

Joanna Braithwaite

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The creatures depicted in this group of small canvases are indeed wild! Each canvas is devoted to a strange hybrid creature. Some hybrids incorporate the human species. A human is teamed up with an anteater, with a sea urchin, and with – of all things – a winged egg! Although these are bizarre combinations, the creatures are not presented as frightening or intimidating, but rather they have the gentle, whimsical quality of curiosities. The viewer is invited to linger over their peculiarities rather than made to recoil in horror.

Notice that there is no suggestion of the creatures' context or surrounding habitat. Where these wild things are is a kind of pastel wonderland, out of time and place. This floating locale, combined with the strangeness of the hybrid creatures themselves, imparts a dream-like quality that can be described as 'surreal'. The Surrealist artwork brings images from the unconscious mind, which includes dreams, into collision with the recognisable everyday world. It can trigger a psychological or emotional response from the viewer, rather than a purely visual and rational one. Such a response can reveal unexpected insights.

By focusing her paintings on animals and humans, it is clear that Braithwaite is exploring the relationships between the two, but what might she be wanting to discover and why does she choose to depict her subjects in this way?

We generally think of, and depict, animals as either friends or foes, discriminating between the domestic and the wild – between those that are lived with and trusted and those that might attack. In the early days of human existence animals posed a threat, but today it is easy to view wild animals in semi-domestic settings such as zoos and wildlife parks. This tends to consolidate the generally accepted Western view that human beings are superior to animals. With her provocative juxtapositions, Braithwaite seems to want to unsettle this assumption.

I have used the unthreatening word, hybrid, to describe the *Wild Things*. But another word, mutant, also comes to mind when looking at the paintings. Inevitably it invokes the contentious issue of genetic engineering. Here it looks like the experiments have gone a little wrong... or have they? Somehow it's difficult to sustain a mood of foreboding when contemplating Braithwaite's world, where unexpected quirks and whimsy are always welcome.

Robyn Pickens

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