

Marcus Coates: Psychopomp at Milton Keynes Gallery, review

Marcus Coates is one of Britain's most original – and oddest – artists. Rating: ****

By Richard Dorment (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/richarddorment/>)
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Try to imagine a digital art video set in a block of high-rise council flats on a run-down estate on the outskirts of Liverpool: if there is a more dispiriting description of a work of art in the English language I have yet to hear it.

But I've now seen Marcus Coates's *Journey to the Lower World* several times, and each time it is just as funny, just as tense, and just as strange as I remembered it.



Taken from the Marcus Coates retrospective at the Milton Keynes Gallery

Coates, who is having his first retrospective in this country at the Milton Keynes Gallery, is the kind of British eccentric I thought they didn't make any more, a man so attuned to the bird and animal world that he believes he can communicate freely with starlings and crows in their own language, speaks fluent rabbit, pretty good badger and passable deer, but has never managed to master the difficult dialect of the plover. Certainly, the animal noises that come out of his mouth are eerily life-like, and if the film in which he transforms himself into a seal is anything to go by, his knowledge would interest David Attenborough.

I know what you are thinking – I did, too – but bear with me. On the day of the filming, eight mostly elderly residents of the aging tower block have gathered together in a small flat on the 20th floor. They are worried about their future, for the bleak monstrosity they call home appears to be under some kind of threat. They have a question for Coates to ask his friends in the animal kingdom: "Do we have a protector?" At this point I should mention that Coates is clean cut, well mannered, and a total geek.

What he is going to do, he politely explains, is to perform a shamanistic ritual during which he will fall into a trance and then descend to the netherworld to converse with the spirits of small dead animals. With luck, he will bring back their wisdom to help these feisty Liverpoolians.

Since he is standing only a few feet away from his audience, this takes a straight face and a lot of nerve. After drawing the curtains and pressing "play" on a portable CD player, the sound of hypnotic drumming fills the room. First he ties two anklets of keys to his feet, and then emerges from the kitchen in a reindeer headress and pelt. Coates appears to fall asleep. When he awakes, he is a different person, more animal in his movements than human. The audience watches with a mixture of stifled amusement, fear, and intense concentration as he walks around swaying, spinning in a circle, all the while making realistic animal grunts, barks, howls and hisses.

When the performance ends, he is covered in perspiration. Speaking in a normal voice, he describes a journey of the imagination in which he wandered through dark caves and dense forests before encountering the sparrowhawk who gave him the answer he was seeking.

What that folksy answer is doesn't particularly matter – because the artwork isn't about Coates, it's about his audience. His camera returns constantly to faces that unself-consciously register their responses to what they are seeing. Just like us, these good people don't know whether to laugh out loud or sit in solemn silence watching this complete stranger behave like a lunatic. Like us, most of them think it's all a lot of hokum, but like us, they can't be 100 per cent sure.

Not only is this ambiguity created deliberately, I'd say it is the whole point of his work. He could be the real thing, or a screwball, or a good actor — and how we choose to see him holds a mirror up to who we are.

For Coates, the world is divided into two kinds of people — the ones who are able to entertain the possibility of the paranormal, and those unwilling to suspend belief even for an instant. All these residents live on the same grim housing estate. For those who are able to enter into an artist's imaginative world, their surroundings are immaterial. Those who can't will never transcend them.

At 42, Coates has clearly learned a lot from the performance art of Joseph Beuys. But for me he is one of the most intelligent and original artists in this country today. Deliriously odd, he dresses up in animal skins and travels the world performing magical rituals for the unimpressed mayor of a town in Israel, or at an open-air festival in Japan. Each time, his camera searches the audience for the exquisite moment when, if only for a split second, a face registers the possibility of belief.

Just as inspired, is *Dawn Chorus*, a multi-screen film and audio installation in which the human voice is made to replicate the sound of birdsong. Early one morning in May 2005, Coates had a wildlife sound recordist capture on tape the cacophony of a dozen varieties of birds chirping, chattering, squawking and twittering simultaneously. Coates slowed the recording down to human pitch, and then taught human volunteers to mimic the song of each bird. Finally, when each volunteer had learned the song of the bird assigned to him or her, Coates accelerated the recording so that the result sounds like the real thing.

But that's not all. Treating each participant like an instrument in an orchestra, he filmed these men, women and children at home or work. On one screen, a young woman lies in her bath, chattering like a starling, on another an old man reads the paper, tweet-tweeting like a chaffinch. Here's the amazing thing: as far as I could tell, they aren't making these sounds at random. They are following the "score" of the original dawn chorus on that May morning.

One of the things good art can do is change the way we look at the world. By assigning each bird sound to a human personality, Coates ensures that I will never again wake up to the racket in our garden without straining to hear each bird's voice, wondering whether it is young or old, male or female, in a good mood or bad.

I'm probably placing the curse of the Telegraph on Marcus Coates, but if after this show he isn't at least nominated for the Turner Prize, I'm a wood pigeon.

- Until Apr 4. Details: www.mk-g.org (<http://www.mk-g.org/>)