

The last 50 years in animal ceramics

Catalogue essay –David Heap

Beth Paynter

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The last 50 years in Animal Ceramics.

Beth Paynter.

Introduction

I am putting together an exhibition based upon how animals have influenced ceramics over the last 50 years.

The other aspect I am focusing on is, that mainly all the craftspeople im using within the exhibition are women, bar two, who will hopefully provide a good contrast to the many female artists within the exhibition.

I am aiming to show how animals as a subject matter are visited over and over again, whether it is in the form of animal prints, photographs of the entire animals or cartoons, whatever it may be, most objects, clothes, films and articles etc have at one time or another been associated with animals.

Society has changed its views a lot regarding animals, animal treatment, animal cruelty etc and many people are now turning to vegetarianism and helping to rescue animals in need, rather than treating them like they don't have feelings, are below humans and are just a source for food and clothing materials.

Animal welfare groups such as the RSPCA, RSPB, WWF, IFAW and PETA (References1) have all worked hard to raise funds and to highlight issues regarding extinction and cruelty to animals, this has led to the general public becoming more aware of these issues and getting involved in standing against them, people are now beginning to view animals as innocent, defenceless creatures who are used and destroyed by man, when we should be helping to protect them and to stop certain species from dying out.

Animal Art/Craft overview

Man and animal are closely related and live together even now, domestic animals are treated as part of the family by most owners and it is now generally considered cruel to make dogs live outside in kennels or leave animals to catch their own food.

Animal art can also be traced back as far as cave men, primitive drawings on cave walls (References 2) were the earliest examples of ‘animals in art’ and were very simplistic, strangely it is not a subject that we tire of returning to, even when buying holiday souvenirs or the latest high street clothes; which are once again primarily using animal imagery and prints. (References 3)

The Egyptians worshiped anthropomorphic gods and surrounded themselves with their imagery, to the Egyptians, cats in particular (References 4) were very sacred animals and were worshipped, in other cultures too, certain animals have been given the status of holiness and are either not eaten or are worshipped, for example, Ganesh is an elephant headed god within the Hindu religion and his imagery can be found throughout India and Nepal. (References 5) Hindus also believe the cow to be a sacred animal to them and therefore do not eat beef products.

People of the Jewish faith (References 6) generally choose to avoid pork and those who worship the Muslim faith (References 7) are also forbidden to eat any pork products, most Hindus and Buddhists are vegetarian, as are some Sikhs, not eating meat is important to the people of these religions as they do not like to consume any products that they feel slows down their spirituality and physical growth. (References 8)



(Fig 1)

As you can see animals still play a huge part in many peoples everyday lives, fashion over the last 20 years in particular has moved towards using a lot of animal print patterns and faux fur, which is a more animal friendly way of wearing fur, as a lot of people have become more conscious of animal welfare over the last few years, especially as organisations such as PETA campaign for cruelty to animals to stop all over the world, and even in the last few years in England we have seen the ban of fox hunting. (References 9)

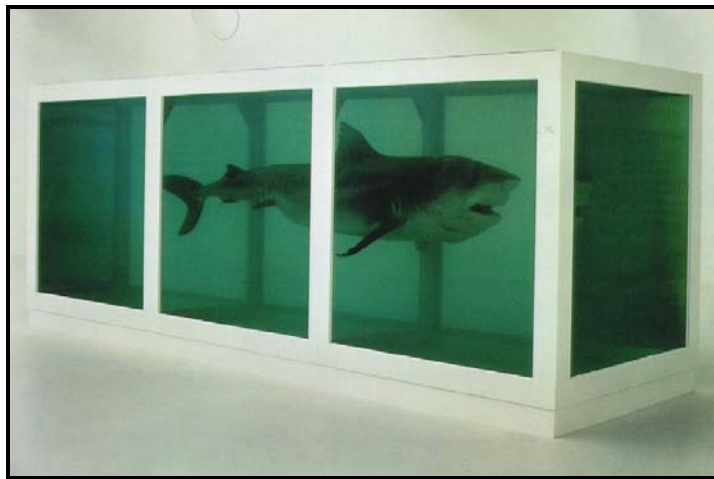
Even within the design world, although abstract in its form, products such as Philippe Starcks juice squeezer shows some resemblance to animals in the long legs it stands up on, they resemble giraffe's legs or even a spiders, showing that even products designed for the kitchen have had animals play some part within the design process. (References 10)



(Fig 2)

Within the art and craft world animals still dominate a lot of artists subject matter, be it showing the quirky personalities of animals, such as Olivia Browns ceramic dogs or making bizarre statements with living or dead animals, for example Damien Hirst's work focuses a lot on using dead animals in formaldehyde showing the insides of animals etc.

But using living animals was a step too far in Guillermo Varga's case as he exhibited a starving dog chained up in an installation, he claims the piece shows peoples hypocrisy as no one cares if a dog starves to death on the street and during the hours it was tied up there no one attempted to free or feed the dog. (References 11)



(Fig 3)



(Fig 4)

Using ceramic animals in order to make statements about personality, cruelty, animal testing and abuse etc is therefore a much safer option as no actual animals are harmed and the piece is relatively permanent, which makes it longer lasting in its spreading of the message intended by the artist, which is why I have chosen to particularly focus upon the ceramic area of animal art.

The artists within the exhibition

The artists I have chosen are within a wide variety of age, experience, technique, approach and popularity, some of the artists are little known but their work is no less important, as I personally believe that everyone should have equal opportunities to display their work.

I have chosen the artists Hella Jongerius, Olivia Brown, Louis Mendez, Ann Roberts and Natalie Surving who works with Richard Surving making her another good contrast to my other female exhibitors.

All the artists within the exhibition have been influenced in different ways throughout their creative career by animals, they all use ceramics and different scales, realistic or quirky approaches to express their individual messages and opinions.

The wide range of styles will hopefully highlight to the public how diverse one subject matter can be made, depending upon individual viewing of the subject, and how after many years animals still play a hugely important part in the way we see the world, and how animals are very important to the creativity, let alone the survival of humans. (References 12)

Hella Jongerius

I have chosen Hella Jongerius as she is classed as more of a designer and worked closely with the company Droog before going on to open her own

company 'Jongeriuslab' so, therefore is different to some of the other makers who mainly produce individual, one off pieces to sell, whereas Jongerius, although also working in hand building works in a pristine, manufactured looking way that makes her work look like it has been machine made and could make her work easy to mass produce.



(Fig 4)

Jongerius works in such a way that the animals she makes are decoration on a functional object such as a dish, although beautifully made and accurate, the accuracy and pristine appearance of them makes it seem less of a personal love for animals that drives her to create them and is more of a decorative reason as to why they are there.

Jongerius is interesting as a designer/maker as she works in a variety of medias and across a broad range of areas, (References 13) she makes furniture, textiles and ceramics among others, this makes her a very interesting artist to have within my exhibition as she is the maker who uses the widest range of materials and subjects, Olivia Brown in particular contrasts her well as Brown works in an obviously hand built manner and although Hella also likes to leave in traces of the techniques etc of how her work was made, it is very subtle in comparison to Olivia Browns hand built dogs.

Olivia Brown

Olivia Brown's work is a strong contrast to Jongerius' work as she clearly has a love for animals that is not as obvious in Jongerius' work, Brown uses her love for animals and their individual personality traits to create quirky, fun pieces of work that are none offensive and loveable, she ensures that every tiny detail in her installations are catered for, even down to the tiniest prop detail.

Brown's work would bring a lot of light and fun to the exhibition as it would be appealing to child and adult alike, the light-hearted nature of the work would encourage people to think about their own animals and the quirky personality traits that they all possess which make them so loveable and appealing to us. (References 14)

Olivia likes to include a story behind her installations, which is usually presented in a humorous and quirky way that makes it appealing to every one, this also brings the characters to life, making them easier for people to empathize with.

Brown focuses on a wide range of animals which she uses in a fun way to highlight issues from people's (rats) treatment in factory environments to frogs in the French restaurant trade.

By using animals in the place of people in a lot of cases could attract more empathy from people viewing the work as animals are defenseless in a lot of situations and Olivia highlights their plight in such a way that people aren't offended by any kind of blatant cruelty on show but empathize and love the animals involved due to the subtle hints at their suffering and the cute way in which the work has been created and displayed.



(Fig 5)

Louis Mendez

Louis Mendez creates pieces on a large scale that mainly explore humans and animals, his scale means that he can achieve intensity and still use traditional ceramic techniques, he uses a wide range of medias; like the other artists within the exhibition he paints and draws as well as creating his ceramic pieces. (References 15)



(Fig 6)

Louis Mendez has been working on animal forms since the 1960's where he hand built forms such as 'Minoan bull' 1965. His recent work focuses on

horses with which he uses a variety of shapes and glazes to create a range of pieces; he uses the raku firing process for some of the pieces which is very different in its approach to glazing than some of the other artists within the exhibition.

‘Simultaneously an object of beauty, power, mobility and wealth, the horse has played a central role in the development of human society since prehistoric times. As such, the horse has also served as an inspiration for artists, warriors, royalty and sportsmen’ - Louis Mendez (1)



(Fig 7)

Like Jongerius, Mendez’s work appears to be more for decorative purposes than for people to see meanings within it and empathize like Olivia Browns work, despite appearances though, Mendez seems to have a real passion for the work he creates, looking back on the past of the animal throughout history and making the work as a kind of homage to the role the animal has played in pushing society forward.

As Mendez has been working for so many decades and still focuses on similar subject matter, it makes him interesting in comparison to the other artists, especially seen as he is also male, as he has been the longest working artist, even working before many of the artists within the exhibition were born, the fact that he still uses animals as a major part of his influences shows that there has been a constant demand for animal based work since the 1960’s.

Ann Roberts

Ann Roberts, like Mendez, has been pursuing her art career since the 1960s but didn't begin exhibiting until the 1980's, her work is darker in comparison to the others within the exhibition, as she focuses on the thought that animals have infiltrated our everyday lives rather than humans having welcomed them into their homes and lives as a household pet.

'I use dogs as protagonists because they have completely integrated themselves into the human world of gestured poses of affection, in this way they participate fully in their humans' lives' – Ann Roberts. (2007:56)

Roberts personifies her animals, using human situations such as showing affection and objects such as boats in which to place the animals, to make them seem as though they have the same intelligence and means as humans.

The darker side of Roberts work contrasts well with Olivia Browns work, as she focuses on the vulnerability of animals and Roberts shows the devious and malevolent side of them, perhaps like Brown, Roberts uses animals to project to the world her view of humans but in such a way that the viewer is never quite sure if the animals are the main focus or the scenario is.



(Fig 8)

Roberts has a love of nature and likes to explore different Medias and creative techniques, but layers within her work are important to her, therefore it is to her, rather a good thing that we cannot quite tell the main focus within the work and have to think about different meanings etc.

She likes to mix different clays together to form a unique and strong raw material with which to work, this is another difference between her work and the others and such a wide variety of technique etc within the exhibition can only be a good thing in highlighting the wide area animals occupy within the ceramic art world.

Natalie and Richard Surviving

Natalie Surviving is again a good contrast to have within the exhibition as although she is a woman like Brown, Roberts and Jongerius, she also partners with a man to create her work, making this male and female team a good partnership to look at.

Working together from the 1980s they have made a wide variety of animal pieces, mainly making life-like and detailed pieces that are reasonably

realistic; still to this day, they make animal sculptures which they sell through a variety of sources.

‘Trained at the Art Centre College of Design in Los Angeles, Natalie Surving became a ceramist but ran away with her family to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico when she had a devastating studio fire. There she discovered a town full of artists and got free use of a tile factory where she began creating animal subjects in that medium. She finds the tiles functional, affordable, and aesthetically pleasing’.



(Fig 9)

Very little is known about Richard, not even if he is Natalie’s brother, father or husband, more is written about Natalie and as my main focus within the exhibition is that the artists are women, this is helpful as although Richard is a male, he is still in the background of the creativity with Natalie and the pair combine to create vast amounts of animal ceramics together.

Their influence seems to be mainly the aesthetics of the animal form in general, as well as European porcelain works and the figurines of German sculptor Johann Joachim Kaendler, at least their work in the 1980’s was

inspired by his figurines. The main focus now appears to be the realistic representation of the animal they're working on at the time.

Conclusion

The exhibition's main aim is to show that animals are still playing an important role within our everyday lives and that even after thousands of years we still look to animals to provide us with food, clothing, and the patterns/prints on their skin for fashion items; love, companionship and inspiration for artwork and even design pieces.

Most households now own a pet; animals that were once thrown out to starve or survive alone are now rescued and rehomed, animals are no longer regarded as below humans, they have been elevated to pretty equal levels with humans due to the change in people's attitudes towards animals and animal cruelty.

Society has changed a lot towards its treatment of animals in the western world and even in countries where they haven't yet viewed animals as having the same feelings as humans etc they still use the images of the animals themselves as inspiration for their artwork, clothes, food etc.

The artists within this exhibition all use hand building techniques to create their work but all have different approaches towards what the main focus of their work is, be it the glazing, the material used or the scenario or story behind it.

They all have very different styles and come from different backgrounds, some have worked for only 10 years while others have worked since the 1960s, either way the result is the same, animal artwork has always been in demand and still is, animals are their inspiration and their work as it is could not exist without them, I hope that this collection of different styles of work will open people's eyes to the different ways in which they can influence people's lives and to think more carefully about how animals should be treated.

I have contacted Olivia Brown as she is one of the more contemporary artists and works on commission a lot of the time, so I was hoping to get a reply but unfortunately I did not receive one. If I were to do this essay again I would have tried to contact all of the artists just incase any would have replied and not just contacted the one I thought was most likely to reply.

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- (13) <http://www.designboom.com/eng/interview/jongerus.html>
- (14) http://www.oliviabrown.co.uk/?page_id=7
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Bibliography & Appendix

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- 9) http://www.whorange.net/photos/uncategorized/2008/09/15/hella_jongerus_animal_plates.jpg
- 10) <http://www.oliviabrown.co.uk/work.php?page=ceramics>
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3) 500 animals in clay. Published by sterling 2007.

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Quotes

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Emails

Beth Paynter

beth_paynter@hotmail.com

To oliviajbrown@hotmail.com

From: **Beth Paynter** (beth_paynter@hotmail.com)

Sent: 06 December 2010 18:11:13

To: oliviajbrown@hotmail.com

Dear Olivia,

I am a third year crafts student, I believe we went to the same uni (MMU Cheshire- Alsager) as its closed down and moved to Manchester now, I've moved to Staffordshire University, where I am now doing my final essay on an imaginary exhibition put together by me which is on animals in ceramics over the last 50 years and I would like to include you as my most modern artist/maker.

I was hoping, if you have time if you could please provide me with a bit of information about why you focus on animals in particular? what issues (-if any) you like to try and highlight in your work, or would like to highlight in the future? and why you believe animals are important in art and crafts.

Thank you for your time and good luck for the future with your work-its lovely!! :)

lots of love Beth xxx

Received no reply.

Images

Fig 1- Hindus with a cow –Google images.

Fig 2- Juicer, created for Alessi- Philippe Starck-

<http://www.vertigo-interiors.co.uk/Accessories/juicer.htm>

Fig 3- Shark- Damien Hirst-

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/01/arts/design/01voge.html>

Fig 4- Starving dog- Guillermo Vargas-

<http://guillermohabacucvargas.blogspot.com/>

Fig 5- ceramic dog- Olivia brown- <http://www.oliviabrown.co.uk>

Fig 6- Louis Mendez with his work-

<http://artist.louismendez.com/Welcome.html>

Fig 7- Horse- Louis Mendez- <http://artist.louismendez.com/>

Fig 8-ann Roberts- fish ceramic piece-

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Fig 9- Natalie and Richard surviving-iguana-

<http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/3493126>