

Nina Katchadourian

## **BEDFORD + BOWERY**

# Animals Become Artists and Collaborators in This Unique Exhibition

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*Nina Katchadourian, Carla and a Friend III, 2002, C-print, 24 x 24 inches (image courtesy of apexart)*

It's generally understood that nature, while vast and occasionally intimidating, can be very beautiful. But how much of this has been intentionally placed and crafted? Is a bee's honeycomb pleasing to the eye by accident or is there something more to it? Tribeca gallery apexart's latest exhibition *Animal Intent*, organized and curated by Emily Falvey, puts animals in the spotlight alongside human artists, framing them as "collaborators" who can potentially assist in the purposeful creative act of making art, a practice normally framed as a very "human" endeavor.

This exhibition is Falvey's first time approaching the concept in a curatorial sense, but she first noted this potential for animal "stylistic intervention" when asked to write about artist Annie

Dunning's work, who creates interactive sculptures utilizing the holes that woodpeckers drill into trees. Using that as a starting point, she discovered other artists working similarly and decided to delve further. Additionally, she's a former vegan—explaining that true impact will come more from total revamp of “our relationship with the natural world” and a rejection of capitalism rather than individual dietary change—and calls the show “part of [her] transition” out of it.

The most basic way to imbue non-humans with creative agency is to examine what they already create and place it in a purposeful setting, like a gallery. “Assuming that the practices of non-humans are not imaginative or artistic simply because they lack human organization seems ... absurd,” Falvey writes in a statement about the show. Though a gallery exhibition inherently exists through “human organization,” many pieces on display predominantly showcase natural animal behavior.

Aganetha Dyck has spent 20 years working with honeybees, placing found objects into their hives which will then become naturally coated in patches and layers of honeycomb. This transforms the look and feel of the objects into something new and strange. “Most of it is all their own decision, but she sometimes gives them hints about where she wants them to build using pheromones,” adds Falvey.

Interestingly and tragically, Dyck recently developed a “life-threatening allergy to bee stings.” She has not given up, enlisting the help of photographer William Eakin to replace her in the physical act of putting objects in the hives. Eakin then further adds to the collaboration by photographing the objects. It's curious to consider that if anything were to happen to bees in this uncertain time for them, they will leave an artistic legacy behind.

Nina Katchadourian's work in the show utilizes animal instinct in two very different ways. Her video piece “GIFT/GIFT” depicts a spider rejecting the word “gift” placed into its web. Spiders can give actual gifts to each other, such as flies wrapped with web, but this “gift” was a foreign invader the spider wanted nothing to do with. “In Swedish, ‘gift’ means ‘poison,’” says Falvey. “So there's a tension between her giving it, considering it's a contamination of the web.” Katchadourian's other piece is a photo series depicting an unlikely bond between a snake and a rat. Rather than imposing a quaint kindness on natural predator and prey, this was documentation of an actual friendship.

“Apparently this snake was given this rat for food but then befriended it,” explains Falvey. “And even though he was given other rats [to eat], he kept this friendship. This snake was actually following its instinct; there was some improvisational creative relationship to make him friends with the rat.”

While much of the work in the exhibition centers on letting the animals do what comes naturally to them and building off of that, others frame the animal as engaging more directly with the artistic side of things. Alison Reider Loader and Christopher Plenzich work with forest tent caterpillars; their work is charcoal drawings made by the caterpillars themselves, done by letting the critters crawl across paper with charcoal dust. Rather than dismiss this crawling as “blind instinct,” Falvey writes in her curatorial essay that the artists “treat them as an improvisational form of cartography,” something that has “choreographic” qualities.

All of the animals in *Animal Intent* seem to be small and, well, manageable to an extent. Bees, spiders, rats, caterpillars, woodpeckers, and other creatures of the sort seem to be simpler to select as partners, especially more than beings who might be larger, more intimidating, more dangerous.

Small as these creators may be, they are largely treated with respect. Falvey explains that Loader and Plenzich placed time limits on their caterpillars's drawing time and ensured that all materials were non-toxic, and artists like Dyck and Dunning work from what the animal is naturally doing, thus causing less disruption. Aganetha Dyck worked alongside a beekeeper to ensure her honeybee interventions were done safely.

Sometimes the waters get murky, though: Michael Anthony Simon works with *Nephila clavata* spiders, capturing them and bringing him into his studio to spin webs which he will later decorate with glitter or spray paint to turn into intricate sculptural works. "He doesn't feed the spider when it's in his studio, because a fly in the web would destroy the web," Falvey tells me. "He knows they can go weeks without eating, but at the same time he's technically starving them."

This agency is not always noted uniformly between everyone, even in the fine print; only in Loader and Plenzich's works are the actual creatures they worked with listed as part of the credits. Each charcoal drawing and video piece states that it was "realized in collaboration with the fourth-stage larvae of forest tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma disstria*)."

Others, like Michael Anthony Simon's web creations and Aganetha Dyck's honeycomb interventions, list the animal-created materials among other tools such as adhesive or porcelain, but the actual beings that had to exist for the artworks to exist remain nameless.

This, while inconsistent, does align with what the exhibition seeks to accomplish. It does not proclaim one way or another to truly know the role that animals have in artistic creations, whether their instincts are merely being manipulated by human artists, they are secretly the small and crawling Picassos of their species, or they reside somewhere in between.

"It's hard to say definitively if it's a true collaboration," Falvey says. "With animals you never know their experience; there's an alterity there that's difficult to transcend. But at the same time, there's a way of acknowledging that alterity without being anthropocentric. I think there are ways to acknowledge our interdependence."

*Animal Intent*, organized by Emily Falvey, is on view through March 18 at apexart, 291 Church Street.