

MASS MoCA

For Immediate Release
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Becoming Animal Opens May 29 at MASS MoCA

(North Adams, Massachusetts) – In the first large-scale art exhibition to explore the closing gap between human and animal existence, MASS MoCA is presenting the work of 12 artists from five countries in a major show opening May 29, 2005. The exhibition -- *Becoming Animal: Art in the Animal Kingdom* will include large-scale sculpture, paintings, drawings, video installation and major new commissions from Mark Dion and Natalie Jeremijenko and Phil Taylor and work by Jane Alexander, Rachel Berwick, Brian Conley, Sam Easterson, Kathy High, Nicolas Lampert, Michael Oatman, Motohiko Odani, Patricia Piccinini, and Ann-Sofi Sidén (in her largest ever showing in the United States.)

“In a world that is increasingly urban, technological, and transnational, animals are nevertheless insinuating their presence into human life in all sorts of surprising new ways, “ said the exhibition’s curator Nato Thompson. “We are gaining knowledge about the subtleties and range of animal communications. The human genome project has illustrated just how close we are -- biologically speaking -- to the simplest forms of animal life. Mad Cow disease and bird flu have made us hypersensitive to the complexities of cross-species viral infection and food chain issues. The artists in *Becoming Animal* are fascinated by this thin membrane separating human and animal life, by the character of animals, by our love for animals, but also by the human capacity to treat animals with disdain and willful negligence.”

Occupying the second and third floors of MASS MoCA’s Building 10, the exhibition will run through February 2006. The exhibition is accompanied by a 132-page hard-cover, full-color catalog with essays by exhibition curator Nato Thompson and Christoph Cox. Major support for the exhibition and related programs provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and Citigroup.

Becoming Animal on Stage and Screen

The MASS MoCA summer/fall season includes a number of performing arts programs around the theme of *Becoming Animal*. The season kicks off on Saturday, May 28, at 4 PM with a talk by Liz Lerman, Brian Conley, and Rachel Berwick, supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Conley and Berwick will talk about their work in the exhibition while Lerman will discuss her newest multimedia piece about the human genome project which she will be working in residence on in May. Ben Munisteri will also be in residence this summer performing a work-in-progress showing of his new work *Not Human* on Friday, June 17. The dance explores the joy of shedding human responsibility for the carefree pleasures of becoming animal. Several music/film events throughout the summer revolve around animal themes. On Saturday July 2, MASS MoCA screens *Tarzan the Ape Man* with live music by Mocean Worker; on Saturday, July 9, Yo La Tengo performs their *Sound of Science*, a concert performed to surreal fish films by French filmmaker Jean Painlevé; and on Friday, August 12, Pere Ubu accompanies *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*. MASS MoCA favorite Lava, returns on August 26 and 27 for work-in-progress showings of *w(HOLE)* – the Whole History of Life on Earth – an acrobatic dance about evolution and geologic time. Finally, in the fall, on October 6, MASS MoCA screens *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History* about the introduction of Hawaiian sugar-cane toads to Australia to counter pests.

A companion exhibition of prints and drawings from the collections of the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute and Williams College Museum of Art entitled *Creature Discomfort* that explores the treatment of animals and chimeras in art history will open June 13 in MASS MoCA’s Prints & Drawings Gallery.

New commissions

Mark Dion will create a site-specific installation titled *Library for the Birds of Massachusetts*. The installation will feature 12 Zebra finches housed in a 17' tall aviary, along with a dead maple tree with ornithology books, bird feeders and nets hung from the tree. Dion's art seeks to uncover the structures that govern the natural world, dissolving the boundary between nature and culture.

Natalie Jeremijenko and Phil Taylor's *For the Birds* is the second part of her ongoing *Ooz* projects (Zoo spelled backwards). Through *Ooz*, Jeremijenko "reverse-engineers" zoos producing new interactions between animals and humans. *For the Birds* will consist of a series of electronic perches placed in MASS MoCA's courtyards for birds to land on. When a bird lands, it triggers an accompanying audio track that will invite human interaction. Through the day-to-day use of the perches, Jeremijenko believes that the birds (predominantly pigeons) will learn to use the perches to rudimentarily communicate with MASS MoCA visitors.

New commissions are supported in part by The Nimoy Foundation.

Works in the Exhibition

Jane Alexander's *African Adventure: Cape of Good Hope* comprises 15 images displayed in five sections which follow a geographic sequence from the countryside to the city centre of Cape Town. *Bom Boys, Lonely Boys, Fancy Boys, Sexy Boys* presents corpse-like humanoids who are devoid of race or identity. The appearance of these mutated individuals (children with stylized animal heads) suggests a landscape and populace haunted and alienated by their past.

Lonesome George, discovered in the Galapagos Islands in 1972, is the last known tortoise of his species. On the edge of extinction, and despite the work of scientists, this male tortoise has not successfully mated. **Rachel Berwick's** installation *Lonesome George* features two video projections, two large triangular sails, and full-scale cast elements from the tortoise shell measuring 3 1/2' long and 2' wide. As the tortoise pulls into its shell, there is an exhale, and fans inflate the sails. Lonesome George has only so many breaths left before extinction.

Brian Conley's *Pseudanuran Gigantica* (2001) simulates the mating call of a Tungara frog with a large inflatable sculpture connected to a sound system. This immense balloon-like apparatus is triggered by the viewer's physical presence. Taking on the role of the female mate, the audience is serenaded by their male counterpart. Ironically, *Pseudanuran Gigantica* does not actually mimic a real mating call of any frog. Instead, the interpretation of a frog's vocal cords are actually a by-product of an artist's invention, making this lover's call more human than animal.

For his series, *Animal Vegetable Video*, **Sam Easterson** attached micro-video cameras to the top of various animals' heads and some plants. The viewer is presented with an awe-inspiring journey from the vantage point of an aardvark, chicken, wolf, water buffalo, tarantula or even a tumble weed. Through these videos the viewer is literally able to access the physical perspectives of these various animals/objects creating an awareness of the daily existence of these plants and animals. Easterson claims that these videos possess the ability to protect and preserve these species: "If you're able to see from the perspective of these animals, you're far less likely to harm them or their habitats."

Kathy High's multimedia/inter-species installation *Embracing Animal* consists of four "tube-scope" video sculptures that present images and situations of "trans-animals." Videos of animal/human interchanges, transformations, werewolves, and vampires play on four mini-LCD monitors that are situated in the bottom of 40" high test tubes. Alongside this display is an elongated cage that houses rescued transgenic lab rats who have been micro-injected with human DNA. Sculpted heads of the vermin who have been terminated are also on display, accentuating the clinically morbid atmosphere that *Embracing Animal* creates.

An unabashed vegetarian and animal rights enthusiast, **Nicolas Lampert** began his *Machine Animal* collages in 1995 as a reaction to the onslaught of the human/machine world onto nature. In *Locust Tank* (1995), a World War II military tank fuses with the locust regarded as a bearer of plagues. Lampert uses his extensive library of photocopied materials to produce, at times, dingy hybrids and landscapes. His *Machine Animal* collages range from seamlessly crossed machines and animals such as *Locust Tank* (1995) to more flagrant jarring juxtapositions.

By knitting together hundreds and, at times, thousands of cut pieces, **Michael Oatman** produces entirely new worlds. In his collage *The Birds*, Oatman equips these innocent creatures of the sky with semi-automatic weapons, Lugers, machine guns, grenades, and bazookas. With a wink at Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 thriller of the same title, Oatman produces work more Bugs Bunny than Psycho.

Motohiko Odani's video *Rompers* (2003) depicts a surreal reality where mutant frogs bound through a psychedelic forest with human ears flopping on their backs, and genetically modified hybrids frolic around a sweet-looking child perched on a tree branch. As her reptilian tongue flicks out of her mouth to eat a fly, the viewer suddenly becomes aware of her yellow eyes, protruding brow, and claw-like fingers, and the unease that *Rompers* communicates increases. Staging a scene barbed by subtle references to children's television programs, adult videos, fetishism, and biotechnology gone awry, Odani insinuates that this fantasy land may be more of a dystopia than a paradise. His *Erectro* (2003) is a stuffed fawn that stands rigidly upright, supported by cyborg-like aluminum appendages attached to its legs. In this piece the artist presents an image that reflects the historical dioramas of out-dated museum displays, as well as the disturbing effects that technology has on the creature of the wild in contemporary society. Odani's contribution to the exhibition is supported in part by The Japan Foundation.

Patricia Piccinini's *The Young Family* (2002-2003) is a silicone sculpture of a new unidentified species, which simultaneously combines features that appear human, mammal, bovine, and primate – seeming both familiar and alien. However, the ugliness of these figures is further humanized by the emphasis of community that this work displays. Nestled on a cocoon-like leather pedestal, the mother lays tired with her litter of suckling newborns. Using grotesque transgenic hybrids to portray these images of love and creation, Piccinini challenges the perceptions of our surroundings and personal relationships.

The QMM Museum (2004) is a retrospective of works pertaining to the Queen of Mud persona, a performance character that **Ann-Sofi Sidén** has developed over the course of her career. Originally, the Queen of Mud was a performance character that Sidén took on when she would walk through art fairs, covering her naked body with thick mud. After this initial performance, Sidén then produced videos where the Queen of Mud appears at talk shows and perfume counters. *The QMM Museum* will consist of an elaborate 12-video projection archive featuring her film *QM, I Think I Call Her QM*(1997). Sidén's work in the exhibition is supported by The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation, American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Consulate General of Sweden.

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA is the country's largest center for contemporary visual and performing arts and is located in North Adams, Massachusetts, on a restored 19th-century factory campus. MASS MoCA's galleries are open 11 – 5 every day except Tuesdays. (open July 1 – September 6, 10-6 every day.) Gallery admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for students, \$4 for children 6 – 16, and free for children under 6. Members admitted free year-round. For additional information, call 413 662 2111 or visit www.massmoca.org.