

Art in America

REVIEWS DEC. 12, 2016

Lin May Saeed

BASEL,
at Nicolas Krupp

by Aoife Rosenmeyer



Lin May Saeed: *The Liberation of Animals from their Cages XVII / Moschophoros (door)*, 2015, tool steel and lacquer, 77 $\frac{1}{8}$ by 41 by 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; at Nicolas Krupp.

Lin May Saeed (b. 1973) is as much an animal rights advocate as an artist. Despite the progressive perspectives put forth by scholars like Donna Haraway in her book *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003), empathy with animals remains rare in art. When Pierre Huyghe uses dogs and monkeys as performers in his exhibitions, the animals' welfare is not the central issue. As a society, we rely on animals but are largely—often willfully—ignorant of them as fellow creatures. Saeed approaches the subject with endearing and persuasive lightness, perhaps to keep us from turning away from the discomfort it can create.

This exhibition, “St. Jerome and the Lion,” ranged from wall-hung gatelike pieces with figurative metalwork to painted polystyrene reliefs to mixed-medium sculptures to a large backlit painting with cutout silhouettes. The motifs in the interspecies scenes depicted throughout derive from the Western world and the German-born artist’s Jewish-Arab heritage. The classical Greek calf bearer appears in one of the gate works, *The Liberation of Animals from their Cages XVII / Moschophoros (door)*, 2015. Here, Moschophoros is reimagined as a masked animal-rights activist—akin to the heroes of Matt Miner and Javier Sanchez Aranda’s comic-book series *Liberator*—thus subverting the calf’s fate. Another gate work, this one horizontal and serving as the exhibition’s title piece, shows St. Jerome removing a thorn from a lion’s paw. In contrast to these harmonious scenes, a cartoonlike drawing on canvas, *Ankunft der Tiere II (Arrival of the Animals II, 2007)*, pictures several animals taking revenge as they attack two women clad in fur coats.

Imprisonment and liberation are recurring themes. A sculpture titled *Yahya*, perhaps evoking the Islamic prophet John the Baptist, consists of a graphite-blackened polystyrene-and-jute wildcat standing atop a wooden crate—one of several works in which creatures are shown commanding their cages. In the striking twenty-one-foot-wide *Freier Markt (Free Market, 2007)*—the aforementioned painting with cutouts lit from behind—birds in cages and a man, an elephant, and a camel tethered to heavy weights are portrayed as if being offered for sale. Other creatures around them seem more alien than earthly. The figuration is spare and the palette reduced, producing an airy and diagrammatic image. The enslavement of animals is depicted as equivalent to that of humans, and one infers that the abolition of both is necessary for an enlightened society.

Saeed’s use of “poor” materials like cardboard, cheap wood, and aluminum foil in many of the sculptures reinforces the deliberately innocent mood of her tableaux, as if she wants her message to sneak in under the radar. The works have cross-cultural resonance, underlining common histories of humans interacting with animals and opening the door for our interspecies narratives to evolve.