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*The Herd: Animal and Tally*

At first glance, the cow print and colourful patterns of the paintings that make up *The Herd* may come across as light-hearted and playful. There is an obvious element of humour in the making of the ultimate *faux-pas* art – the cow painting – twisted into the form of vague abstraction. Aware of the innate silliness of cow paintings as a genre, I set out to create a body of work that poses serious questions about rationality. *The Herd* explores the relationship between the rational, labelled and numbered world, and the experiential realm of abject bodies existing in real space.

As per Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection in her essay *Powers of Horror*, the abject is "The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery." It has everything to do with the body in its reactions and relations, from feeling disgust to being disgusted by feelings. The abject body is one that exists only in viewing, and as a subject has "only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (Kristeva, 02). The seeing of an abject body is an act of defining both the subject and the viewer, especially in comparing the ways that they are both similar and different from one another. It is my opinion that there is no body more truly abject than the body of the cow. It is a body that exists in the ways it does in contemporary society purely as a result of human tampering for our own benefit. Our human relationship to this animal is uniquely characterized by an interest in its body, particularly its flesh and bodily fluids, which is simultaneously a source of both disgust and reverence for different people, cross- and intra-culturally. Such diverse notions of the simple image of a

bovine body make it the perfect subject for a consideration of human experience and perception.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes in *The Open: Man and Animal* that “the inhuman is produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the enfant sauvage or Homo ferus, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form.” The very human concepts of the slave, barbarian, and foreigner are all informed, supported, and sustained by various categorizations and generalizations that fail to appreciate the vast diversity of lived experience. It follows that a description of human experience, from vile discrimination to common interpersonal misunderstandings, may naturally employ animal imagery. This practice dates back to folk and fairy tales across generations and cultures.

Just like precautionary and educational children’s tales, new configurations and understandings of animal bodies can be used as a tool to relearn unexamined certainties relating to how we navigate the world and distinguish ourselves from abject and Other bodies. So too they can be used to create a new framework that allows for a deeper consideration of and empathy for unspeakable experiences. Giovanni Aloï writes:

*“...Through the challenges raised by post-colonial studies, the concept of otherness has become central to the contemporary debate. [...] The woman, the slave, the queer, the black, and the savage have all been re-learned through a continuous and infinite process of unlearning and reconfiguring. It therefore follows that the animal, the ultimate otherness of the animal, another subject of power relations, would also become part of the discourse.”*

I have approached this discourse from the tail end. A contemporary view of art centered around animal bodies separates these bodies into the realm of kitsch, animal rights activism, or spectacle. A contemporary discussion of cow art is incomplete without a mention of Damien

Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided*, which similarly (and literally) dissects the intensely abject bovine body and forces the viewer into firstly, a process of consideration of the human/cow relationship, and secondly, a consideration of human viewership and interpretation. The horror of this iconic piece stems from a sense of abjection that only a cow body can provide. I have selected the cow for similar reasons, but to far less horrific ends which are more centered on a reconfiguration of understanding rationality and otherness.

My approach to prompting this reconfiguration begins with pattern. For starters, cow print is a highly organic and unpredictable pattern that nevertheless is always easily recognizable and instantly conjures images and concepts of the complete body itself. These ideas are provided readily by the basic nature of the human mind, which searches out meaning where none is readily accessible, and labels all aspects of lived experience in categorical ways. By creating abstractions of the already organic cow print pattern, completely decontextualized from a cow body, and framing these shapes with many small lines (representative of tally marks) I intend to visually represent the tension between rationality and bodily experience. Even the ways in which the human mind receives "pure" abstraction are marred by a search for imagery and meaning where there is none. It has been a happy coincidence that classic dairy cow print (Holstein Friesian cattle) closely resembles a Rorschach test.

Patterning seemed like the most appropriate visual tool to use in the creation of *The Herd* as my most central interest was in an investigation of mental, social, and political structures which are largely informed by a tendency to categorize, generalize, and label experience. The metaphysical tension between experience and category, animal and tally, informed my use of the two primary patterns present in *The Herd*. The lighthearted first impression the works gives comes full circle with the realization that the visual language I developed in the series is ultimately just a new dictionary of symbols, strokes, processes and

techniques that is, and always will be, implicated in the very process of rationalization the work seeks to expose.

In *Remote Control*, Barbara Kruger defines art as “the ability, through visual, verbal, gestural, and musical means, to objectify one’s experience of the world: to show and tell, through a kind of eloquent shorthand, how it feels to be alive.” The ‘eloquent shorthand’ of *The Herd*, and of any dictionary (including language) is one that falls short of accurately, thoroughly, and truthfully describing experience. This is the way in which *The Herd* finds itself coming full circle, back to the lighthearted first impression it gives off. It is only a picture of a picture—images to represent representation and perception, simple and silly but packed with the contents of any eloquent shorthand, any language, any context.

The ultimate goal and irony of *The Herd* is to show the shortcomings of rationalizing experience through my own visual methods of representation and rationalization. And so it fails, and proves its own point.

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