

The Beast Within: Beasts United! at Fused Studios

Kim Carpenter

On the surface, Jeremy Stern seems like an affable enough guy: laid-back, calm, maybe even mellow. But apparently beneath that façade beats the heart of a wild, twisted beast – or more accurately, several. In an exhibition that featured a series of map collages, drawings and ceramic sculptures, Stern released his inner hybrid creatures on the public to share deeply personal experiences that are as much about place as identity.

“Mapping,” of course, is nothing new in contemporary art. In recent years, a new legion of landscape artists has emerged that uses imaginary maps to examine topics such as suburban sprawl and global warming. What is novel about Stern’s approach is that his maps are based on real places that he then reinvents into self-reflected images, a cartography of his own consciousness. To accomplish this, the artist takes state symbols and reconfigures them into a coherent whole. Given that each state of the union has a seemingly needless, politically-correct plethora of official symbols ranging from “state dog” to “state fossil,” it’s no easy task. Parts of creatures are collaged together – a lark beak with mammoth tusks, a bee abdomen with deer legs – to represent Nebraska, for example. It’s up to the viewer to discern the different elements and translate what the inherent narrative is saying – either about the state or the artist. *Mama’s Boy Rises*, a loose charcoal on paper, is certainly a creepy crossbreed of Florida: an alligator, panther, butterfly, marlin and tiger are all tied into one ghoulishly leering, jeering brute. Stern grew up in Florida, so the narrative here is doubly hideous. There’s something surreal about this drawing that speaks to the oppressively intense heat of the deep South. In the Florida beast, we catch a harrowing glimpse of a sweating, fat Clansman. It’s not a place we want to be. In contrast, *Nebraska, Cat, Chair*, also charcoal on paper, has an entirely different feel. Inside the outline of the state, Stern places only a cat (one presumes the artist’s pet) and an empty chair. The vibe is isolated and lonely, but there’s something soft about the cat that makes this work not entirely melancholy. We might not necessarily want or plan to be in Nebraska, but it doesn’t look like a bad place to kill some time.

For his map collages, Stern overlaps sections of maps with images of state symbols to reorganize specific landscapes and reorder space in general. These intricately fabricated pieces are about actively transforming environments as opposed to reflecting on them, as seems to be more the case with his drawings. At 45 by 38 inches, *New York* is larger-than-life and draws the viewer into a state that frequently overshadows the other 49. A combination of beaver and ladybug, this mutant is a big lumbering beast, lunging ever westward. But its awkward composition also makes this animal/insect ineffectual. New York may overshadow, but it will never overtake. And while New Yorkers might like to think they exclusively set standards and start trends, the Empire State hasn’t been empirically proven to be the country’s cultural epicenter.

Stern’s sculptures, his first foray into clay, intentionally have a less serious feel; indeed, they even work as an antidote to the drawings and collages, a lighter meditation on his introspective theme. Installed against a large-scale mountainous landscape cum rugged relief map, the colorful sculptures seem more like cartoon characters than hideous creatures. *Nebraska* looks like a woolly mammoth with a bee behind. Tusks uplifted, the beast looks like it’s shaking its booty – and enjoying itself. *New York*, featuring a winged Kong Kong (Stern’s one wavering from state symbol in favor of city icon) looks like it’s trying to menace, but the poor beast just isn’t very convincing. In this regard, Stern’s USA is territory you want to traverse, simply to encounter the kooky mélange of characters on the way. It’s not the destination, it’s the journey, and ultimately, that’s what living in different places is really all about: one individual synthesizing new people and novel experiences with old selves and former lives. And that’s what makes these these introspections intriguing to unravel and equally engaging to view. Life doesn’t come with a roadmap – it’s up to us to chart the way and steer the course as best we can.