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Review: Lions and tigers and goat girls? "Bestial Encounters" at the WAG

Posted by Alison Gillmor, CBC Local Arts Reviewer

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Unicorn - Sarah Anne Johnson (Winnipeg Art Gallery)

The Winnipeg Art Gallery is a zoo this week, with the opening of three animal-themed shows.

The traditional "alphabestiary" format gets a subversive twist from 26 Winnipeg artists, with works covering everything from a baleful ape to a lonely zebra. (Bestiaries, compendiums of real and imaginary animals, were common in the Middle Ages, and they've come down to modern times mostly in the form of children's alphabet books. You know, "C is for Cat, D is for Dog.")

Commissioned by the Winnipeg-based magazine *Border Crossings* to mark its 25th year, the works range from the spooky (Janet Werner's *Goat Girl*) to the whacky (Marcel Dzama's *Kurmudgeon Finch*) to the outright beautiful (Tim Schouten's *Horse*). (There's also some birds-and-bees stuff: Parents should be aware that the show contains "mature content," particularly in *Rat Boy*, from the ever-naughty Diana Thorneycroft.)

The beastly art continues with *The Singing Condition*, in which local electronic-media

artist Erika Lincoln uses ingenious little mechanical contraptions to investigate the lives of urban birds. One piece features a nest of shredded plastic perched in a communications tower, with ambient city sounds -- car alarms, crosswalk signals, cell phone rings -- electronically morphed into repeating bird calls. It's a brilliant way of suggesting these creatures' hybrid position, poised precariously between nature and culture.

The animal theme wraps with Volker Seding's patiently observant, enormously sad photographs of zoo animals. For over 15 years, the German-Canadian artist visited zoos around the world, capturing portraits of resigned, weary and solitary captive creatures, often standing in front of cruel parodies of the natural world (fake savannahs and faux jungles painted onto cement walls).

Taken together, these shows offer a complicated investigation into what we see when we look at animals, whether that animal is a dangerous predator, a sedate dairy cow or the family's pet dog Fluffy. In the end, since human beings are the most self-absorbed species on Earth, it's usually some kind of reflection of ourselves.