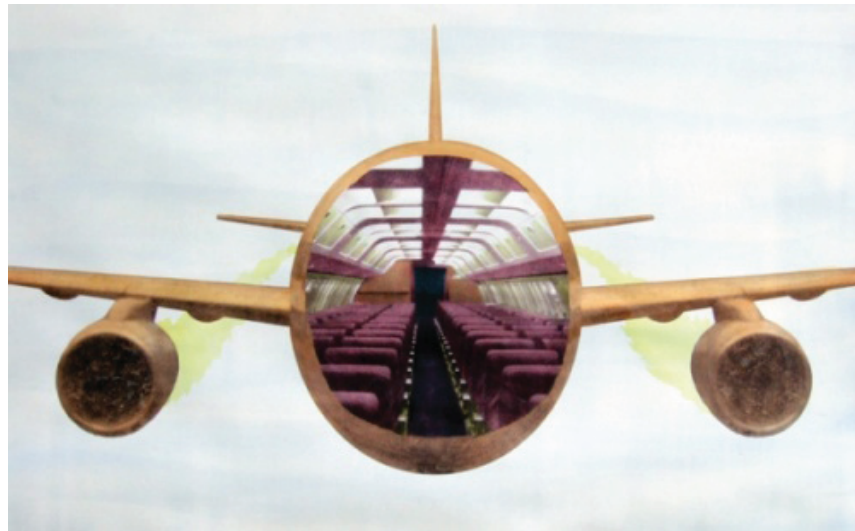


The Hunted and the Hunters

Aaron Morse and others offer animals and historical references with a twist

By Matt Morris
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Having Country Club's West End gallery space in walking distance of my home was a luxury I didn't fully appreciate until it moved across town to Oakley. But while it is now further away from downtown and many like-minded arts organizations, it is worth the trek.

Now located on the second floor above the high-end design store Voltage at 3209 Madison Road, the room is huge with more space for current exhibitions and works by other artists. For the size of the room, it is not brightly lit, lending coziness to the range of muted whites. The floors, walls, columns and ductwork are all painted unifying shades of white that set the room behind what is on view — a long-held ideal for viewing contemporary art.

The large number of paintings by Aaron Morse, currently on view in the exhibition *Kingdom of Nature*, is joined by a bright collection of ceramic works by the duo Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis, which, all things considered, works well.

Morse, who was born in Tucson, Ariz., and now resides in Los Angeles, earned his MFA from the University of Cincinnati in 1998. His works are painting/print combos where collage and watercolor paint have been worked across the fronts of pages and canvases that have been printed with images. The pictures are seemingly appropriated from sources as diverse as natural-history illustrations,

comic books and the washy pulp-novel illustrations that are very trendy right now.

Many of these works are veritable orgies of Darwinian evolutionary models, music-concert enthusiasts, jungle creatures and warriors from all parts of history and culture — Mayan, medieval or fully suited army men that recall Desert Storm or its sci-fi doppelganger, the G.I. Joes of the movies.

While these dense collages possess a beauty not unlike intricate tapestries, Morse's delicacy and deft control of materials are shown better in a number of the more distilled works that focus on one scene at a time.

Take, for instance, "Rapture Plane (#3)," hung near the front desk. In this large work on paper, a jet faces the viewer head-on, with the nose of the plane removed and the interior of the fuselage exposed.

Morse seems constantly in search of an iconography for our present age to contrast the historical in his work. This enigmatic image of the jet summarizes our complicated relationship with such crafts: vehicles for hijacking and terrorism, a fallible industry with soaring prices and decreasing convenience, and even Oceanic Flight 815, the fateful Pacific flight that crashed at the beginning of the science fiction television series *Lost*.

Several works that focus more on painting and less on printed images offer more direct entry points into Morse's cluttered fantasy realms. "The Mountain That Was God" is an intensely colored field of green, magenta and marigold patches that are organized into a troop of silhouetted army men ascending a craggy mountain range.

"Deluge" also features silhouetted yellow adventurers, but this time as sword-wielding angels flying into crashes of aquatic colors and watercolor marks shaped like serpents and sea monsters. Here, Morse recalls William Blake and contemporary painter Peter Doig equally. Rather than overcrowding one picture with many clashing scenarios, both pieces irradiate their scenes with psychotropic color schemes and wild painting. The use of the materials reflects the ecstasy and trepidation of the images themselves, which is the best I can ask for from painting.

In their accompanying project *License to Illuminate*, Parker and Davis display artful ceramics that employ lighting, patterns and tasteful touches of gold leaf to excite the coy objects they've crafted. The two are currently based in Cincinnati. Pugs, wolves, rats and snakes are mutated and presented as sconces, tabletop art and two-headed monstrosities that are nonetheless adorable and enticing.

Although cast animal sculptures by Kiki Smith or Katarina Fritsch immediately spring to mind, Parker and Davis present their works decidedly as products and décor. However, the crowded shelves of cups or rat multiples were too cramped a space in which to see the intricacy and plotted humor of their objects.

Parker and Davis evoke a porcelain hunting lodge, mounted animal heads, patterns suggestive of tartans and historical regalia. The piece "Figurine" highlights their penchant for evolving historical imagery — in this case, a couple drawn from a Fragonard courtship painting from 18th Century France. The tree against which the couple sits is modern and modular, in high contrast to their whimsical costumes. Three cast rats hang by their tails like ornaments, and the head of a fourth is chained to the lady's golden hands.

Using images of wildlife, domestic pets and historical or current events, Morse, Parker and Davis remix scenes and décor to surprise, provoke and meditate. Their elegant works complement the new space. The sense of play I've come to expect from gallery director Matt Distel's projects at the old West End locale is still present in spades, and the implied irreverence of the work does some to make up for the gallery's move to such a polite, moneyed part of town.