

Fowl Play: “Fatal Farm” at 9 The Gallery

“Fatal Farm”, now showing at 9 The Gallery, was created by Cindy Schnackel as a way to illustrate her growing conviction that animals have feelings in much the same way as humans do. In recent years there has been a growing body of book and film exposés about factory farms, generally told from the perspective of the investigator. Gallery viewers may be surprised and amused to find that this show focuses more of a “birds-eye” view of the animals’ lives and surroundings.

Most of the artworks in this show fall into three design categories, with pieces from each category evenly distributed throughout the gallery. Many are executed in a broad, cartoon-like style that contrasts with Schnackel’s dark subject matter.

First, there is a group of larger mixed-media pieces, each which juxtapose the central image(s) of an animal that is a meat source (including a cow (beef), chicken, lamb, (wild) duck, pig (smoked ham), pigeons and squab, quail, and venison) with a background of recipes and/or butchering diagrams. (The three sculptures in the show follow a similar design.) The whole animal serves to remind the viewer that the objects of the rather bloodless printed directions for butchering and cooking are, in fact, living animals. These pieces range from the witty – a shades-wearing, cigarette-smoking duck hipster in “Wild Duck” – to the surrealistic “Lamb Chops”, in which a little girl with a lamb-chop face is bottle-feeding a lamb. A very few pieces contain grotesque elements.

The second group of pieces are smaller (roughly 4”x 6”) and depict animal “portraits”. The subject is often a chicken; commentary in the form of a typed message is often integrated into the artwork. Schnackel uses these pieces to convey her idea that animals have consciousness and emotions. One large painting that also falls into this category is entitled “Birds Rule”. We see a parakeet with five “thought lines” that lead us to see what s/he is dreaming about: biting the hand that feeds it; flying free; finding a mate; serving up a human on a platter, Thanksgiving style; and envisioning a missile dropping on the head of a cat.

Interspersed among these artworks are small mixed-media or acrylic paintings of whimsical “monsters”, imaginary beings. These works usually include typed comments or headings. Thus, for example, the heading above a beast that looks a bit like a humanoid pickle reads “Madness Most Discreet”. These miniature beasts create breaks between areas of larger, more farm-focused artwork.

Finally, there is “Chicken Slumber Party”, another large work that shows an exuberant group of hens doing what teenage chickens...um, girls...have been doing for decades: eating popcorn while watching television, laughing together, drinking, grooming each other and so forth. It’s a deliciously silly piece of anthropomorphism that doesn’t really make a point about farms or fowl, but nevertheless captures the personality of chickens at their spirited best.

Not all of the artwork has the same visual or psychological impact. The work “Chicken Breasts”, which compares ever-enlarging breasts to enlarging cell phone size seems dated and off the mark. Other pieces, while adhering to the pro-vegetarian theme, stray far from the farm. Venison, squab, and quail, though killed for their meat, are not raised under the wretched conditions of factory farms. Finally some works, particularly the “portraits”, are without context. Viewed on its own, it’s not clear why “Baby” is bloodied. What are we to make of a simple portrait of a chicken set against a background of worms?

Overall, this show displays the playfulness and imagination of an artist who has a serious message to convey.