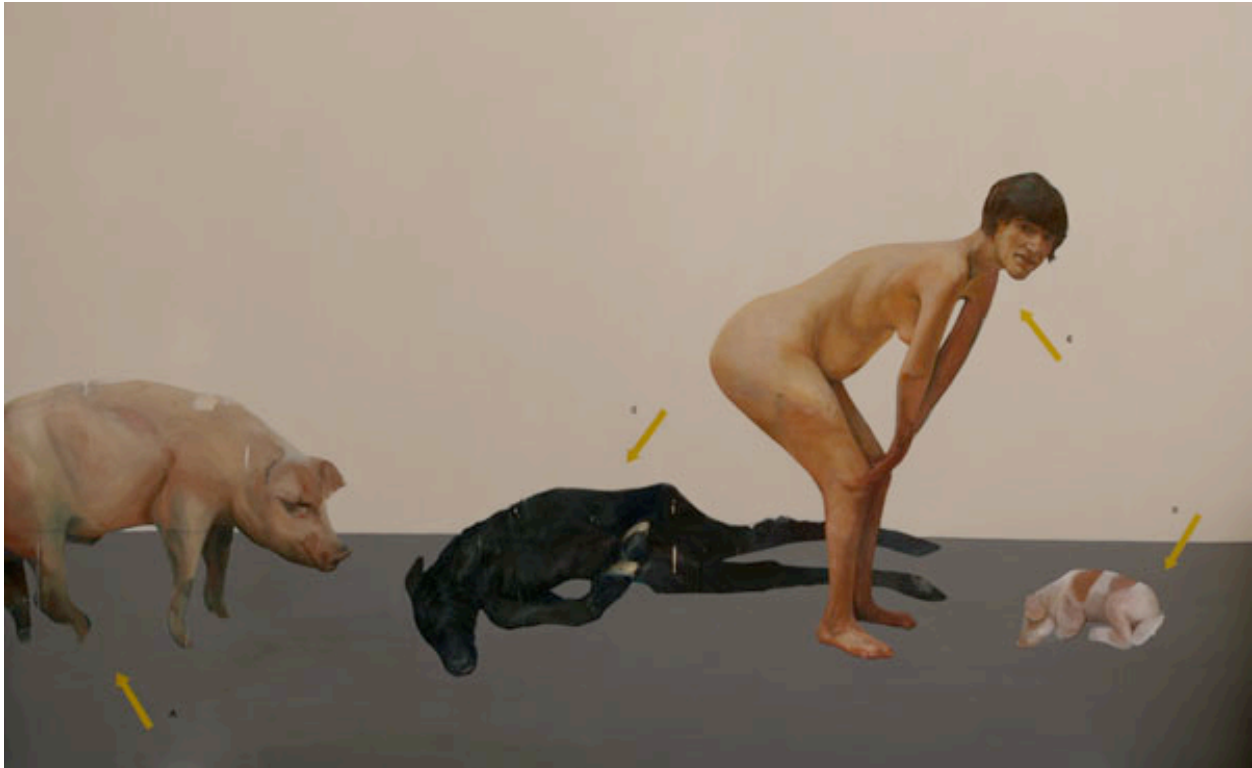


Seeing Animals
Alison Kafer



The first thing I notice is the repeating pink, the round rump of the pig meeting the curve of Sunaura Taylor's back, flesh matching flesh. Looking closer, I find the same hair on pig and person, short spiky pencil lines lining up legs. Even their textures are similar, Taylor refusing any distinction between hide and skin. She and her pig both stand, solid in their heft, unlike the cow lying between them. But it, too, finds its echo in Taylor's body, small limbs curved into self, raising questions about proper shape and stance. Each of them—pig, human, cow—located equally against this flat gray background, the color of institutions, making me wonder what space holds these bodies together.

Unlike Taylor's earlier paintings which depict the suffering of factory-farmed animals, making clear to the viewer what is often unclear to the consumer, this painting is harder to read. Harder to read partly because Taylor has put her body squarely in the frame, insisting that we read her alongside these animals. She labels herself figure C, right next to figures A, B, and D, marking each with clear yellow arrows, a herd more medical than agricultural. In the blunt syntax of medical textbooks, the title—"Animals with Arthrogryposis"—points to the intentionality of this placement. It's a pointing that unhinges me, especially when I imagine Taylor surrounded by pictures of disabled farm animals and stories of defective livestock culled from herds. What does that do to one's self, hearing one's diagnosis repeated over and over, a mantra of unworthiness, burden, and lack?

Taylor's gaze meets mine, and so does the baby pig's, both looking at me looking at them. Staring back, in the parlance of disability politics, although is it right to call this pig a crip?

Or this crip a pig? Taylor looks long, wondering what we're willing to take the time to see. Which of her many questions will we take up? Which questions will hold us here, holding her gaze, and which questions push too far, turning us away? This painting makes me uncomfortable, even as I wish otherwise, even as I can't quite pull myself away. When does analogy shift from truth to offense, or insight to lie? Does my concern about analogy run both ways, or am I concerned only about some of us animals but not others? Taylor bristles at those who want to read the suffering of animals only as metaphor for the suffering of humans, and against my wishes I sometimes find myself bristling back.

Her untitled sound piece makes my bristles soften even as the hair on my neck stands tall. This monotone voice instructing me in the disposal of defectives reminds me of the context of this painting, reminds me of the deaths behind us and the deaths to come. "This animal cannot maintain itself in the piggery and must be destroyed." "This condition is hereditary." "This animal cannot maintain itself in a competitive environment and must be destroyed." How can I hear this talk of congenital defect and economic value and destruction and not think about eugenics, about disabled humans shuttered away or killed? My gaze moves from the pig with arthrogryposis to the human with arthrogryposis and back, but it doesn't stop there. Now I find myself moving from the pig destroyed for its impairments to the pig slaughtered for its flesh. Is the killing of disabled pigs different from the killing of healthy ones? Is the culling of nonproductive, disabled cows different from the killing of cows as meat? As a disabled viewer, am I supposed to feel allegiance to one set of animals but not the other? And if so, allegiance on what grounds?

Everything gets still more complicated in the collection of drawings and photographs Taylor has assembled, animal to animal, freak to freak. Even as she places her mark on these images, reclaiming and reworking them, she remains faithful to their origins, placing animalized human freaks (the mule-faced woman, the alligator-skinned man) next to freak animals (two-headed snakes and excessively-legged frogs), making plain the blurring boundaries of the ten-in-one freak show. But like the boundary-blurrer she is, she takes this move still farther, refusing the bifurcation of freak show and medical clinic, or surgeon and butcher, or patient and meat. In "Self-Portrait as Cuts of Meat" she even paints herself into—as—this liminal space, placing her hybrid self in the middle of a butcher diagram. And that twisted humor renders her more faithful still. Her freaks stare back, talk back, flipping us off as we zero in on their giant fingers and pricks and humps. Nothing About Us Without Us, they sneer, pissing on pity with great gusto.

Desire is everywhere here, a desire Taylor insists on bringing to the surface. She paints people naked beneath their clothes, cunts and tits and dicks sprouting up all over. Vulgarity can't be masked for long, and Taylor has no patience for niceties and half-truths, at least not as long as she's surrounded by these animal images. Her persistent yellow arrows tell us to look here, but she knows that's exactly where we're already looking. These arrows point us to what we're thinking but afraid to admit, or get us thinking things we don't mean to think, or catch us looking where we know we shouldn't. It's true: I want to see what's under that coat, or to trace that hump, or to map those scars; I can't stop looking at that stump, at that ridge of flesh, even as I find myself recoiling.

Fear runs through the creation and reception of these images, a fear hard to deny. I worry that I'm looking incorrectly, unfairly, too closely. That I'm desiring too much, holding on, wanting what isn't mine. Inserting myself into stories in which I don't belong. Or, conversely, perversely, letting go too quickly, erasing histories and denying my desires. Taylor carries her

own fears, afraid of what you'll see. She worries that you won't understand what she's doing here, that you'll take offense, turn away from her, from them, from us.

It's Lobster Girl that stops us, her fear palpable and real. Her hands mapped, documented, diagrammed, her difference splayed along the page. Freak becomes patient, body becomes object, girl cries out. Lobster Girl's cries are turned toward the ghost images that follow her, bodies whited out, erased. What does it mean to be ghosted, disappeared from view? Perhaps Taylor's is the best possible response, removing these bodies—these lives—from the places they've been placed, helping them escape these pokes and prods.

What does it mean to own a history, to possess an image or inhabit a story? In disability studies we have writers like Georgina Kleege writing letters to the dead, writing knowing they won't write back. I think of Taylor's drawings like that, her mash-up photos as letters to the dead, asking questions that go unanswered. Questions directed at ghosts. Or maybe they're more like ransom notes, covered in inappropriate marks, making demands of both the living and the dead.

When Taylor first showed some of these drawings to colleagues in disability studies, she met cries of recognition. Folks looked at these photographs as if they were their own, images pulled together from some collective family album. Here's Charles Tripp, and look, over there, it's Priscilla. All of us here together at once. Taylor not only acknowledges this desire for mutual recognition but illustrates it, inserting herself into the group portrait at Coney Island. That's her, there in the corner, just like it could be you, or you, or you. "I have such affection for these folks," Taylor tells me, surrounded by photographs, her gaze moving from pig-boy to pig to me.

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