

Art Made by Tempting Animals

By KAT HERRIMAN JAN. 12, 2016

At the artist Dana Sherwood’s apartment on the Upper West Side, her dog, Hera, answers the door, tail wagging. A lifelong equestrian who now competes in dressage, Sherwood is used to collaborating with animals — and connects with them on a fundamental level. “Dressage is all about understanding a horse through the feel of your body; it’s like inventing another language,” says Sherwood. “What I’m interested in lately is the difference between what we assume animals think and how they actually behave.” In her new solo show, “Crossing the Wild Line,” at Denny Gallery on the Lower East Side, Sherwood takes nature’s pulse by way of an unlikely combination of media: pastry, video and drawing.



An installation view of Dana Sherwood’s new exhibition “Crossing the Wild Line.” The show includes (from left) watercolors and sculpture, night-vision video and a food cart, all relating to Sherwood’s latest project: putting carefully chosen treats out in wild areas in Brazil and Denmark, then filming local animals’ responses.



A view of the food cart Sherwood erected in the Botanical Garden of Brasilia.

Sitting down to speak about her exhibition, Sherwood lays out a small plate striped with berries, raw nuts and chocolate shards. The welcoming gesture echoes an aspect of her work: the homemade confections Sherwood makes and leaves outside to be devoured. Her sculptural edibles attract both predators and prey. In the past, Sherwood has targeted specific species with individualized ingredients: seed and suet pyramids for birds, raw hot dog and powdered doughnut towers for raccoons. “The more people, the more raccoons. I’m always interested in animals that are benefiting somehow from proximity to humans or human interference,” Sherwood says. “That’s why I like baboons; they are kind of the raccoons of South Africa.” Informed by the artist’s research into historic food design and zoology, her pieces rely on the serendipitous participation of her wild volunteers.

At “Crossing the Wild Line,” recent back-to-back projects are on display. For the exhibition’s namesake project, Sherwood flew to the Botanical Garden of Brasilia, where she erected a traditional food cart

in the lushness of the tropical preserve. In the gallery, resin re-creations of her confections decorate her original cart, which traveled to New York to be part of the show. Passersby can see the installation from the street — and their curious stares are not unlike that of the ocelot that one can see feeding on a dangling carcass in Sherwood’s surveillance tapes. “I wanted to use only natural and native produce for this project,” says Sherwood, who worked with the team in Brazil on her ingredient research. “I wasn’t going to use it at first, but the raw chicken ended up being what got the most action. It’s those factors that you can’t plan for.”



A still from Sherwood’s video “Crossing the Wild Line” (2015), which depicts an ocelot enjoying the bounty she’s set out.

After a balmy stint in Brazil, Sherwood zipped off to a remote part of Denmark, where she encountered a forest full of deer, many of whom were too timid to approach her ambrosial presentations — pancake towers topped with berries and apples. “Even when I just put out two carrot sticks, they bolted,” laughs Sherwood. “I ended up making a documentary video about the frustrations of dealing with animals and the expectations you set for yourself expecting that animals are going to cooperate. It’s never the case that animals act the way you think they are going to.” On the wall, hand-colored drawings of sausage links and raccoons feasting provide a fantastical foil to the night-ops aesthetic of her nocturnal footage. These watercolors play a critical part in her process. “When I’m waiting for my tapes to be finished, they are the only thing that keep me sane, especially during really isolated settings, like Denmark,” Sherwood says. “They are a way for me to plan as well as react.”

Dana Sherwood’s “Crossing the Wild Line” is on view through Feb. 21 at Denny Gallery, 261 Broome St., New York, dennygallery.com.