

McLennan and Ball at David B. Smith Denver



Laura Ball "Growing Pains" Watercolor on paper 2010

Lauren Ball and Ryan McLennan both paint animals in their unnatural state rendered in detailed watercolor and acrylic. The authority of traditional presentation heightens the irony of the artists distempered interpretations. Of course John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage backhanded the historic media trope into the canon over a decade ago.



Ryan McLennan "The Witch" 2010 Acrylic and graphite on paper 37 x 52 in.

McLennan deftly double backhands, pictorially alluding to 19th century nature illustration of John Audubon or Martin Johnson Heade. But he takes the viewer pretty far from that happy world where the naturalist-painter took such pains to praise the fauna of the New World in colors. Bye bye to that cabinet of wonders.



Ryan McLennan "Purification" 2010 Acrylic and graphite on paper

These pictures uncannily seem to be painted by the animals they depict who make foreboding but forbearing commentary on the desolate paradox the New World has become. Kind of like Sam Beckett. For these creatures, the stumps and trunks which were their taxidermic armatures in Audubon become – always blasted – their environment. A bemused musk ox (ovibos moschatus) stares into a skull in a tree as great blue herons (ardea herodias) contort from perches in excoriated trunks. A red fox in throes of death or at least petit-mort in the hollow of a grey boulder is reflected in another floating above him. At first it seems hes being attacked but the poses and jaws are not confrontational. The hovering fox may be a sympathetic spirit. The animals convey emotion through their compositional arrangement and situation.

Anthropomorphic projection? The factual scientists bane? So what. The fabulists in control here. As the late Dennis Oppenheim might say, “Go further with fiction”.



Laura Ball, "Tree of Life" 2010 Watercolor on paper 32 x 49 in.

Lauren Balls bestiary and botanica archimboldize wildlife and fauna to augment both wildness and artifice. The overall fleshiness of her concatenated bodies accentuated through watercolor translucence, conveys a sort of genetic pantheism – everything contains a little bit of everything else. This awareness generates some febrile wingflapping and tailfeather shaking. Arrangements of nubby and smooth animals read like the fatty and muscled tissues of the show *Bodies*.





Laura Ball "Spring" Watercolor on paper 30 x 22.5 in. 2011

There is an avian component to most figures. For example, in *Display*, a toucan beak becomes a rhino horn, a peacock as its tail. The rhinoid of *Growing Pains* stomps through a white background over a zoological wake of its own making, as if its animate parts co-seminate the ground, trailing feathers. Ungulate heads and snake trunks become legs in *Writhe* where a giraffelike creature sheds and treads on its spots, having laid bare the fauna of its flesh. A ram's head graces the crotch. But though genders signified, it isn't determined – these beasts are done up like a Philip Treacy hat. There's a decorative element of Klimt's tessellated *Kiss*, but not the tapestral flatness.

It's been a long time since nature has been natural. But it doesn't lose its charm.

[David B. Smith Gallery](#)

Top Photo: *Laura Ball "Growing Pains" Watercolor on paper 33 x 51.5 in. (83.8 x 130.8 cm) 2010*