

The animals who float through the dreamy atmospheres of Maude Maris's new paintings are mainly ones she knows from around her studio in Normandy: a cat, a bat, and a snail are among them. Each seems endowed with a magic whose properties we can't know, as if at the center of a creation myth just unfolding. The cat, viewed from above, rests on a blanket of night sky, stars arrayed before it like playthings. The bat hangs before a brushy field of blue, joined only by a disc of moon. And the snail glides through an overcast sky, the barest suggestion of land beneath. Our vantage on each of the animals disorients; we may not be their intended audience.

These paintings differ considerably from the artist's last body of work. In those paintings, Maris followed an elaborate process of translation: She would start by casting small, found figurines, especially of animals, in plaster. She would then pose, photograph, and depict the plaster forms on canvas, enlarging them to monumental scale. This series of translations lent the original objects an apparently ancient power and the juxtaposition of one or more of them suggested mute conversation. Maris painted the animals, seemingly hewn from white marble, in cool, iridescent gradients, as if pulled from a liquid crystal display.

Working from her studio in Normandy, Maris recently chose to follow a freer, more painterly approach, liberated from her sculptural models. The animals, too, seem liberated from their obdurate objecthood. Yet they still possess a coldness, a distance, a silence. I was introduced to Maris through another artist, the late Lin May Saeed (1973–2023), a German-Iraqi sculptor who devoted her career to solidarity with nonhuman animals. Saeed understood that animals had language, whether or not we understand it, but thematized their silence and strangeness out of respect. Against the weight of western art history, she believed that animals are subjects and not objects. Maris's animal paintings, past and present, explore similar themes — how we attempt to fashion and fix the nonhuman creatures around us, with whom we may share a deep but conflicted intimacy, and how they resist or break free of such constraints.

In 1970, critic John Berger famously posed the question "Why Look at Animals?" Humans have a deep history of interspecies kinship, he observed, from which they departed only recently: "To suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a 19th century attitude backwards across the millennia. Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises." Yet the animal's "lack of common language, its silence," Berger writes, "guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man." It is no coincidence for him that zoos, the places one might go to engage with the nonhuman, emerged at exactly the time that animals receded from everyday life under industrialized capitalism. Yet the zoo, Berger writes, "cannot but disappoint." This is so because "you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal.... The space which they inhabit is artificial."

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In Maris's paintings, with their brushy atmospheres, animals occupy an abstract, artificial space. Yet they are not marginal, or at least no more than us. The forces Berger described over a half century ago have only continued to alienate and obviate humans, to mediate and monetize our experience of the world. Both labor and leisure time, for many, is spent on screens. In the artificial space of the internet, no content type wins more clicks than the animal video. "Should we be embarrassed to watch animals on Instagram?" Maude asked me. Are they a nostalgic, even primordial comfort blanket, as we navigate our own alienation? Perhaps, but painting might be as well. And I'd no sooner give it up.

Robert Wiesenberger

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