

Man vs. Beast: An Intimate Look

By Michael O'Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Birds do it. Bees do it. Even educated fleas do it.

Nothing more natural in all the world, it would seem. And yet the deed that songwriter [Cole Porter](#) so euphemistically referred to as falling "in love" takes on decidedly darker implications in an exhibition of drawings at the Gallery at Flashpoint.

Let's get right to the point: "Julie Comnick: According to Their Kind" is about the act of procreation. But the artist is less interested in sex than in politics. At once coolly clinical and subtly disturbing, the show features 20 works but centers on seven pictures of animals coupling. Of the pandas, zebras, macaques, elephants, giraffes, flamingos and lions caught in flagrante delicto, none looks especially happy -- with the possible exception of the pandas, who are just too darn cuddly to ever look miserable.

Maybe it's the restraint systems. In nearly every picture, some form of leash, manacle, rope, chain, bridle or harness appears. In Comnick's drawing of the big cats, a whip, cracked by an unseen lion tamer, flicks into the center of the frame. Numbered bands are strapped to the flamingos' necks. The giraffes are blindfolded. While there's heat here, it comes from a sense of implied violence, not passion.

The exhibit, whose title comes from the biblical story of Noah's ark, depicts animals (often endangered) that have been forced to breed in captivity. In case you miss her message about man's "dominion" over "inferior" creatures -- however well-intentioned -- one drawing is simply a verbatim copy of a passage from the book of Genesis, including this excerpt: "the fear of

you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea."

Fear and dread? What have we come to if we have to force animals to have sex with each other?

It's not the only troubling question the show raises.

A second series of drawings shows various stages of in-vitro fertilization of a human embryo. A third reproduces texts from such medical literature as a sperm donor brochure and a guide for fertility patients. Issues of eugenics and selective breeding linger just below the surface, reinforced by such passages as the one describing how to increase the chance of a given sex in pregnancy.

It's all about power, then? Power over the beasts. Power over our own bodies. Even as Connick seems to drive home this argument, she consciously casts doubt on that conclusion, suggesting instead that what's really at issue is not strength, but human weakness.

How have we lost touch with our own animal natures, and what else do we risk losing -- including our own futures -- because of it?

They're darn good questions and ones that come across loud and clear in what is perhaps the creepiest group of drawings in Connick's show: a series of empty boats, including a pair of life rafts. Floating on deceptively calm waters (think of them as arks, if you will), according to the artist, they are "resting places where we can stop and consider the questions."

[Julie Connick: According to Their Kind](#) Through Feb. 9 at the Gallery at Flashpoint, 916 G St. NW (Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown) Information: 202-315-1310. <http://www.flashpointdc.org>. Hours: Open Tuesday-Saturday from noon to 6. Admission: Free.