



Marcus Coates: Proxy | Kate MacGarry Gallery | London

Text by Travis Riley

Marcus Coates is best known for his shamanistic performance works in which he channels and consults animal spirits. This element of his practice has already found its way into Tate Britain's Triennial 2009 (curated by Nicholas Bourriaud) and in 2010, earned him a retrospective at [MK Gallery](#). In this show, at [Kate MacGarry](#), there is much less overt shamanism, but Coates' animal connection remains apparent.

The first piece you encounter is a thirteen second looped video of a Spotted Eagle Ray, slipping fluidly through glowing, tropical seawater. The effortless movement of the ray is emphasised by the small projection, which focussed on a grey painted rectangle, seems slightly raised from the wall's surface. The shimmering water becomes ethereal. The piece is called *Dogbatpigbird* (Spotted Eagle Ray, Galapagos) (2012) and the accompanying text, provided in the work listing, offers a comparison between the ray and the four titled animals, drawing on reproduction, sight, foraging, and flight based similarities. The work is framed by the statement: "Proximity to the video can aid the personal integration of conflicting multiple perspectives." Coates has demarcated a function to be filled by a symbolic attribute of the animal.

The work, *British Moths* (2011) comprises of a series of twenty-four small headshots, self-portraits of the artist smeared in white shaving foam. The expressively malformed features of the face appear ghoulish against the stark black background, and the more time spent, the more moth-ish the artist appears to become. The illuminated spectre does have something of a pale, light-drawn moth about it. Each portrait is ascribed a specific species of British moth, which in turn gives it a character name. The colloquial

(English) names of the species are surprisingly evocative; exemplary are *The Delicate*, *The Conformist*, and *The Exile*. The connection between image and title is subtly present, whilst *The Drinker* is smothered haphazardly in thick foam, *The Seraphim* peers out at the lens of the camera from under a heavy, white brow.

The Albatross Species (2012) and *Platonic Spirit: Running Grey Wolf* (2012) are closely related works. *The Albatross Species* consists of a neat pile of twenty-two standard-size scaffold boards, whilst *Running Grey Wolf* is a plinth, painted a dusty, light-grey, measuring 204 x 98 x 33cm. *The Albatross Species* is a result of Coates' realisation that the standard lengths of scaffolding board correspond almost exactly to the average wingspan of all Albatross species. The species are duly listed in ordered accordance with the pyramidal stack of boards in three different sizes.

Running Grey Wolf seems a self-aware recreation of the albatross-scaffolding phenomenon. The plinth has been built to purpose, measured to represent the skeletal dimensions of the wolf. Placed in the centre of the gallery space, the piece takes on a peculiar presence. Only just off-white, and of distinctly un-plinth-like proportion, the box does not hold the sleekness or movement of the wolf, but it does invoke the animal, both in the sense of a citation and of a measurable physical presence.

The title of the show is *Proxy*, and it is by this definition that Coates remains a conduit between human and animal worlds. Just as the human-built plinth is a stand-in for a wolf and the standard-sized boards stand-in for species of Albatross, so Coates disguises himself to represent twenty-four species of British moth. Other works in the show follow this theme, in *British Mammal Collection* (2012) Coates proffers bronze casts of faecal matter to fill in for the animals, and in *Skylark Song, duration 10mins* (2012) we are presented with a disordered bunch of film hung from the ceiling. The sheer length of tangled film stands in for the duration of the projection that we don't get to view.

One of the big questions posed by Coates' performances has always been about investment. Should we laugh or believe? Does Coates consider this a serious endeavour, or a means to a different artistic end? The ambiguity is lost in this show. The representation of nature is earnest, even when humorous. Respect is given and significant claims are made of the animals represented, but in this case there is no filmed audience to respond either with laughter or belief. Instead of investment, the question has become about the impact of the statements attributed to the artwork. The wolf is only a wolf-proxy by the attribution of the title. The works are all given a quality that allows them to appear ethereal or in some way transformative, but it is the text that activates their potential.

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- See more at: <http://www.aestheticmagazine.com/blog/marcus-coates-proxy-kate-macgarry-gallery-london/#sthash.zdx1YxAR.dpuf>