

The Day

Wild kingdom: Dana Sherwood's Old Lyme show explores "Animal Appetites and Other Encounters in Wildness"

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Artist Dana Sherwood on the film set The Artists' Bedroom Bestiary in Old Lyme in 2021. (Photo by Paul Mutino, Courtesy of the artist)

The bedroom sits on a lawn, as if torn away from a house, only two walls still standing. It looks like a film set, and it is.

The green wallpaper is emblazoned with drawings of raccoons. The antique-style furniture and accoutrements recall the early 20th century.

At night, the bedroom is arranged with plates of food. Night-vision cameras capture what happens in the depths of the evening. Wild animals cautiously approach the room and the dishes. They smell the victuals. They touch the offerings. They grab a hunk and savor it.

Sometimes, it's a raccoon, using its paws like agile hands. Another time, it's an opossum mother with her babies hanging onto her back as she scampers around the bedroom.

The set-up and the resulting videos are by artist Dana Sherwood, and the images were captured in Old Lyme last summer.

The videos — and the complete bedroom set, moved indoors — are part of the exhibition "Dana Sherwood: Animal Appetites and Other Encounters in Wildness" on view at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme.

The bedroom is meant to be an homage to the circa 1910 bedroom that's featured in the Florence Griswold boardinghouse, where Lyme Colony artists gathered during that era.

Sherwood's set and cameras were placed last summer on the property of a neighboring location to the Flo Gris: the Connecticut Audubon Society's Roger Tory Peterson Estuary Center. Since the site was formerly the Bee and Thistle, there was a huge commercial kitchen that Sherwood could use to make food for the art installation.

It's a recent work by Sherwood, whose fascination with this process began by accident 11 years ago. Sherwood, who is based in Copake, N.Y., was making time-based work out in the landscape at the Art Omi arts center in upstate New York, where she put out cakes meant to decay over time. Instead, she realized the food had been raided by raccoons.

Flo Gris associate curator Jenny Parsons says that Sherwood "found beauty in it and wanted to explore that element of the unexpected. She started intentionally making projects offering food to animals ... I think Dana's really pushing the boundaries of art and life by inviting the presence of wild animals to take part in her art."

Parsons says the lack of control and the acceptance that things might not go as planned became part of Sherwood's journey — and part of the work itself. Parsons notes that the element of chance has a tradition throughout art history, from surrealism to readymade.

As a result of each project, Sherwood received more invitations to do her work at different locations. Scientists in Denmark, for instance, suggested she travel there because the red deer were so tame they might eat out of her hands. In fact, the deer were scared by the presence of humans. They timidly began to approach the cake that Sherwood has left outside, but then they bolted.

Sherwood was frustrated but realized this, as she's quoted as saying in the exhibition: "When you invite the chaos of nature as a collaborator, there's no telling what's going to happen."

Parsons says Sherwood had an epiphany; she realized there is something wonderful in animals just being animals.

"As much as we try to think like them and give them something they may want out of generosity or in an attempt to connect, nature is just unpredictable and there's actually optimism in that," Parsons says.

Sherwood has adjusted the food in various displays based on what the animals seem to like, at one point coming to this revelation: "No one eats kale!"

Sherwood creates whimsical ink and watercolor works inspired by the videos and by her interest in such literature as Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland."

Connection to Flo Gris

Parsons met Sherwood in 2018, when she and Flo Gris curator Amy Kurtz Lansing stopped by Lyme Academy of Fine Arts when Sherwood was giving a talk there.

Parsons recalls, "I was just blown away by the ways in which her work was so avant-garde but really had so many connections to our core story (at Flo Gris), especially through animals, the environment, and food. Those are all so important to the narrative of the Lyme Art Colony and the reason that the artists came here in the early 20th century. They came to paint the landscape, to immerse themselves in nature. Many of them came to paint animals on the surrounding rural farms. Some of them even interacted with Miss Florence's cats — there were animals right inside the Griswold House that were domesticated. Then we know that they loved the food, that Miss Florence grew food in her garden, that she had fruit from her orchards, she grew vegetables."

Some of the Lyme Colony artists said they really enjoyed the food at Miss Florence's, and that was one of the many reasons they kept returning.

"When we saw that Dana's practice involved so many of those intertwining themes, we just thought it would be a really great way to continue this journey we've been on, which is programs and exhibits about art and the environment and interconnections between those things. Her work would be a really original and unique way to show a different perspective," Parsons says.

She notes that making art in a kitchen is different, but everyone can relate to eating or dining or social connection. That's really what is at the core of Sherwood's work, basic ideas about coming together around the table, eating, sharing and connecting.

Night vision in Old Lyme

Sherwood became Flo Gris's artist-in-residence during the summer of 2021. The set for the Old Lyme installation was built in May of that year (Sherwood's studies for the set were handed over to the Day + Age in Ledyard, a design, building and restoration company that designed and created the set based on Sherwood's ideas). The filming followed.

When Sherwood puts out the dishes of food, she wants them to be artworks. She spends time pouring food into Jell-O molds and making aspic.

"One of the things that is important to her is not only that she's feeding (the animals), but that she's feeding them something very beautiful in this almost ritualistic manner, so she creates these kinds of still lifes in the landscape," Parsons says.

Sherwood was inspired by the memento mori still lifes of Dutch masters where it all looks beautiful and abundant, but, upon closer inspection, things are rotting.

"It's really a story about the circle of life and embracing the idea of life and death," Parsons says.

Sherwood researches the animals' wild diets. But she also found early on that when she offered up processed food because it was simply what her roommates had stashed in the closet, some animals liked that, presumably having eaten it before because of access to trash cans or dumpsters, Parsons notes.