

Animals are everywhere in art these days. But the attraction is problematic, for not everyone who paints or sculpts them is a card – carrying ASPCA member. It isn't a sudden burst of affection for all things bright and beautiful that is responsible for all these depicted creatures: rather, an animal is a given, a platform, a good pretext for art-making. And an animal can also be a stand-in for very human emotions.

As is the case with most subject matter that becomes a rage, art starring animals has to be really strong to impress for very long. There is a credibility factor. What bond is there between artist and the depicted animal or the animal lurking in his psyche? An expressionist artist has the duty to put us back in touch with primal feelings and emotions that have been buried for millennia. We crave real rawness, not the ersatz kind.

The singular art of Valentina Dubasky comes close to the goal. Her most recent series is of stag's, proud, noble animals who toss their heads and wear their answers like crowns or laurel wreaths. Their dignity makes them compelling initially, and in their depictions, Dubasky squanders none of this quality. On the other hand, she doesn't make icons out of the animals. What might seem at first to be a humbling of them turns out to be in fact a double ennobling. Simply the animal becomes a table.

Everyone is enchanted by stories of enchantment. Tales of magic and sudden metamorphosis strike some very responsive and primitive chord in all of us. The power of enchantment is in operation in the first time one encounters a Dubasky stag. The beast's broad back becomes a tabletop. It's held up on tiny legs and often bears a goblet or some other vessel. By the process of dual reading this cup might also be a brand marking the stag's flank. What is most noticeable, for it insinuates itself, is the stag's elongated head. It faces the tail and appears severed like a trophy resting on the table. We have two

VALENTINA DUBASKY

abstract before our eyes and a feast of non-referential painterly now comes to the fore. In this, each painting is radically different from the others for Dubasky has achieved some subtle Iberian color schemes which fill in the blocky architecture of her stag's construction.

The ancestors of the low-slung stags are found on the walls of

have perky little tails. We are holy in a mythic imagination.

Because they aren't quite right, Dubasky's stags possess high wind some numbness and humor: one sees an intermediary 20th century influence of Jean Dubuffet and his art brute. In work preceding the stag's, distortion reads as charming. Heads are the visages on dinky

Valentina DuBasky, Amber Stag, 1983.

oil on paper, 38" x 50" Private Collection, Courtesy Oscarsson Hood Gallery



readings: wild animal and keenness table. In compliment, the untamed consorts with the elegant domestication in a seamless fusion.

These paintings are at nearly perfect pitch, they are posed at an interface between abstraction and figuration which is a very contemporary concern, and at the same time they are sounding boards resonating with prehistoric echoes.

The oldest trick in the art school book is turning the representational painting upside down to evaluate whether it's painterly components hang together without being abetted by a narrative content. Something similar occurs after coming in contact with Dubasky's recent stags. The singular image, initially so potent, naturally pales upon repetition. The fact that the paintings turn

Lascaux and Altamira caves. With Dubasky's work, we appreciate and knew the ingenious solution prehistoric artists found for the problems of foreshortening entailed by an animal's turning its head. Laconically, the cave painter would paint the head on the body facing the tail. Though extreme, it's convincing.

The cachet of Dubasky's painting is or emulation of this procedure. It signals deep roots so taking her work out of the routine classification of neo-expressionism. The noble and heraldic come into play: this is more remarkable when one senses that the reversed head is something of a violation. The element of drawing has its place in the sun via the soaring antlers and the long tail, detached from the body like a curtain rope or maybe a margin line. But stags

bodies. They can resemble the spindly crank on an organ grinder's box. For all their heft these earlier animals are more vulnerable than the stags. Prior to the new stags, Dubasky experimented with glitter as a paint. A pink Dubuffet-like cow stands out against a sparkly night sky like a constellation. A prototype for the recent stags seems to be overturning a glittering goblet with its muzzle. The sparkly works to enhance the fairytale.

Alongside the stags are some workaday tabletops holding vases of flowers. Long stems presage the antlers of the stag. They emulate the animal that not only dares invade a banquet hall but also imposes itself tenaciously in the viewer's imagination. (Oscarsson Hood. October 3 – 31)

William Zimmer