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ART



Good Dogs Sit

Animals: they're so cute when they're dead

by Carle Steel

SEEMA GOEL AND LEE HENDERSON

ANY SHARP KNIFE WILL DO

DUNLOP ART GALLERY

UNTIL AUG. 4

"For 15 years, they've charmed you, amazed you, and surprised you," reads the copy to Telus's latest television ad campaign to choose the next spokesperson for the telecomm giant's ads. Between each phrase of text, cutie patooties like a baby hippo, dancing parrots and a frantic duckling appear and disappear, replaced by the image of the competition: a floating dolphin, a beatific monkey, or a big-eyed baby pig.

Whenever I see animals in advertising like this, I assume they are all dead. They may not be, of course, but if they're young, adorable farm animals, they probably outlived their usefulness long before their image made it to my eyeballs, and we all know what people do to animals that are of no use to us. The rest, who knows. Shuffling around in zoos or forced to swim with yuppies? Stars of *Meerkat Manor*? We don't care, beyond the 30 seconds that we lactate over their infantilized beauty.

We're simple that way: we like watching TV and talking on the phone and being entertained. The cute animals are just a perk, a tickle to our nervous systems already stroked with the rewards of technology and wealth.

It's a combination of animal porn and prostitution, where animals are stripped of context and forced to act like they're enjoying themselves. We buy it without a second thought.

Which is why I liked *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* so much. The whole exhibition is a second thought: about the animals we live with, the ones we don't and all the ways in which we take their lives and images for granted and without their consent.

In it, artists Seema Goel and Lee Henderson are overt about the way we take pleasure from the images of animals, through photography, literary imagery and taxidermy.

At the entrance to the show, tiny mice are mounted, trophy-style, under museum glass. Text elements speak of photography, guns, power and taxidermy: "The first task is to remove the narrative of its life, replacing it with polystyrene, clay sawdust and stitching," reads one line of text. "What we're doing here is not pretty."

It's true. We like replacing narratives when it comes to animals. It's the only way we can be in the world; how else could we face industrial meat farming, dead oceans and clear cutting of forest habitats?

Inside the gallery hang framed black and white photographs of trophy heads - of a muskox, moose and ram, hung in a genteel masculine room somewhere - overlaid with autofocus targets and exposure information. They are caught in the eye of three taxidermied domestic dogs. It's a gaze that is totally mediated, yet palpable to step through. There is something off about the dogs, in their frozen-in-hunting posture, clumsily rendered and stiff. The subjects of their interest, the trophy heads, are caught

immobilized, pinned against a wall on every possible level. If you count the photographs, these animals have been shot, decapitated, stuffed, then shot again - and all by nature lovers, to boot.

What Goel and Henderson also play with is the idea that it's proper to preserve some kinds of animals through taxidermy but not others. Trophy mounts and bear rugs are one thing, domestic and commensal animals are another. But why? It is perhaps the otherness of the wild animals, the lack of a shared language between us. It's as if their outright pissiness towards us when we meet in the wild has bought them a place on the wall, silent and obedient, felled by our superior tools and intellect. The dogs, even in their altered form, are still dogs. They are tempting to touch, and make the viewer wonder about their lives and deaths, whether they were good dogs, whether they were loved or missed. Even here though, there is discomfort around their value, a floating question of how their owners could have let them wind up in a Regina gallery so far from Ireland where they lived and died.

If anything, it is the mice in the show who have resisted the stripping of narrative. They have kept their mouse-ness, these tiny, eternal interlopers on our lives, as formidable as any predator. When was the last time a muskox gave you hantavirus, ate your crop or burned your house down? Cured your cancer? Exactly.

The success of *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* is its reframing of taxidermy and consumption of animal imagery. Through the taxidermy element of the work, it forces animals who have chosen to live with us into the place of the wild, unwilling animals that we would normally stuff and display as trophies. It's only by our relationship to them - the faithful family pet and protector, the household pest and scientific tool - that we know what we're doing is wrong.

Unlike the easy suspension of disbelief that comes over us when we see a frog shilling a cellphone, we don't buy the complicity of these animals for a minute.

Which reminds me of a joke: An old lady has two pet monkeys who both die on the same day. She takes their bodies to a taxidermy shop. "Do you want them mounted?" asks the taxidermist. "No, just holding hands," she says. That's the thing. As humans, we can put them in any positions we want.

