

MOYRA DAVEY

Plymouth Rock

PRESENTED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH TRANSLINK



Moyra Davey, *Untitled (animal pictures)*, 2019, silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist; greengrassi, London; and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Installation mock-up: Alina Ilyasova.

Moyra Davey will deliver the inaugural Capture Keynote Lecture on Thur. April 2 at 6 pm at Emily Carr University of Art + Design (p. 109).

CURATED BY EMMY LEE WALL
CAPTURE PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL

The Stadium–Chinatown SkyTrain Station features the work of New York–based artist Moyra Davey in the inaugural presentation of her series *Plymouth Rock*. This suite of black-and-white photographs of fowl and equines offers an affecting juxtaposition to the surrounding urban environment in which they are installed. The focus on animal imagery speaks to rural life in a language that arguably positions its subjects “outside of history.” We had the opportunity to discuss this body of work with Davey and she kindly offered insight into the series.

EMMY LEE WALL

Can you tell us a bit about how the idea for the *Untitled (animal pictures)* series came to be?

MOYRA DAVEY

I’d been planning to photograph the political theorist Dalie Giroux, but ended up taking pictures of her animals instead.

ELW

What inspired you to visit the home of the political philosopher Dalie Giroux in La Pêche, Québec?

MD

I got to know her first via her writing and a YouTube lecture, then I met her in Montreal and we did a recording together. She had wanted that meeting to take place in La Pêche, but I was only able to visit her there at a later date. By then it was spring and there were swarms of voracious mosquitos and near-constant rain, and I was trying to take photographs in those conditions with an old Hasselblad camera.

ELW

These photographs relate to a film. Can you tell us about the film and describe the relationship between the film and the photographs?

MD

The film is called *I confess*, and it triangulates three writers: the novelist and essayist, James Baldwin, the Québécois revolutionary, Pierre Vallières, and the political philosopher, Dalie Giroux. It’s an essayistic work anchored by the emergent themes of race, poverty, and language in North America. It began as a meditation on Baldwin’s novel *Another Country* then took an unexpected deep dive into the turbulent separatist politics of Québec in the 1960s and 70s, as filtered through my childhood recollection of the events.

Dalie’s dogs and chickens made their way into the film via a Skype recording—the chickens are in the yard and on the porch, and the dogs are a wild pack bumping up against the camera and gamboling through the frame.



Moyra Davey, *Untitled (animal pictures)*, 2019, silver gelatin print, 30.7 × 38.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist; greengrassi, London; and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

At the same time, I was reading a very beautiful bestiary text by Dalie Giroux, about art for animals. I was thinking about it as I made the photographs, and would email certain scans to her, such that the photos became part of a dialogue with Dalie.

ELW

What unites these three writers—Baldwin, Vallières, and Giroux—for you?

MD

They are all revolutionary thinkers and activists.

ELW

When we were discussing this series earlier, you very poetically described these works as being about animals that stand “outside of history.” Can you tell us what you mean by this?

MD

I have to credit Liz Magor with that observation. She watched the video and immediately started to comment on how all the humans are consumed or inspired by one thing or another, caught up in history, ending history, and the animals are oblivious—free and wild and untrammled by the weight of human concerns. Until we take them down with us, that is.

ELW

This phrase “outside of history” really struck a cord because, for me, there is something very timeless about this suite of images, almost universal. Is that something you were deliberately thinking about when you were shooting these animals? Is this why they are shot in black and white versus colour?

MD

There is actually another player in my constellation of influences, and it is Peter Hujar, who was unrivaled when it came to photographing animals. Shooting in square format and in black and white, I am actively channelling him, and finding out how unbelievably difficult it is to make this type of photograph. I am still trying to relax into the process and learn from it.

ELW

Hujar’s depiction of animals is so striking—they are very much portraits or studies of each individual subject. Is capturing the essence of each animal what you consider so challenging about creating this kind of work?

MD

There’s the technical aspect—animals rarely hold still—so you need a fast shutter speed, you can’t direct, and you need to be quick, but the bigger challenge, “capturing the essence” as you say, is harder to put into words. I found that some of the better photographs came about when I was learning about equine behaviour, like pair bonding and the habit of standing mane to tail to double up on fly-swishing.

ELW

What considerations come into play for you when you are conceiving a public art installation rather than preparing works for a more typical gallery installation?

MD

There is a certain freedom to working on the public art piece. The photos get blown up, cropped, things I rarely do. You can be more loose and experimental in your approach to the photograph because it’s about what will make an impact when seen quickly and from a distance.

ELW

There’s a definite power to these images and I think they are even more affecting because of their site of presentation. The works will be installed at the Stadium-Chinatown SkyTrain Station, which is quite a juxtaposition for these rural, quiet, contemplative images. Were you thinking about this context when you proposed this series?

MD

Yes. I love the stark contrast of rural/animal and urban/human cultures.



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