

“Beasts of England, Beasts of Ireland”

VISUAL CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Old Dublin Road

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Animals appear throughout art history, from the ancient cave paintings at Lascaux to the formal, the clichéd, and the kitsch. Curator Stephen Brandes has selected eleven artists for his exploration of contemporary renderings of the bestial form. Ben Long’s thirty-foot *Horse Scaffolding Sculpture*, 2013, an aluminum skeleton of a horse arising magnificently from a plinth, dominates the menagerie of works in this exhibition. But it is where animals themselves provide the material for the works that things get more interesting, as the boundaries between subject and object blur.

Polly Morgan’s *Surgical Fruit*, 2013, is a plaster and resin sculpture of a human arm, which draws an added frisson with the taxidermied swallow clutched in its hand. Elsewhere, Morgan’s *Picking Progress to Pieces*, 2013, appears as a pair of mini scaffolding towers. The structure is made from crow femurs, which is fascinating but lacks the unsettling contrast of the stuffed avian with its smooth captor. “All taxidermied animals are either road casualties or have been donated to the artist by pet owners and vets after natural or unpreventable deaths,” states a disclaimer on Morgan’s personal website. How rare to find art at this level apologizing for itself.

Francis Upritchard’s “Monkey,” 2009, hovers on this representational hinterland. Her three monkeys aren’t stuffed; rather, the small simian figures squatting on the gallery floor, exuding a sense of pathos, have been executed with the use of hollow fur coats and limp leather gloves. This is an interesting distancing device that also draws attention to the different ways in which we use and abuse animals. Meanwhile, Stephen McKenna’s dejected-looking donkey, *Narcissus*, 1999, shows that painting, while lacking the immediacy of taxidermy, can still embody the same freight of emotion for which the animal-as-subject has always been a vehicle.



Ben Long, *Horse Scaffolding Sculpture*, 2013, steel and aluminum. Installation view.