

BLINDFOLD

LYNNE ROBERTS-GOODWIN

15 march to 20 april 1997

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin and the mastication of natural history

No one has ever had a meaningful conversation with a herbivore. You're kidding yourself if you imagine that a cow or a horse is sharing your affection when it nuzzles you with its big wet nose and blinks at you lazily. They know that you aren't an enemy – so they trust you and agree to have their chops tickled – but they have inscrutable reasons for including you in their confidence. You'll never know what they get out of your expressions of admiration and blessing. They're somewhere else. They don't have the same facial relationships, just as they don't have a language of the prehensile. Besides, they probably think you're very manic and shrill.

You can impute all manner of affections and emotional responses to the beautiful mammals that eat grass; but it's all sentimentality and wish-fulfilment. With contemporary cleverness, we laugh at Landseer and the quaint anthropomorphizing of beasts in Victorian taste; but we're no wiser, no closer to the psychology of animals than the bourgeois gentlemen of the nineteenth century who imagined animals through human character. Nearly all cultural history reveals a fondness for 'nature moralized' rather than nature *per se*; because the consciousness of beasts is incomprehensible. We know that animals have consciousness but we're quite unprepared to imagine what it might involve.

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin is hardly interested in defining nature by some totalized conception of animal consciousness but she is prepared to investigate the experience of animals as they pass through human hands; from there, she speculates on the economy of affections that exists when you try to extrapolate from human feeling to animal experience. Roberts-Goodwin's work is neither concerned with the fate of animals nor with animal-rights nor with the reform of animal husbandry nor vegetarianism. The point of her engagement with the remoteness of animals is the epistemological status of a sympathetic emotion.

In her installation entitled *Blindfold*, you're invited to share a number of experiences with the most beautiful creatures, the Wapiti Deer, an introduced species in Australia. Two photographs present the delicate visages of the beasts, as if in the genre of reportage, the kind of photography which might show an individual in a crowd who seems to signal some typical inflexion of mood that characterizes a whole memorable situation. And so, the perspective is a little confusing and the depth-of-field is shallow: we're just catching the moisture in the eye before the tender creature moves out of sight. The image is haunting: there's a sense of lost intimacy, a completely unfulfilled encounter, a sweetness which is never to be realized.

A large expanse of wall in the installation presents an uncanny animal presence, just where you might expect the wall to recede in its the abstraction which is the 'natural' planar default of walls. This wall is pulsing with animal camouflage: it seems close and bizarrely intimate; and the enveloping sense of stretching fur and muscle contrasts with the optical remoteness of the photographic snippet of herbivorous phenomenology.

Camouflage, of course, is the 'method' by which nature conceals from one creature the volume and

tangible substance of another. Of course, there's no method in the sense of will; but nature has its own blindfolds which inhibit the visual access of one creature to another. It isn't just human consciousness that finds another animal presence impenetrable. Nature has, as it were, made all creatures alien. The camouflage is the natural blindfold which corresponds to the cultural blindfold which prevents humans from entering and seeing the headspace of another creature.

But Roberts-Goodwin is not a phenomenologist. She isn't contented evoking natural things and enjoying their singular richness. Her camouflage is larger than life: it isn't natural but painted, artificial, even institutional; for it's the sort of art work that the Army throws over its tanks and four-wheel drive vehicles for combat in the jungle, the habitat of non-humans. And any nature-photographer or field naturalist or even hunter of wild beasts will synthesize this spotty streaky pattern in order to steal up on beasts and shoot them unawares.

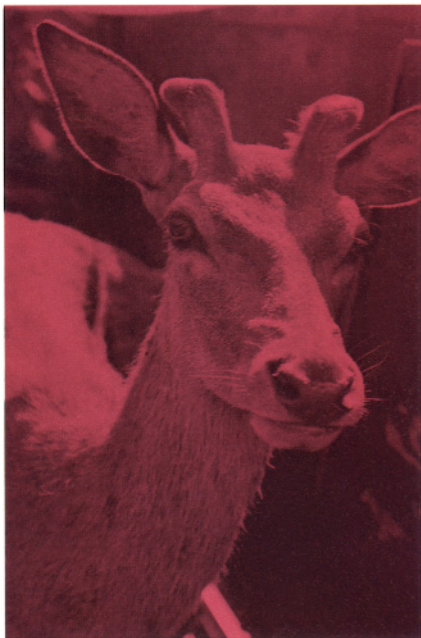
In the terms coined by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, the camouflaged wall motif represents the 'deterritorialization' of the block in human consciousness for the experience of animals, represented – in Roberts-Goodwin's installation – by the photographs of the remoteness of the fugitive animal faces. Deterritorialization is the deferred expression of something somewhere else rather than a directly causal relationship between two phenomena. Thus, while in some sense we wouldn't be able to understand the animals anyway, our failure to understand them is mirrored in the blind patterns that nature (but subsequently culture) has made for the animals. The artificial camouflage deterritorializes our limited awareness of the animal's consciousness. Conversely, we're insensitive and dense when it comes to animal sentiments on perceiving an image of a single beast; and this 'thickness' deterritorializes the random patches of unintelligible and



deer 1 1996/7
electrostatic print on film
220 x 110cm

inscrutable disposition which we engineer to replicate an animal's lack of visual presence.

I don't think that Roberts-Goodwin is untouched in her speculations about the blindfold that obscures our vision both ways. She does somewhat identify with the animals that she photographs (even acknowledging that this is impossible); and perhaps the 'toxic sweetness' of her encounter with them is part of the reason for the pink light in the installation. The photographs of the Wapiti deer are lovingly seized with her own camera. She, too, holds the camera, goes camouflaged and wears the blindfold; but this intrepid experience is not without naive joy, even as it reveals the patchy gaps in consciousness which the very sentiment of closeness paradoxically highlights. And in 'chasing' the Wapiti deer, Roberts-Goodwin recalls in her photography, at least, the expeditions of certain Edwardian



field naturalists and professors of zoology whose compendious and authoritative encyclopaedias she studied as a child. It's from such empirical sources that Roberts-Goodwin first came to know the very name 'Wapiti', all material which racy and vivacious English prose lodges firmly in the mind of a curious youngster. Nothing is so seductive as the poetry of science; and the joy of absorbing such well-sifted information encourages ritual re-reading in later life. Then one realizes that the copious learning filed in the archive of natural history is also somewhat naive, that it explains natural processes but cannot – in spite of much sympathetic narrative and positive gallantry toward the beasts – convey what it's like to be on the other side of the blindfold. That belongs to speculation alone.

Robert Nelson

deer 2 1996/7
electrostatic print on film
220 x 110cm

List of works

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin
BLINDFOLD

deer 1 1996/7

electrostatic print on film
220 x 110 cm

deer 2 1996/7

electrostatic print on film
220 x 110 cm

camouflage wall

duotone laser cut film
5 x 1200 cm

camouflage glass

duotone laser cut film on glass
2 windows x 233 x 192 cm

skylights

translucent film on acrylic sheet
6 skylights x 200 x 200 cm



THE ART GALLERY *of* NEW SOUTH WALES