

SUSAN CHEAL

WILD POODLES ROAM THE EARTH



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 11 - FEBRUARY 15, 2003

AUSTIN, TEXAS

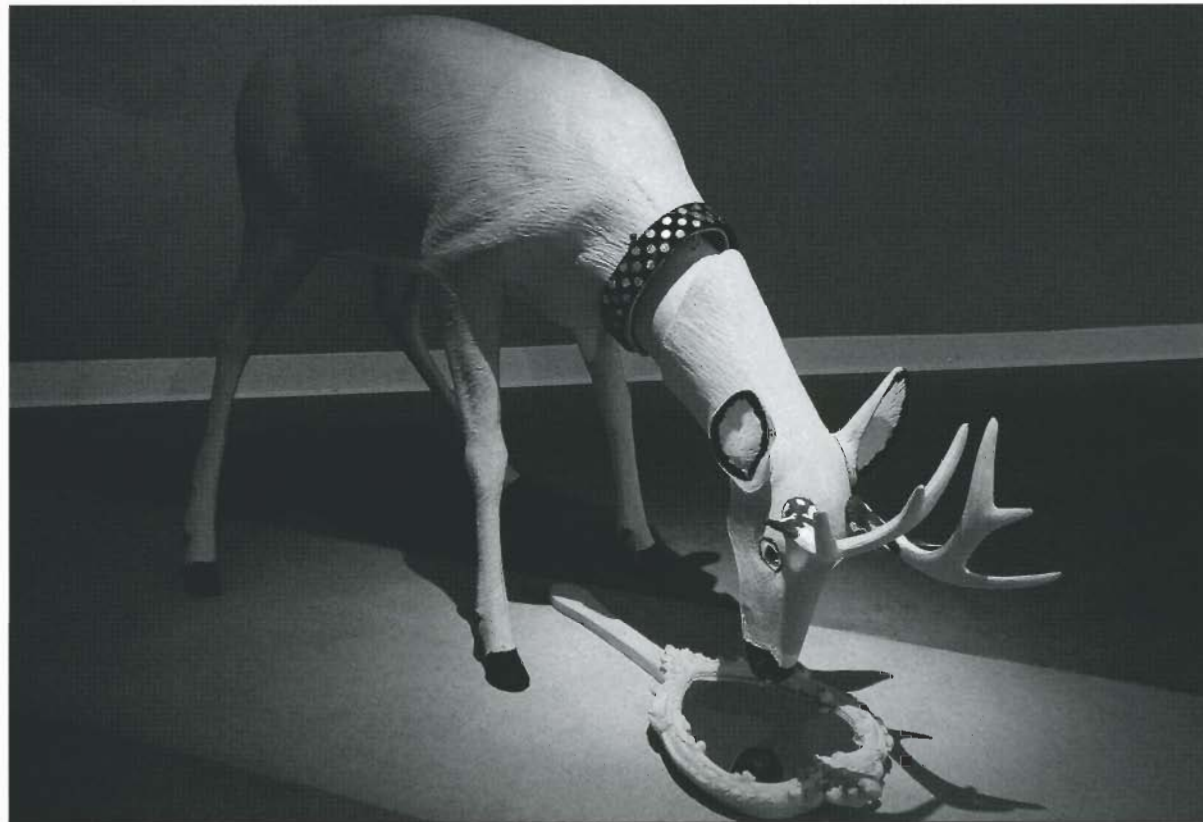
SUSAN CHEAL

WILD POODLES ROAM THE EARTH

The weird and wacky exhibition title, *Wild Poodles Roam the Earth*, hints at the surreal strangeness of Susan Cheal's latest sculptural offerings. Borrowed from the title of one of humorist David Feldman's wildly popular *Imponderables* volumes, it suggests the artist's fascination with pop cultural idioms and her wry observations about consumer lifestyles issues in the burgeoning 21st century. As Cheal is the first to admit, Chapman's text is "a real fun book," and part of her preferred bedside reading.

And while no wild poodles put in an appearance in this exhibit, there are other animals, in a kind of stand-in for human behavior. The six species represented are: the *Leopard*, *Deer*, *Bear*, *Coyote*, *Owls* (a flock of them) and a lone *Goose*. It's an all-inclusive kingdom as Cheal's animals vary in their natural habitat, from the barnyard and the depths of the jungle to the forest and the wild, wild West.

Yet, these sculptures are not the dry dioramas of a natural science museum or scientifically cast interpretations of actual beasts. While Cheal's menagerie is perfectly scaled and accurately proportioned, their palette would never be found in Mother Nature, except perhaps the Technicolor hues of Saturday morning cartoons. And their naturalistically rendered bodies makes the animals' eye-popping color scheme even more extreme: consider a lime green deer, coral-hued bear, violet spotted *leopard*, royal blue *coyote*, chartreuse *owl* or aqua *goose*. Cheal gives us a discoized bestiary and to make matters more intriguing, in place of fur (faux or otherwise), clothes her stable in flocking deluxe. It's like Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom hit the road and ended up in Las Vegas. These are definitely and defiantly glamorized members of the animal world.



DEER, 2002. Foam sculpture with flocking, plastic, light sensors, audio, motor. 35" x 53" x 28"

Then there's the kitsch factor of *Wild Poodles*. Cheal's animals possess a kinship with the 1970s era phenomenon of the bobbin' head dog (or other beast) that often graced the dashboard of some revved up muscle machine. It's as if those retro creatures (which not coincidentally were also flocked) have grown gargantuan and are confronting us in a high/low cultural showdown held at the pristine arena of this contemporary artspace.

Since the dawning of history, animals and their accompanying mythology held preternatural meaning. In civilizations from Egypt to China, beasts both real and imagined have been endowed with human or even divine powers and represented accordingly in art. Where would Chinese art history be without their dragons? What's Egyptian tomb sculpture without Horus the Hawk (the sun-god) or Anubis the Jackal (the guardian of the underworld)? Then in ancient Greece, there were the lessons to be learned from *Aesop's Fables*, an adroit model of human behavior gleaned through

animal parables; *Wild Poodles* can be seen as a contemporary extension of this classical Greek tale.

And like the famed fables, Cheal's animals offer more than meets the eye. Besides being beautiful and even beguiling to gaze at, these creatures literally speak to the viewer. As we approach a sculpture, a hidden device activates each animal's voice box; they in turn emit messages, from words to song. The sound component adds another layer to *Wild Poodles*. We want to bend down to listen, as these animals surprise us with admonishment, sadness, irony and humor in their pithy tunes and spoken statements.

Cheal has carefully mated each animal to its perfectly pitched vocal selection. Thus *Bear*, says (in the artist's voice): "I just can't control my appetite...I just can't control it!" "That's me," Cheal reveals laughingly, "some of the animals are autobiographical, particularly the *bear*." She continues: "He references my appetite for food, also my longing for

lushness, for knowledge, for beauty." Then there's the *Leopard*, a lilac spotted animal goddess who sports a dazzling pearl necklace. "*Leopard* is me wanting to dress up and show off," admits the artist, as appropriately, the sculpture emits the show tune, "Putting on the Ritz." The trio of *Owls* is also musical, but their number is from the disco era: "I Love the Night Life, Baby."

Goose poses a feminist statement as the sculpture recites in an agitated tone (again, using Cheal's actual recorded voice): "I've reached my quota!" "She's menopausal," the artist notes, as *Goose* can perhaps be read as a subliminal statement about women's reproductive cycles and their value after their child bearing days are over. Meanwhile, *Coyote* serves as a metaphor for tyrants and dictators everywhere. Standing innocently in his royal blue flocked coat and bejeweled collar, he states, while his head bobs up and down: "I just can't help myself." The chartreuse *Deer* is more perplexed. Vainly gazing into a pink mirror that lies on the floor, he quizzically wonders, "Who Are You and What Do You Want?"

And there's strange truth in the telling details of these four-legged friends. The coral-tinted *Bear* wears a ruffled collar, which suggests some 17th century Dutch dowager who has flipped out. The jewel-encrusted collar of *Coyote* seems more restraint than adornment. *Leopard's* double strand of pearls signals the aplomb and attitude of a Park Avenue socialite.

Pathetic, sad, compelling, humorous, vulnerable and almost alive, Cheal's creatures evoke deep emotions within the viewer. Like a favorite stuffed animal from childhood, they're equal parts fantasy and reality, pop and poignant, and also unsettlingly and strangely human.

Most significantly, *Wild Poodles* marks a breakthrough exhibit for this mid-career artist whose formal schooling was in Texas and who currently is an Associate Professor of Art at the University of North Texas in Denton. While her earlier art was characterized by elaborate installations

melding paintings and sculpture, Cheal will be the first to tell you she now thinks that that body of work was "ponderous and didactic."

What freed her was the experience of living in California, where she taught from 1995 through 2000 at a series of colleges and universities in and around Los Angeles. Even the idea of making the animals for *Wild Poodles* came to her in California, after she saw the dashboard of her hostess' car (the painter Karen Carson) ornamented with a bobbin' head dog. After moving back to Texas from California, she committed to a conscious desire to make her art "lighter, more humorous." Even her current color palette, like the artificial drink colors used for the animals' coats in *Wild Poodles* and that hip retro flocking, bear the imprimatur of California cool.

The California thing merged with cultural ideas gleaned from such pundits as Dave Hickey (a visiting professor when Cheal was in graduate school at the University of Texas at San Antonio) and James B. Twitchell (one

of Cheal's favorite writers, the author of such classic exposes of contemporary American society as *Carnival Culture*).

And most importantly, Cheal has found the courage to be reductive. *Wild Poodles* was exhibited in an earlier incarnation with a cycle of paintings, which bore text messages and aphorisms much in the style of Jenny Holzer. Those oil on panels also featured figurative fragments inspired by illustrations from a 1919 version of *Aesop's Fables*. Recently, Cheal has stepped away from the baggage of that series of paintings, whose content and meaning were redundant with her sculptures and also cut into their power. Now, the artist is literally letting her animals speak for themselves. It truly is a time when *Wild Poodles Roam the Earth*.

Catherine D. Ansporn
Houston, Texas
November 2002



Coyote, Foam sculpture with flocking, light sensors, audio, motor. 23" x 36"

SUSAN CHEAL

Resides in Denton, TX.

EDUCATION

M.F.A., Painting, The University of Texas at San Antonio, TX.

B.A., Painting, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2003 *Wild Poodles Roam the Earth, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX.

2002 *Wild Poodles Roam the Earth*, Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX.

Background Printing, Trinity College, Hartford, CT.

Background Printing, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.

1995 *Apology for Wonder*, Milagros Contemporary Art, San Antonio, TX.

Apology for Wonder, Finch Lane Gallery, Salt Lake City, UT.

1994 *Pages from a Quiet Book: A Societal Labyrinth*, Salt Lake Art Center, UT.

1992 *Pages from a Quiet Book: A Societal Labyrinth*, Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, TX.

The Wilderness Within, Southwest Craft Center San Antonio, TX.

1991 *Dancing between the Hunt and the Hearth*, Gittins Gallery, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2003 *Introductions*, Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston, TX.

2002 *Disclosure*, University of Dallas, Haggerty Gallery, Dallas, TX.

Faculty Exhibition University of North Texas, Denton, TX.

Red Hot-Red Dot, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.

Farewell Fiesta, Ft. Worth Museum of Modern Art, Ft. Worth, TX.

EXPO 02, 500X Gallery, Dallas, TX.

1997 *Art in the Metroplex*, Texas Christian University, TX.

Disparate Realities, Long Beach City College, CA.

1998 *Chair Show*, Santa Ana College Gallery, CA.

1997 *Group Show*, Helen Lindhurst Gallery, University of Southern California, CA.

1995 *Text/Image*, Utah Arts Festival, Salt Lake City, UT.

Faculty Exhibition, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, UT.

1994 *WESTAF-Three Artists*, Maude Kerns Art Center, Eugene, OR.

A View of Eight, Utah Visual Arts Fellowship Exhibition, Salt Lake Art Center, UT.

1993 *Utah Women's Art Project*, National Museum of Women in the Arts D.C.

Hidden Treasures, Utah Arts Festival, Salt Lake City, UT.

Faculty Exhibition, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, UT.

Group Exhibition, Phillips Gallery, Salt Lake City, UT.

10 + 10 Invitational, Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City, UT.

1992 *Utah Women's Art Project*, Springville Museum, Springville, UT.

Out of the Land, Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City, UT.

Relativities, 25th Anniversary Alumni Invitational Exhibition, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

Group Exhibition, Gittins Gallery, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

1991 *Man/Woman: Different Perspectives*, North Arts Center, Atlanta, GA.

Loft Project, Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, TX.

1990 *Blue Star V*, Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, TX.

S/Paces: 10 Artists from Hot Sauce Studio, San Antonio Art Institute, San Antonio, TX.

Fringe, San Antonio Art Institute, San Antonio, TX.

Faculty Exhibition, The University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX.

Group Exhibition, Thompson Marince Gallery, San Antonio, TX.

AWARDS / GRANTS

1997 *Downtown Cultural Trust Fund* Grant, L.A. Community Redevelopment Agency Graffiti Removal Project

1994 *Utah Visual Arts Fellowship Finalist*

1993, 1995 *Utah Arts Council Individual Artist's Grant*

1992 *WESTAF Regional N.E.A. Individual Artist's Painting Fellowship*

1991 *The City of San Antonio*, Individual Artists' Grant

The City of San Antonio, Organization Grant, awarded to Blue Star Art Space for Labyrinth Project

PUBLIC ART

1998-1999 *City of Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency* Graffiti Removal Stencil Project-San Fernando Valley, South-Central and Downtown Regions

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2002 *Exhibit Leaves Widener Gallery*, The Trinity Tripod, Hartford, CT.

1999 *Stencil Project with Susan Cheal*. Winter Newsletter, Los Angeles Conservancy Corp. City of Los Angeles Public Arts, CA.

1996 *New American Paintings*, Open Studios competition, Number VI, Open Studios Press, MA.

1993 *Reviews - Texas*, Sculpture Magazine, January-February

Out of the Land, Utah Women's Art Project, Catalog

1992 *Susan Cheal Examines the Wilderness Within*, San Antonio Express News, July 8
Cheal's Art Offers Message to a Violence - Scarred World, San Antonio Light, July 9

WESTAF/NEA Regional Visual Arts Fellowship Recipients, Catalog

1991 *Man/Woman...*, Atlanta Journal Constitution, January 30

Man/Woman: Different Perspectives, exhibition catalog, January

1990 *Blue Star V*, Blue Star Art Space, exhibit catalog, July

Blue Star V: A Lesson in Art, Living, San Antonio Express News, July 8



Cover Panel: *Installation view*, 2002. Foam sculpture with flocking, light sensors, audio, motor.

This Panel: *Leopard*, 2002. Foam sculpture with flocking, light sensors, audio, motor. 27" x 72" x 24"

Back Panel: *Bear*, 2002. Foam sculpture with flocking, ruff, light sensors, audio, motor. 36" x 57" x 21"



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Stephanie Barko, *President*

Laura Bailie

Jane Lilly Schotz

Laura Pickett Calfee

Patricia Shipton

Judy Birdsong

Margo Sawyer

Maury Sullivan

Alexander Wettlaufer

STAFF

Chris Cowden, *Executive Director*

Kathryn Davidson, *Associate Director*

Tsina Napoliello, *Operations Manager*

Katherine McQueen, *Assistant*

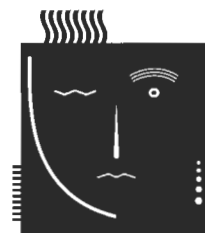
Chris Huron, *Preparator*

Debe Bentley, *Gift Shop Manager*

This publication has been made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts. Special thanks to BAH! Design.

Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,692 artists (includes 18 Members Show) in 213 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 226 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to

receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

1710 LAVACA ST.

AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701

(512) 477-1064

wtw@texas.net

www.womenandtheirwork.org