

The COYOTE

and the Beer Can

(IS THERE ANY HOPE FOR WILDLIFE ART?)



goldbuyer57

by Douglas Ord

I

In 1979, Canadian wildlife artist Robert Bateman produced a painting that was unlike any he had done before. At first glance, however, its distinctiveness was minute. Its obvious subject matter was a coyote, which Bateman later said he had wanted to depict "in a noble stance."¹ The coyote, posed slightly to the right of centre in a precisely rendered "natural habitat" of low-grown brush and stones, is presented in great detail with an obvious concern for verisimilitude. It is gazing even further toward the right, apparently at something that has escaped the boundaries of the painting's frame.

Both in style and generic subject matter, this painting is indistinguishable from Bateman's other work and – except in regard to technical quality – from that of literally hundreds of other wildlife artists. For all practise, with varying degrees of skill, the craft of realistically portraying animals in their "natural habitats" without any intrusive reminders of the 20th century or even, for that matter, of the fact that human beings exist at all. Nestled toward the lower left-hand corner of *Coyote in Winter Sage* though, and almost concealed by carefully-painted stalks of grass, is the element of heterogeneity, of freakishness almost, insofar as the conventions of the genre are concerned. Rendered with the same attention to detail as the represented habitat and the represented coyote is ... a represented Budweiser beer can. It is shown lying on its side, its pop-open top conspicuously unrepresented. The represented beer can is revealed thereby to be empty of represented beer, making it a represented object of the category: mass-produced throwaway container that has finally acceded to its long-term status as garbage.

In the best-selling coffee-table book where the painting was reproduced a couple of years after its creation, Bateman offered the following explanation, prefacing it with an almost apologetic "I don't often paint pictures with messages but ..."

Coyotes live in semi-wilderness areas near towns and villages – the sort of areas that get littered with beer cans and other garbage by snowmobilers and casual hunters. The beer can in the picture may bother a few people enough to remind them to take their beer cans home with them.²

This is certainly a humble enough ambition on the part of the artist, who came to wildlife art only after an early apprenticeship in the "messageless" praxis of abstract expressionism. But the intrusion of a discarded beer can

into what is almost always the historically evacuated pictorial space of a piece of wildlife art – especially of a piece of quickly mass-reproduced wildlife art – may be of greater significance than even the perpetrator himself was willing to allow at the time.

II

As a genre, wildlife art holds great appeal for what might be called the aesthetically unschooled – for those who, for whatever reason, are without the conceptual tools required for even a rudimentary understanding of modern and postmodern art. Like the "kitsch" described by Clement Greenberg in his famous essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch,"³ wildlife art tends to make things easy for such an audience. It offers in pictures a readily recognizable simulacrum of the very phenomena that seem to present themselves to the eyes in real life or at least in the real lives of talented individuals who are still lucky enough to enjoy access to wilderness.

But in catering to so contemporary a yearning on the part of those who view 20th-century civilization itself in less than salutary terms, wildlife art employs the very techniques of that civilization. Only it does so covertly, behind conventions of perspective that were developed between the European Renaissance and the 19th century. Wildlife art's largest marker, for example, functions on the basis of mechanically reproduced prints and the plates that are found between the covers of coffee-table books; it is, *par excellence*, a genre that has profited from the decay of the "aura" that Walter Benjamin believed appertained to the unique art object in pre-industrial times.⁴ For what is important in mass-reproduced and widely distributed wildlife art is not so much the unique object as its apparent verisimilitude and referentiality to an apparently fragile and endangered reality.

Yet wildlife art's other major concession to modernity is in the artist's frequent use of the camera to record, for later transfer to canvas, details of landscape and of animal movement and physiognomy that may evade the naked eye. Again, however, this does not entail an obvious use of contemporary technology, such as has been the hallmark of modernist art generally, but rather its careful disguise. The realistic style of wildlife painting implies that what is depicted is as accessible to the painter's unaided eye in reality as it is to the viewer's eye in representation. But

Photo. ©1979 Robert Bateman. Courtesy Miu Pond Press



wildlife art, like the camera, freezes the presence of phenomena that, in their relationship both to the eye and to consciousness, tend to be highly ephemeral. Moreover, the availability of multiple exposures of the same scene or animal enables the artist to arrange his composition with almost imperial sovereignty and control.

The question that arises in regard to such a pattern of dissimulation is whether there is anything of aesthetic or even broadly cultural worth to be found in so relentless, even stubborn, a repudiation of Arthur Rimbaud's well-known prescription "Il faut être absolument moderne"⁵ and of Theodor Adorno's corollary that "all genuinely modern art seeks the liberation of form" as "a cipher for the liberation of society."⁶ In its favour, wildlife art incorporates something of the precision of observation that is integral to the biological and physical sciences; in this sense it traverses the gap that is widely believed to separate the culture of art from that of the sciences. Moreover, its adherence to largely reportorial conventions of sight

may well contribute to its popularity among those for whom applied science and not art provides the everyday framework of understanding. Such people – now undoubtedly the majority of the educated adult population – are thereby at least introduced to some sort of art.

At the very least, however, there is something both irritating and regrettable about the popular success of so disingenuous and stylistically reactionary an art form, which takes place at the expense of a higher public profile for more thoughtful and historically engaged approaches to art. But even more disturbing, such depictions may also serve, in the particular style of their representation, as buttresses for a nostalgic, backward-looking and thoroughly unrealistic cultural agenda of self-delusion – not only in regard to nature but also in regard to crucial aspects of consciousness and perception. By way of illustration: one of the most reflective and perspicacious of contemporary artists, Jannis Kounellis, has claimed that it is as good as "impossible today to create an image, because to do so is

ROBERT BATEMAN

Coyote in Winter Sage (1979); Acrylic on masonite; 48 x 72 in



Photos: Robert Bateman, courtesy Mimi Ford Press, Venice, FL

no longer historically plausible. What is lacking is the power to maintain a centrality and to represent that centrality.⁷ Such considerations are clearly lost on the Robert Bateman of his more conventional work, who could blithely say of a painting entitled *At the Cliff - Bobcat*, which was issued in a print edition of 12,500:

Aside from the variety of elements and surfaces that excite both the visual and tactile senses, I was particularly attracted by the sculptural qualities in this cliff face and by the interplay of triangular shapes I found there. At centre I placed the looming inverted rock wedge, and carried the triangular theme throughout the elements of the painting; to this end, with its ruffs of fur extending downward from its ears to its jowls, the anatomy of the bobcat was most obliging.⁸ [boldface added]

Such a confident imperium of organizational consciousness, which seems typical of wildlife artists, represents little better than a poorly disguised sublimation of the spirit of empire according to which the North American continent itself was subdued and organized, especially during the 19th century. The reinforcement of such an agenda must be above all reassuring for those who want to believe that a *rapprochement* can be worked out between "nature" and the living room walls on which

prints of wildlife art are likely to be hung. But the terms of this (apparent) *rapprochement* implicitly affirm a broad spectrum of conventional, even culturally reactionary assumptions. These include: the possibility of a privileged observer; the reliability of strictly visual perception in the depiction of "reality" generally and "nature" specifically; the convertibility of "nature" into two-dimensional static property; the malleability of "nature" to human will; the verisimilitude of the closed and frozen frame; and so on.

These are largely aesthetic conventions. But a psychological investment in them both reflects and (via the process of monetary valuation) contributes to confidence in parallel epistemological conventions about cultural stability, continuity and predictability. Wildlife art makes no attempt at "barring the contradictions of society in our time" (as Peter Bürger characterized an objective of the avant-garde). Instead, such work "promotes, by its very form, the illusion of a world that is whole."⁹ In Canada, this illusion is readily inspired and maintained by the as yet unbroken mythology of "peace, order and good government." It does so notwithstanding a global ambience of disintegrating nation states, mass pauperization and invisibly poisoned ecosystems in which to hold to such traditional frameworks for perception may be both deluded and dangerous.

III

But the fusion of reactionary stylistics with a thoroughly contemporary reproducibility can, at least for the sake of argument, be read a slightly different way. Against mod-

ROBERT BATEMAN. Clockwise from top: *Gentoo Penguins and Whale Bones* (1980), 30 x 48 in; *At the Cliff - Bobcat* (1990), 35 x 48 in; *Carmanah Contrasts* (1989), 47-1/8 x 41-5/8 in; Acrylic on masonite

ernist experimentation in both literature and the visual arts, the socialist theoretician George Lukacs long promoted a realism whose ostensibly useful phases he described as "critical" and "socialist." He saw the preoccupation with formal experiment and novelty in the arts as symptomatic of an unhealthy and chronic angst, which in turn was predicated on an implicitly nihilistic resignation in regard to the possibility of real and dialectically progressive social change.¹⁰ As a committed Marxist, Lukacs believed that the future necessarily belonged to socialism and that it would unfold according to the pattern of class struggle. But his interpretation of socialism entailed faith in an aesthetically very old-fashioned notion of "objective reality."¹¹ Throughout his many writings, Lukacs made the case for literature and art that honoured an ostensibly stable but actually rather 19th-century sense of "perspective" – one of his favourite words. For him, it was important that literature and art honour much the same conventions of perception as were held by the masses. In this way, the analysis of bourgeois society by critical realism and the shape of future society through socialist realism could not only be made generally accessible but literature and art could also tie themselves to the revolutionary working class that Lukacs believed would inevitably be the engine of historical transformation.

History itself has at this point of course played Lukacs false, so that faith in the inevitability of a socialism, the shape of which could be anticipated in a realistic art and literature seems sadly misplaced. Similarly, the ontological primacy accorded 19th-century categories of perception on account of their presumed relationship with an inevitable socialist future seems equally misplaced. Nevertheless, residues of Lukacs's position have a certain applicability to wildlife art. These pertain not to socialism as anticipated among many intellectuals from the 1840s to the 1950s to be the future hope of humankind, but to the quasi-ideology whose framework of analysis has now effectively supplanted that of socialism as a fashionable means of conceptualizing the present and planning for the future: environmentalism.

IV

By virtue of their chosen subject matter, most wildlife artists would seem to place themselves among the vanguard of the "environmentally concerned and aware" as this has come to be popularly defined. But questions similar to those that can be raised about the conventions of

the genre can be raised about its environmental soundness. In most wildlife art, an illusion of pristine purity is created at the nexus of an occluded web of conventional identities and business transactions. Does the construction of such an illusion and its widespread distribution among the aesthetically unschooled contribute to a resolution or even an awareness of the complex ecological dangers currently facing humankind? Or might it actually inhibit such an awareness by providing neatly framed or bound simulacra of supposed scenes of nature that fit just as neatly into the scheme of the average *bourgeois* or *petit bourgeois* living room in the "developed" world? So harmonious a reconciliation of culture and nature not only affirms a tidy spectrum of conventional aesthetic and cultural assumptions; it also disguises, among other things, the fact that forests and other natural habitats are constantly being destroyed throughout the "developing" world in the interest of furnishing tens of millions of other living rooms according to the same standard.

This sort of contradiction is much more at the core of the ecological crisis than is the threat posed to the specific animals depicted in wildlife art. In occluding this contradiction and in presenting a mirage of reconciliation between depicted wilderness and comfortable viewing context, wildlife art risks becoming an artistic supplement to the social phenomenon of "cocooning," and a support for a particular variety of magical thinking. Each careful brushstroke, each feather, hair or twig precisely rendered not only contributes to the exchange value of the painting under a Protestant ethic of conspicuous craft but may also seem to guarantee the survival and prosperity of a real feather, hair or twig. As actual wilderness becomes less accessible to growing populations, such magical thought may grow in appeal. Wildlife art provides a refuge from the pressures of everyday life, a substitute for the physically unavailable and an undemanding means of assuaging guilt and helplessness.

The dangers should be obvious: the meticulously reproduced image of a bird or an animal is *visually* more real (or hyperreal) than the actual bird or animal that, if seen at all, usually comes into view for no more than a fleeting instant. Rather than explore the implications of that ephemerality – of what Theodor Adorno has called "the appearing quality of nature"¹² – on human emotion and sensibility, wildlife art substitutes an illusion of permanence and purity and an illusory perspective of privi-

lege for the complex and highly problematical relationship between human consciousness and the natural world.

Against both critical and socialist realism, which he promoted, George Lukacs contrasted traditional "bourgeois realism,"¹³ which as a Marxist he believed had had its day in overcoming the restrictions of a historically superceded feudalism. Such bourgeois realism had, by the time he was writing, become reactionary and retrograde because it merely affirmed bourgeois values without criticizing, let alone surpassing them. And like any art form that has exhausted its period of historical relevance, bourgeois realism, by the late 19th century, had deteriorated into formulaic repetition, academicism and meretricious pandering to popular taste; it had become, even then, an epitome of what Greenberg would refer to as kitsch.

Conventional wildlife art is readily subsumed into this characterization of bourgeois realism, especially in its social role. It does not challenge viewers, either formally or in its content; it merely soothes, implicitly affirming a variety of conventions and assumptions while disguising its participation in the technological and economic orders that menace the subject matter it purports to depict.

V

But *Coyote in Winter Sage* goes conventional wildlife art one better and arguably pushes it into the realm of Lukacs's second category, critical realism. It does so for more than the obvious reason that the intrusion of a discarded beer can into the customarily dehistoricized landscape disallows the viewer an escape route from the dilemmas posed by the throwaway society that exists beyond the painting's frame. For the represented beer can, though perhaps without Bateman's intending it to, adds an element of reflexivity to the original painting and especially to the mass-reproduced print, given a mass society that is both inundated by and predicated on such images. The mass-produced beer can, of course, enjoys a less exalted fate than the mass-reproduced piece of wildlife art. But one of Walter Benjamin's observations concerning the mass-reproduced artwork in general is that it is far more compatible with the general state of "distraction"¹⁴ in which all objects are likely to be viewed in mass society than would be the original work of art whose "aura" enforces a kind of distance and demands a mental state of

concentration that, even in the 1930s, was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

The viewer, flipping through the pages of plates in a coffee-table book of Robert Bateman's wildlife paintings is more likely than not to be in just such a state of distraction. And he or she is unlikely to be aroused from such a state by the soothing rhythm of turning pages or by the soothing surfaces that depict precisely rendered animals against precisely rendered pristine backgrounds. Unless, that is, there is something jarring, something that does not quite fit the expectation, something that enforces self-consciousness. Then perhaps, distraction will be obliged to make room for perplexity. And perplexity, from the very origins of western civilization in the Platonic dialogues, has been an integral moment in the emergence of critical thought – of which the "environmental movement" still has far too little.

The represented beer can in *Coyote in Winter Sage* does not honour expectation. It becomes instead a metonymic signifier, not only in regard to throwaway mass culture but also in regard to all objects that can be readily consumed in a state of distraction and then set aside – the mass-reproduced piece of wildlife art and the book that contains such reproductions included. It thus becomes a kind of thematic virus with the capacity to absorb and transform not only the picture but even the genre into which it has been inserted. It subverts their identity as simulacra that permit escape and echoes instead their identity as mass-reproduced objects that function culturally as part of a self-sustaining network of such objects.

The repeatability of such a strategy of exposure obviously has its limits. Some of its potency is based on the shattering of prior expectation; if such expectation is eroded in regard to a particular artist, those who seek simply to be distracted can still look elsewhere. Moreover, the generically self-critical aspects of *Coyote in Winter Sage* seem to have been unintentional; the artist himself, insofar as he has an interest in working commercially within the genre, might therefore be expected to shy away from the implications of such aspects. And sure enough, Robert Bateman has, since 1979, continued for the most part to paint wildlife pictures with no historical or critical referentiality whatsoever. He has, however, very recently begun to paint and publish pictures that aggressively depict the desolation wrought upon the natural world by

contemporary industrial practice: an example is *Carmanah Contrasts* (1989, published in coffee-table version in 1990). In one of its two panels, Bateman has depicted a tiny version of himself standing amid the immense trunks of a Vancouver Island rainforest; in the other much larger panel are depicted the remains of such a forest after clear-cut logging. This work constitutes a wildlife-art heresy, not only because the artist has inserted an (admirably humble) version of himself into dehistoricized landscape but also because the second panel, in its implicitly modernist visual cruelty, repudiates compatibility with the culture of comfort and distraction that makes its way so easily to living room walls.

Moreover, Bateman has also shown signs of being aware of the limitations of images themselves in a cultural space that is awash in images and images of images that blur the boundaries between the present and the past, the real and the hyperreal. According to the text of "An Artist in Nature" (1990),¹⁵ Bateman now devotes a considerable amount of time talking to audiences – who come to see him on the basis of his reputation as a painter – about the perils to the biosphere. Some of this textual reference may be timely eco-promotion but Bateman has in fact long displayed an interest in "conservation" issues. And the increasing politicization of his activities echoes – very paradoxically – the activities of that most radical of recent artists, Joseph Beuys, who came to view the broadly political talks he gave whenever he got the chance as an integral part of his artistic practice.

How can there be a link between Joseph Beuys, promoter of the idea that any and every object can have currency in the realm of art, and Robert Bateman, producer of framed and sanitized paintings of "noble" animals? Memorable is the fact that Bateman's first gesture toward critically aware realism was made in a painting of a coyote while Beuys's primary gesture toward the North American continent itself was made through his sharing a cage in a New York gallery for a week with a live coyote. (It would seem, therefore, that the coyote, as archetypal trickster figure, still has the capacity to subvert expectation in the most unlikely places.) But perhaps more importantly, Beuys considered it crucial that art reach out to communicate with ordinary people. Can art afford to hold itself aloof from the aesthetically unschooled, who happen to make up a majority of the population and who must therefore change if ecologic crisis is to be addressed? In this

regard, critical realism has its limits and may be a self-abolishing genre due to both its constantly diminishing shock value and its own internal contradictions within the realm of image. Furthermore, an attempt to extrapolate from it toward an inherently more positive "environmental realism" would probably make for as much oppressive, ridiculous and downright bad art as the prescription for socialist realism did. But the strategy of direct address (pioneered by Beuys on the basis of his "expanded concept of art")¹⁶ holds intriguing possibilities if and when Robert Bateman and, for that matter, other wildlife artists choose to engage the broader implications of the coyote and the empty beer can.

Douglas Orr is a writer, artist and lecturer in aesthetics. He has recently completed a novel.

NOTES

1. Robert Bateman, *The Art of Robert Bateman*, text by Ramsay Derry (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 126
2. Ibid.
3. Clement Greenberg, *Essays on Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 15
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 222 & following
5. "It is necessary to be absolutely modern."
6. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 361.
7. Joseph Beuys, Enzo Cucchi, Anselm Kiefer & Jannis Kounellis, *Batissons une cathédrale: Entretien*, trans. (German into French) Olivier Monnoni (Paris: L'Arche, 1986), p. 137, my trans. into English
8. *Wildlife Art News 1992 Yearbook of International Wildlife Artists* (St. Louis Park, Minnesota: Pothole Pubns., 1992) p. 16
9. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (U. of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 86
10. George Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John & Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 41 & following
11. Ibid., p. 86
12. Adorno, p. 100
13. Lukacs, p. 104
14. Benjamin, p. 239 & following
15. Robert Bateman, *An Artist in Nature*, text by Rick Archbold (Markham, Ont.: Viking Penguin Books, 1990), p. 175
16. See, for example, "Entrée dans un être vivant" in Joseph Beuys, *Par la présent je n'appartiens plus à l'art*, ed. Max Reichmann, trans. (German into French) Olivier Monnoni & Pierre Borassa (Paris: L'Arche, 1988), p. 44 & following

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