take-off on Goya's *The Parasol* (c. 1777): **Goya with Monkey Mop Boy** (2014). In the assemblage **She-Wolf and Swan with Romulus and Remus** (2015) mentioned above, we find **Monkey Mop Boy**, with its wide open mouth, supplanting Romulus or Remus... master yoga teacher, Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) stands for the other twin, also reaching to painted whipped cream canisters.

When the original boy-doll (2006) was thought to be lost, the artist re-created it from one tiny photograph, but this time as a mask and costume for himself, now equipped with a mop made of limp toy monkey (2009). Since then **Monkey Mop Boy** has prominently featured in the artist's performances. **Dan Bainbridge's performances** are based on improvisation, usually employing music, stuffed animals, or a costume-persona of **Monkey Mop Boy**. They include collaboration with other artists or audience participation, and Bainbridge himself often interferes in performances of other artists. They allow for chance and obligatory chaos, exploring the same themes his animal creations do: invoking good and evil, the artist analyzes what it means to be trapped between one and the other. He wrote about the metamorphoses of **Monkey Mop Boy** and its meaning as a persona in his performances:

"The Boy is wearing bright pink pants and a forest green turtleneck. The Boy has a job to do; he is a worker. He is caught in a strange surreal underworld. The monkey mop does two things: 1. It is creepy and absurd, provoking questions about the relationship between animals and humans. 2. It is a humorous invention meant to bring the "fun" back into cleaning. Novelty mops are items purchased by parents for their children. Having to clean would no longer be a form of punishment. This idea reminds me of Tom Sawyer painting the fence. Why do we only see those sexy French maid outfits on Halloween? Why do I always picture Communists in grey jumpsuits? I need the colorful, dysfunctional melting pot of America".²

The hybrid and ominous character of Dan Bainbridge's works, the tension between the physical nature of the materials and the subject, as well as the connection he makes between toys and exploitation, situate his work within the tradition of critique of American society by such artists as Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy and evoke specifically American nightmares. His own description of **Monkey Mop Boy** also echoes the themes present in Polish artist Zbigniew Libera's *Correcting Devices*, a series of objects focused on ways of showing how individuals are formed in the socialization process, which included such works as *You Can Shave the Baby* (1995) and launched his career internationally. Yet, even with these affinities, Bainbridge (who doesn't employ ready-made toys) follows his highly original path.

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¹ Dan Bainbridge, poetic writing to performance artist Sarah H. Paulson, on the back of a 2009 show card for a performance

² Ibid.