

Amy Mahnick Artist's Statement

My paintings are carefully constructed still life arrangements where I pay particular attention to symbolism, words, and the language of painting in order to communicate something about the lives of animals—something from which most viewers would prefer to look away.

Beginning with symbolism, I employ some of the same objects used by vanitas painters such as candles, hourglasses and dried flowers to evoke a sense of brevity, urgency and finality. Ceramic animals become representatives of different areas of exploitation and the human roles we play within them. Cow-shaped creamers, for instance, are used to highlight the cruelties of the dairy industry. Their open mouths, designed as spouts and as cute symbols of their being generous, magical milk machines, in my paintings become a means of expressing pain. In my still lifes they appear to be crying out rather than offering, thus countering the industry-created myth that animals willingly, or even joyfully, submit to their exploitation. Another figurine, a pair of white (neutral), unidentified, “Carefree Birds,” becomes a stand-in for our collective unwillingness to hear the protests from animals and the suffering behind them.

I compose my objects within uniquely proportioned rectangles and in alignment with the underlying armature. These formats, and their armatures, provide an abstract foundation suggesting the natural harmony of the universe and the interdependence of everything within it. They exert an unseen influence on the picture that runs counter to the hidden system of distorted relationships between human and non-human animals in laboratories and on factory farms throughout the world.

In addition to format and placement, tone and color design play important roles in my telling of animals' stories. What at first might seem like a quaint, innocuous still life, is actually, upon further inspection, a painting about male chicks in the egg industry with coloring inspired by a phrase from a Joyce Carol Oates story, that of a “broken, bloody egg.” Conversely, using chiaroscuro can be a way of evoking hope as light value shapes are arranged to emerge out of a dark background.

Finally, words, either directly or indirectly, play an important role in my paintings for animals. A postcard of a painting from art history, for example, is one way of inviting viewers into the picture and of setting the stage for it. Placed in the immediate foreground, and at an angle, it draws one into the set-up via the story contained within the image. Two such postcards I use are Meredith Frampton's *Still Life, 1932*, and Carolus Durand's *Merrymakers*. The content of the postcards isn't comprehensible given their foreshortening and the intimate scale of my work, but by revealing their titles in my titles, viewers can begin to understand that there is more going on than what at first meets their eyes. Meredith Frampton's painting addresses the theme of man vs nature, so the relevance is clear. In *Merrymakers*, however, two adult women and a child are seated around a table and taking delight in the presence of a parrot. It's a perfectly uncontroversial scene to most people, but if one would look at the situation from the parrot's point of view, they would notice the complete lack of anything within its environment natural to parrots. So this postcard functions similarly to the *Carefree Birds*.

Depicting books is another way of setting the tone with titles such as “The Cry of Nature” and “The Lives of Animals,” by Stephen F. Eisenman and J. M. Coetzee, respectively. Not only are the titles named in the titles of the painting, but the books are literally the platforms upon which the animals stand, amplifying their calls to all who care to listen.