

Monsters and Mystery Haunt Four Women Artists' Grimm-Like Dream at the MAC

By Lucia Simek

I have a couple daughters, and we like to read fairy tales together, especially ones where scary or heroic talking animals feature alongside little girls. My girls are certainly frightened when we read stories like these, but not so much that they won't listen. They are listening for the part when the girl defeats the beast, as so often she does. But they also are just really interested in the beasts - those wicked and complicated bad guys. And because I have daughters (and am one myself), I know that girls are beasts too. Fairytales, among other things, certainly act as parables about conquering our own demons.

There are various incarnations of she-beasts and otherwise in a show called Beasts and Bunnies at the MAC through February 12, which features work by Helen Altman, Frances Bagley, Celia Eberle and Margaret Meehan - a group of female artists whose work explores animal themes in fantastical ways. Individually, these artists each can fill a gallery with an air of wonder-terror; together here, the gallery is effectively another world.

The large gallery is populated largely with sculptures, both free-standing and wall-mounted. Most notable (or perhaps noticeable) is a life-size, cream-colored, footless foam zebra by Frances Bagley. It's frozen in a gallop, with metal rods jutting out from its unfinished legs. His black stripes, made with felt, are only complete on one side, while the other half of the body remains shrouded in black. His eyes are covered in cheap packing foam that seems to billow in the pantomimed motion of the creature. He's a kind of half-made Franken-beast, come to life mid-way through his creation. Many of the contributions by the four artists propel the same vibe: a kind of gothic, man-playing-god-and-getting-it-all-wrong theme that makes for some haunting conceptions.

Margaret Meehan's sculpture Pelt is a crouching heap of deep purple-black faux fur studded with fake teeth. Meehan teases expectations in this piece by lumping the fur in certain places to suggest a body part, but then doing the same elsewhere, adding teeth willy-nilly and confounding any sense of the beast's body; you can't tell head from tail. The shape of the thing, and all those teeth, make it seem like some kind of cystic aberration: cells adding to cells, fur mounting fur. The monstrous thing is terrifying in its simplicity, with powers in it that threaten, even if the thing is inert. One of my daughters, who tagged along to see the show, wouldn't go near it. "It has too many teeth," she said.

Bared teeth are always threatening indicators in stories with animals and people alike. Nothing is so chilling as a wolf's sharp snarl, or a mean grown up's. Meehan employs teeth quite often in her work. The human prosthetic teeth she uses always change something that could be benign — like the Victorian photo of baby, Molly, pictured in this show, whose mouth has been made up in a pinched set of pearly whites- into something malevolent and corrupt.

Some of Celia Eberle's work does something quite the opposite. Her cluster of three small wall sculptures called Petrified Forest is made from bone and coral - things that would be corrupting somewhere if not for the artist employing them. Atop the bone, Eberle has created little vignettes with the coral serving as trees or branches, with small animal figures made of jet perched on or peering out of it. These are sensitive little pieces, though cryptic too, that counterweight Meehan's forceful hazards.

Helen Altman's contributions to the show are varied: a skull made from anchovies, a fish tank with fake goldfish tethered to weights, plush toys that twist together, a blanket printed with a dog's portrait, among others. She plays with notions of warmth, comfort and familiarity while tweaking our relationship with familiar things into something untouchable and bizarre.

The small square gallery has been turned into a habitable landscape by the four artists — a collaborative installation called Call and Response. A low fence has been constructed on either side of the space, creating a narrow “lane” that one walks down to get through the gallery. Behind the fence on the left side is a smattering of odd little constructions, sculptures and readymades cluttering the ground behind a tall cut-out tree. Bats, birds and butterflies dangle from the ceiling, and a foam squirrel eats a nut somewhere up above. There’s a tick-tock sound that fills the space, made by a cuckoo clock and two glockenspiel-type toys that spin small animals on plates, knocking tiny balls at each rotation. On the right side of the gallery, casts of hands project a wolf shadow puppet on the wall. On the floor here, too, are bowls of odd collections.

The placement of objects throughout the installation, and the laying of the tick-tocking over the experience, acts like a collage of narratives set to the pace of growing fear. There’s an austerity to the space, too, as much as there is confusion. Much of the dimension of the installation is actually created by shadows.

The room - executed poetically and with intuitive deftness - feels just as those old Grimm’s’ fairy tales can: magical, but potent with horrors disguised as loveliness. Trickery, you’re certain, abounds behind each artful oddity, as expected from this bevy of women with such seismic imagination and steadfast concern for their craft.