

# Art: The Wild Kingdom Shown by Melissa Miller

By MICHAEL BRENSON

**W**HEN Melissa Miller's paintings of animals have been shown in New York, the response has been generally enthusiastic. The works seemed immediate, imaginative and seamless. The feelings and struggles of her tigers, polar bears and monkeys seemed very much our own. But there were still doubts. Were the paintings too simple? Was the goodness they radiated — no matter how it reflected a widespread utopian impulse in contemporary art — a sign of sentimentality? How far could affectionate paintings of animals go?

With Miller's first full one-person exhibition in New York, at the Holly Solomon Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue (near 57th Street), through Nov. 30, the answer is a long way. Miller is a complex and ambitious artist. When she coaxes bears, zebras, sheep, baboons and peacocks to take refuge in her paintings, they reward her by performing on a number of levels. Each aspect of these paintings is carefully considered, from the scale, to the point of view, to the brushwork, to the Southwestern (Miller is from Texas), almost evangelical light.

The fullness of these works has something to do with the degree to which they are steeped in tradition. The large painting of "Zebras and Hyenas" — in which zebras huddle together to protect themselves against hyenas under an orange sky — is like a history painting. The most schematic of the three large paintings, "Aesop's Crow," suggests an 18th-century still life. The wonderful "Salmon Run" brings to mind waterfalls and bathers by 19th-century artists like Gustave Courbet and Albert Bierstadt.

Miller's immediacy has a great deal to do with the artist's relation to recent American art. In "Salmon Run," she attains the Abstract Expressionist goal of making brushstrokes both form and content. Each stroke is clearly a means of construction and clearly water, teeth and fur. The artist's feeling for pictorial gesture is matched by her feeling for emotional gesture. When a rabbit parades on tiptoes through an open field, or when a zebra raises itself above the pack and howls at the sky, we believe it.

The link with Abstract Expressionism does not end here. Miller likes big space. Some movements of her animals, as well as the way animals in many of the small paintings move about inside the skins of other animals, recall rituals of Southwestern Indians, who also left a mark on Jackson Pollock. And like Pollock in some of his largest "drip" paintings, Miller places us near the heart of her dramas and builds compositions that pull in and out at the same time.

The composition suits the content. Miller corrals together farm and wild animals, predator and prey, festivity and danger. A baboon wearing a leopard skin roars through the sky. A wolf dances inside a deerskin. The acrobatic frenzy of the bears and salmon in "Salmon Run" has the sensual fury of a Mardi gras. There is a need here to embrace equally the wild kingdom and the vanishing wilderness, both the bear's imperative to hunt salmon for survival and the salmon's drive to hurl itself toward freedom.

The exhibition brings to mind the Book of Isaiah and the prophecy that when the Messiah comes the "wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid." If this utopian message seems strange now, it should be remembered that it was at one time fundamental to one of the greatest visionary artists — William Blake. Indeed, the tone, subject matter and dense simplicity of Melissa Miller's paintings suggest that she is building her own version of the "Songs of Innocence" and the "Songs of Experience."

Also of interest this week:

**Sonia Gechtoff** — "Paintings and Works on Paper: A Selection, 1956-1985" (Gruenebaum Gallery, 415 West Broadway): This exhibition covers 30 years and lets us know that Sonia Gechtoff's entire career has been marked by a dialogue between impetuosity and control, illumination and night, the rush of the sea and the sea walls necessary to contain it.

The earliest works in the show are abstract paintings from the 1950's. They suggest Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston. They reveal the artist's fascination with the destructive and creative power of fire and water. Their color is bold and paint is laid on thick over a grid through which a storm is always threatening to blow.

In the 60's Gechtoff moved from expressive oil painting on canvas to small, acrylic works on paper. Her work now required immense patience. Forms were outlined. Then they had to be rubbed with pencil until bit by bit they released their warmth and light. The exhibition includes two new series of works on paper, one based on London, the other on New York. Some of these miniatures are gems.

But in works like these, the inspiration only came at the end; the explosion only occurred after long discipline and restraint. It cannot be surprising then that someone whose early work could be so volatile should now be feeling her way back to painting on canvas. In the recent paintings — done in acrylic rather than oil and aided by pencil — the subject is again the sea. With its solitude, force, mystery and danger, it seems to have been her primary model all along. (Through Dec. 7.)

**Jody Pinto** — "Hoodoo Saints Hoodoo Martyrs" (Hal Bromm Gallery, 170 Avenue A, at 11th Street): Everything in Jody Pinto's provocative show — paintings, sculpture, video and installation — seems like a performance. Nothing is fixed here. We

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"Wolf Dancing as Deer," 1985, by Melissa Miller

are not allowed to stand back and just look. Pinto pulls us into a present where pain, pleasure, politics, sexuality, meditation, violence, religious and martial-arts ritual run together.

The paintings are on paper and wood. The images are not so much painted as dripped and splattered. There are few specifics. The dominant image is a hand — which is identified with creation, destruction, defiance and brotherhood. The paintings and video are also filled with gestures — of prayer, dance, tenderness and attack.

In the video, two women dance on stilts to the sound of Caribbean and South American music, some of it from the soundtrack of "Black Orpheus." In the installation "Passage for an Acrobatic Worship," we move through an enclosed, curved passageway until we arrive at a simple wood structure that suggests a prie-Dieu, a throne, an instrument of torture and a device for sadomasochistic sex.

The show suggests that at a certain ritual level religion, politics, festivity, violence and sex have something basic in common. The strength and weakness of the show has to do with Pinto's determination not to make distinctions between various kinds of experience. Running everything together gives the show its edge. But it also raises a question whether all intense experience is being presented as equal, or whether intense experience is being advocated as an end in itself. (Through tomorrow.)

**Jonathan Santlofer** (Pam Adler Gallery, 578 Broadway, between Houston and Prince Street): Jonathan Santlofer's new paintings are filled with curiosity and zest. He works with specially built, often irregularly shaped canvases, in which sections jut out and recede. His imagery is more precise than before — suggesting interiors, landscapes and human images. In this show, Santlofer has also placed his work within the long Expressionist tradition — from the cave painting at Lascaux, to van Gogh, to German Expressionist painting and film.

What hasn't changed is Santlofer's lusty, almost voluptuous feeling for paint and his interest in theater. The unusually thick canvases make the paintings resemble boxes or stages. The bold, exuberant rhythms and gestures not only suggest the Kabuki theater, with which Santlofer was concerned in his last show, but also the commedia dell'arte. The tension between actual and painted shapes, between actual and painted shadows, continues the artist's exploration into the relationship between illusion and reality, which brings to mind the theatrical vision of Luigi Pirandello. (Through Nov. 27.)

**Siah Armajani** — "Dictionary for Building IV" (Max Protetch Gallery, 37 West 57th Street): While Siah Armajani has been involved with large, outdoor sculpture projects, he has also been designing nonfunctional, indoor sculptures based on architectural and furniture motifs. The five works in this show — the fourth chapter of his "Dictionary for Building" — are richer in color and more fantastic than before. They contain doorways that cannot be entered, steps that cannot be climbed, strange shifts of scale — all of which encourages us to isolate and reflect upon individual motifs.

It is essential to Armajani's Constructivist esthetic that the works were not executed by him. They do not bear the mark of the artist's hand, and they were not intended to have psychological content. The aim is to create work that can be experienced as belonging to everyone. The mirrors encourage our involvement. Some are inclined downward so that we only see our feet; some are inclined so that we only see our face. The mirrors shift the focus toward ourselves and then to the way we experience the architectural and furniture motifs through our body. This show has the freshness it must have if it is to be successful. (Through Nov. 30.)

## Photographs of China

China is the subject of two exhibitions opening Sunday at the International Center of Photography, on 94th Street at Fifth Avenue. "On China: Photographs by Hiroji Kubota," a collection of 100 color pictures by the Japanese photographer, captures rural and urban life. "Rare Chinese Photographs of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai, 1942-85" documents official China, with 60 black and white photos taken by the Chinese photographers Wu Yinxian, Lu Jourmin, Lu Xiangyu and Hou Bo. The exhibition will run through Jan 5. The gallery is open Saturday and Sunday, 11 A.M. to 6 P.M.; Tuesday, noon to 8, and Wednesday through Friday, noon to 5. Admission is \$2.50 (\$1 for students and the elderly). Information: 860-1783.