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ART REVIEW: "Beauty Plus Pity" Rational animals

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on October 7, 2009

"The world is perfect, and we're such fuckups," Emily Vey Duke laments in "The Birds Come Back," one episode within "Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure," a video by the Canadian artist-couple Duke and Battersby. This month at Rochester Contemporary, get lost in a multimedia world where god is just as screwed up as humanity (we were made in his image, as the story goes...), and taxidermied-animal spirit guides teach us a thing or two about ethics. The human experience is a tortuously confusing division of our animal and rational natures. Span a little time with this zeitgeist exhibit and watch its creators blur those lines.

Rather than nauseating us with their empathy-heavy and philosophic examination of our place as awkward masters of nature, partners Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby are all about using unflinching irony "to speak on two emotional registers at the same time," Duke says. The duo, who have been working collaboratively since 1994, "diffuse the narrator and push the empathy out into the world, and have it land where it may, whether that be in earthworms, people, or seeds," Battersby says. They've disguised the autobiographical nature of their honest and vulnerable art by altering their voices with accents and computers, and in many cases, using animated animals to tell the stories.

At the artist talk on Sunday, October 4, the duo explained how using irony in dealing with thorny issues like rape and alcoholism allows them to "tell truths without having to...sacrifice complexity." Battersby began that statement, and Duke finished his sentence. It's evident that they form a good team, but when asked how they make it work, they said that they don't recommend collaborating. "It's a lot of fighting and a lot of making up," Duke says, adding that she would find herself very attached to parts of the project and become angry at changes Battersby would make, before cooling off and gaining perspective. "Learning that I can think I'm right and not be right has been very important," said Duke. Sounds like sage advice for everyone.

When you first enter the gallery space, now painted to resemble rolling green fields, you must move through a gathering of taxidermied animals on pedestals, idol-like and dressed up in ribbons and jewels, fur and bone, in order to express our "fetishisation of the natural world," per the artists' website. This theme of needing to understand nature on our terms is repeated throughout.

Viewers of the main-attraction video, "Beauty Plus Pity," projected on the wall, can take a seat on the sculpture "Rest for the Wicked," which is a long forked tree branch bench, but also a pointed statement that includes us in the artwork. The video expresses our awkward longing for contact with nature, and the failings that result from our

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An image from "Beauty Plus Pity," a collaborative exhibit by Duke and Battersby, showing through November at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

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misguided attempts. The piece is a collage of found footage, the artists' own filming, animation, song (influenced by karaoke, hymnals, and tunes that children make up), and spoken word. In one scene, a delusional hunter sincerely insists that his "need" to be intimate with animals is "so strong" that killing them is the only way he can sate this drive - "At least this is a wrong committed for the right reasons," he says.

Another segment is a Salinger-like assertion that children, unlike already-lost adults, signify a possibility of good and redemption for humanity, if shaped correctly. Also included is a song about the heavenly father, suddenly seeming rather more like an aging human pops: fallible, cantankerous, and one who has to be looked after. The animated taxidermied animals from the gallery close the video with a song, revealing that they are the spirit guides, watching us, amused by, and adoring us. We invented them to punish us, they say, but if we wise up, they'll forgive us. Like a Jiminy Cricket, they tell us what we already know, but have buried in our pursuit of what we think we want. Duke and Battersby excavate that voice and give it a compassionate, if scolding, visage.

Also included is a wall of art prints, such as "The Greatness We Strive For" triptych, which meditates on our arbitrary desire for different kinds of greatness. Nearby and above direct eyeshot, another print reads "Unlimited Subjectivity" in bold black lettering. This is the pair's mantra, Gallery Director Bleu Cease explained to me. There are countless ways to take this, of course, depending on who's looking.

A second video-viewing-station is provided with a TV and headphones where you can (and should) watch Duke and Battersby's earlier videos, and the round room at the rear of the gallery contains a projection of "A Day in the Life of the World," which is a smaller edition of their upcoming "A Year in the Life of the World". The piece simultaneously shows looped time-lapse video of different places in the world, projecting in their respective place on a map of the continents, each day lasting about three seconds. The work serves as a reminder to zoom out from the minutiae of your daily strife, but also conveys a sort of wistfulness: what is lost in the rushing, in the brevity? Time's a-wasting.

Beauty + Pity

By Duke and Battersby

Through November 15

Rochester Contemporary, 137 East Ave.

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

Wed-Sun 1-5 p.m.

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