Animals We Are Ourselves
Miriam Cahn, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Roni Horn
November 18 – December 08, 2021
Opening: November 18, 2021

“Animals We Are Ourselves“ brings together works by contemporary artists Miriam Cahn, Berlinde De Bruyckere, and Roni Horn. In diverse ways, their works focus on concepts of ‘the animal‘ and ‘the human animal‘, whereby their respective practices emphasize the various accesses to the animal through humans by critically questioning them. For centuries, artists have embedded different symbolically charged animals into their works. Allegorical representations of animals gained currency in the Middle Ages, functioning as ironic commentaries on the human condition, often bearing humanized features. The (hunting) still life genre reflects one facet of a colonizing human perspective on animals—a popular motif in Flemish Renaissance painting. Animal bodies are displayed as precious prey. Thanks to detailed reproduction specific features of their bodies and breed, they bear witness to an increasing interest in the (natural) scientific systematization of the environment in Central Europe. In the 20th century, artists often juxtaposed the notion of the animal to unveil supposedly genuinely human qualities. In contrast, contemporary approaches highlight a perspective of the common—an encounter between humans and animals at eye level, in which the latter can both withdraw from the mutual gaze as well as return it. The current theoretical discourse raises the question of a resilient and respectful coexistence of humans and other living beings, e.g., in hybrid or posthuman forms of cohabitation that consider the local and planetary perspectives. For several decades, philosophy tried to define and reflect the (in-)human differing from the animal. Jacques Derrida‘s thoughts on the human being using clothing and language in distinction from animals are well-known in this context. Feelings of shame that assailed the naked author himself when he was suddenly at the mercy of his cat‘s gaze inspired him to deconstruct the seemingly distinct boundary between subject and object.

Berlinde De Bruyckere (*1964 in Ghent, where she lives and works) sculpts with casts of wax, animal skins, hair, textiles, metal, and wood uncanny-looking organic forms. “To Zurbaran, 2015“ (2015) mimetically recreates a Lamb of God painting by the Spanish Old Master Francisco de Zurbaran. Transformed into a bodily sculpture of a foal, the work evokes a sensation of indefinite unease. The vulnerability of humans via the reference to Christian iconography, and the concern for suffering animal bodies, are quick associations. Having grown up and lived in Belgium, the artist consciously refers to Flemish Renaissance painting and the European Baroque tradition. In particular, transience or vanitas of luxury in still lives forges a backdrop to her work. The European masters and Christian iconography inform her reflective installations but mythology and literary traditions of the distant and nearer pasts as well. By emphasizing the ambivalence of conceptual pairs such as danger and protection, life and death, or love and suffering, De Bruyckere aims to undo supposed dualisms.

Roni Horn‘s (*1955 in New York, where she lives and works) work revolves around the multiformity of identity(ies), meaning(s), and perception, as well as the strategy of doubling as a central element of artistic studies. The bird portraits exhibited are part of a long-running photographic series of stuffed Icelandic wild birds. At close range, Horn photographs the birds against a plain white background. The framing and composition of the image and their format strongly remind of conventional studio portraits. The diptychs, however, are dorsal views of the respective female and male of a bird species. The feathered back heads and parts of neck parts come into focus. At the same time, these representations elude the task of providing explicitly identifiable images of the portrayed. Their instability makes them unsuitable as scientific evidence. Remaining in an enigmatic threshold stage, they demonstrate how limited knowledge gained from appearance ultimately is. Thanks to repetition, the double portraits invite a more careful examination of difference and a comparative seeing, and thus changing our perception of the work.

Miriam Cahn‘s (*1949 in Basel, lives and works in Stampa) painting “Kleines Stehtier“ (2000) shows a standing figure faintly emerging from the cloudy background of the painting. Is it a delicate monkey, which from the vertically formatted canvas directs its red eyes in an unfathomable gaze into the exhibition space—or is it a human being in transformation? The posture and the implied breasts make the four-fingered figure appear vaguely feminine, without being given any proof to substantiate such an impression. Like De Bruyckere, Cahn is not only interested in the vulnerability of bodies, but also the attraction of affect, lust and violence.

“Animals We Are Ourselves“ is NEST‘s first exhibition in cooperation with the Ursula Hauser Collection. With its focus on 20th and 21st-century women artists, it is one of the most important collections of contemporary art in the world. The collaboration provides a framework for working with collection loans in teaching and research. Accordingly, “Animals We Are Ourselves“ is affiliated with the “Art & Collecting“ seminar by Laura Bechter and Dr. Gabrielle Schaad. Starting from questions about the relationship between humans and animals, the presentation allows to work out motifs and (art historical) references in contemporary art using the example of animal representations. In addition, it offers students insights into the technical areas of conservation and art handling during the installation process.

Events

Public tour with Elsa Himmer
Saturday, November 20, 2021, 3pm
Internal tour for ZHdK members with Dr. Gabrielle Schaad
Wednesday, November 24, 2021, 12:30pm

Registrations via nest.exhibitions@zhdk.ch

Upcoming Exhibitions

“Sensing Out Loud: I Am the Last Woman Object“
December 16, 2021 – January 06, 2022
Opening: Thursday, December 16, 2021, 6-8pm

“Aggregating Matter: Of Dandelions and Architectures“
January 20 – February 10, 2022
Opening: Thursday, January 20, 2022, 6–8pm

1. Roni Horn
Untitled, No. 2, 1999
2 Iris-printed photographs on
Somerset Satin paper,
each 55.9 x 55.9 cm

2. Roni Horn
Untitled, No. 1, 1998
2 Iris-printed photographs on
Somerset Satin paper,
each 55.9 x 55.9 cm

3. Roni Horn
Untitled, No. 5, 1998
2 Iris-printed photographs on
Somerset Satin paper,
each 55.9 x 55.9 cm

4. Roni Horn
Untitled, No. 15, 1998/2007
2 Iris-printed photographs on
Somerset Satin paper,
each 55.9 x 55.9 cm

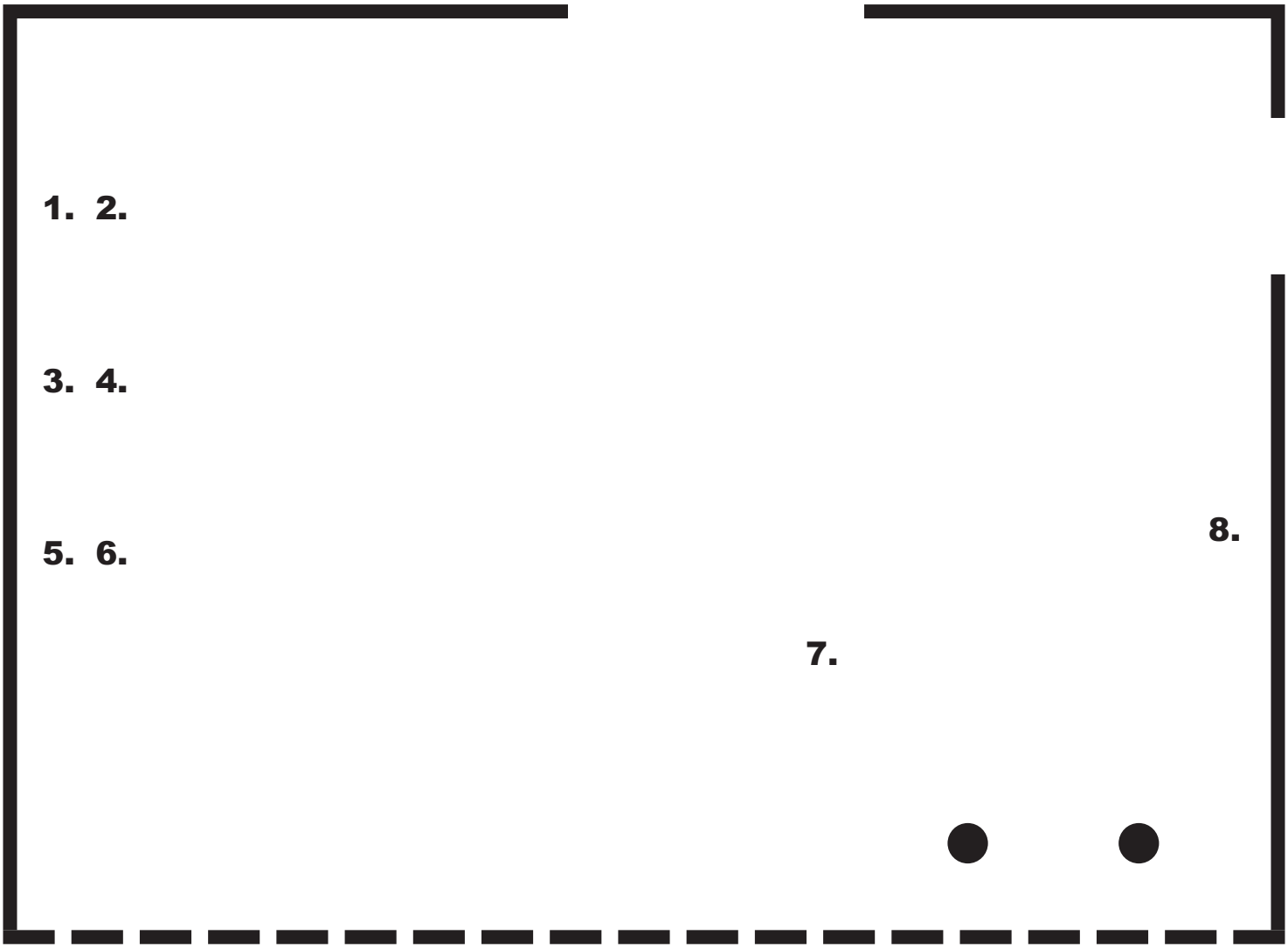
5. Roni Horn
Untitled, No. 14, 1998/2007
2 Iris-printed photographs on
Somerset Satin paper,
each 55.9 x 55.9 cm

6. Roni Horn
Untitled, No. 4, 1998
2 Iris-printed photographs on
Somerset Satin paper,
each 55.9 x 55.9 cm

7. Berlinde De Bruyckere
to Zurbaran, 2015, 2015
Horse skin, fabric, wood,
iron, and epoxy,
116.8 x 160 x 127 cm

8. Miriam Cahn
Kleines Stehtier, 2000
Oil on canvas,
66.2 x 39.5 cm

All works:
Ursula Hauser Collection, Switzerland



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Opening hours: During the openings and on appointment via nest.exhibitions@zhdk.ch.

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