



ELEANOR MORGAN

THOSE TINY BIRDS. THE LITTLE ONES WITH MANIC MOTIONS THAT HOVER AROUND CAFES. ASSESSING. PECKING. WATCHING AND HOPPING — THEY'VE GOT THEIR OWN BRAND OF STREET CRED. THEY KNOW HOW TO LOOK CUTE, GET FOOD AND BE QUICK ABOUT IT.

words liz bruchet photography brendan laird

The act of looking at animals is, to a large extent, a way of viewing ourselves. We endow creatures with scientific and symbolic value, pointing out similarities and oddities and develop stories to situate them in the larger scheme of things. Of course, each idea remains relative to our own subjective position, resulting in an awkward collision between the imagined and the real, the familiar and the strange, and the observer and the observed.

The work of Vancouver-based artist Eleanor Morgan takes this unsteady perspective as the starting point of her work. "We can't observe nature without transforming it in some way, without considering it as order, metaphor or object." Her installations enact the scientific, mythical and material productions that allow us to "transform" nature into recognizable forms.

Hailing from a small town near Nottingham, England, Morgan encountered a number of unfamiliar, but common animals on her arrival to Vancouver three years ago. Her observations of squirrels, for instance, resulted in a video piece that captures a standoff between a squirrel and the lens of a camera. The artist, behind the camera, and the viewer, in front of the screen, peer into the gaze of a curious but wary little creature. It's a silly moment, looped into a surprisingly poignant interaction: observer and observed, subject and viewer.

Another video work shows the artist's hands laying delicate threads of spider's web onto a sheet of glass, slowly forming them into the shape of a plate, fork, knife and wine glass. It's a still life of sorts depicting the mundane tools of modern society, born out of an impractical manipulation

of "natural" material. In a similar vein, Morgan created a delicate sculpture in the shape of a cup and saucer, made out of strands of spider's web that had been carefully collected from sites around the city.

A recent solo exhibition at Vancouver's Or Gallery focused on one particular animal: the dreamer fish. According to Morgan, this creature was "crying out for allegory." Living in the dark depths of the ocean, the dreamer fish lures its prey through a glowing rod that dangles above its mouth like a fishing pole. With its hellish appearance, parasitic mating patterns (the tiny males suction themselves to the female) and romantic name, the species is perfect fodder for art.

One particular specimen caught Morgan's attention: a female dreamer fish found with a bulbous, swollen stomach, having perished after ingesting a ball of discarded packing tape. Morgan created a series of pseudo-scientific investigatory tools to delve into the fish analogy. The show featured a wax replica of the dissected fish, a series of drawings that reproduced microscopic views of the fish's lure, a video interview of a specialist discussing the animal's peculiar mating habits and a mock diving helmet, complete with a pulsing LED light hanging above the forehead like a high-tech variation of the fish's lure. Each object hovered between functionality, fantasy and absurdity. In many ways, Morgan's installation called out the often futile attempts to save and return to nature, all the while offering a unique and symbolic investigation into the subject.