

Skinning Humanity: Anthropomorphism and the Mortality of an Ideal
by Rae Langes

“Are those real animals?”

“Yeah...they’re real dead!”

“Hahaha!”

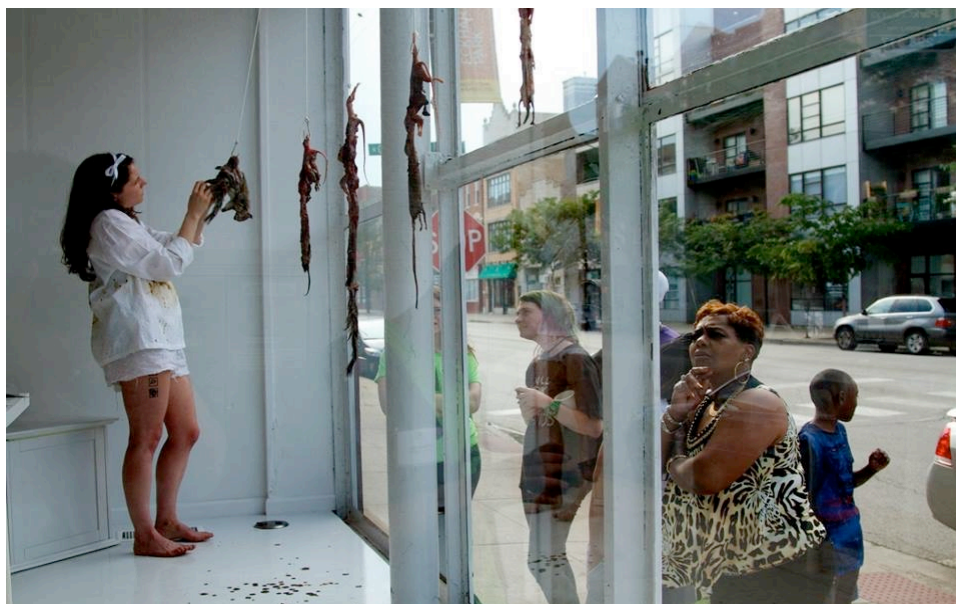
“She’s got her shoes off!”

“That’s disgusting! Where’s her self-respect?”

“I wonder what it smells like...”

“That looks like a squid, but I know it’s not!”

These are the various comments of passersby as they stop, observe, wrinkle their noses, and point at what is happening inside the storefront windows of Defibrillator Performance Gallery. Some walk right past, seemingly impervious to what is going on behind the glass. Two children munching on candy and chips turn backwards to stare as their mother drags them through the small crowd that has gathered on the sidewalk. Where mannequins donning the latest fashions and other commodities would usually be on display, half a dozen dead rodents – squirrels, rats, mice – hang suspended upside down in mid-air by metal hooks attached to the ceiling by rope. The hooks pierce the dead flesh of each small carcass. Behind them stands Ohio-based artist and trained taxidermist, Francis Marion Moseley Wilson, dressed in a white blouse and white cutoff shorts, deftly skinning each animal in turn. As she holds a rat’s torso in one bare hand and uses the other to pull back a piece of its pelt with pliers, the rope from which it hangs vibrates and pulls tense. You can almost hear the sound of flesh ripping. After skinning the rat in its entirety, gravity slowly pulls the pelt downward until it dangles by a single sinew from the tip of the muzzle in a postmortem kiss with the body it once enveloped. Intestines slip through tendons as the entire musculature sags and stretches the rat to twice its original length. As Wilson moves to a mouse on her left and begins cutting into it with an exacto blade, blood drips like molasses onto the floor. A lone fly circles on the inside of the window.



In this macabre performance, titled *play #1*, Wilson methodically removes the pelt of each rodent over the course of three hours. Like many performances that take place in the Electrodes Window Gallery of Defibrillator, *play #1* stops traffic moving along Chicago Avenue, a major thoroughfare of the city. It invites people to slow down and contemplate on the vulnerable and exposed bodies of animals we are accustomed to encountering in a lifeless state, flattened in the streets by indifferent car wheels, or rotting away in alleys or on sidewalks after ingesting a fatal bite of poison. Once the protective layer of skin and hair is removed, the flesh underneath looks uncannily similar to our own. As I watched the performance, I couldn't help but empathize with the small, unfeeling bodies at its center, which raises a question about who, or what, I was empathizing with. The animal or an idea of the animal?

Wilson's artist biography states that her work interrogates "the intersection between animal death and anthropomorphism as it relates to human views on wild animals, pets, and animal-shaped toys." In the final hour of the performance, the relationship between animal death and anthropomorphism literally comes into play as it culminates in a tea party. Wilson removes the tiny carcasses from their hooks, poses them on tiny chairs in front of tiny tables with tiny teacups on tiny saucers after dressing them in tiny hats and tiny suits or tiny dresses. The pelts become hand puppets that operate according to the whims of Wilson. They embody human, rather than animal, traits and behaviors.



What is the utility in projecting humanity onto animals, or vice versa? As many scholars in the humanities point out, “animal” is a culturally constructed term often used to elevate humans above other mammals. However, the tendency to separate human and animal domains is more telling about “us” than “them.” In U.S. culture, the concept of the “lowly animal” is rhetorically deployed to police human behavior and dehumanize particular communities, especially those that are poor and/or of color. Accusations such as, “They are acting like animals!” translate to, “We cannot control them! They are not like us!” Such statements reverberate back to the violent colonization of the U.S., wherein likening people to animals was used to justify genocide, slavery, and the forceful assimilation of cultural others. On the flipside of the lowly animal trope is the animal used as an exemplar of a universal human ideal. This use of the animal is abundant in classic children’s stories, which serve as lessons on how to behave and treat one another according to dominant cultural values. Mice of the opposite sex fall in love, marry, and live happily ever after. Squirrels valiantly defend their territory against invading predators. *play #1* exposes the overlap between these seemingly opposite notions of the animal. The mutilated carcasses, crammed into pristine, white chairs for an afternoon tea party, invoke the brutality of assimilation via their mimicry of a tradition passed from Victorian England to the Americas during colonization. A tradition replicated and rehearsed in the imaginary worlds of children playacting as adults. When Wilson places the rodents around the table, it is an act of civilizing these once wild creatures. As the party guests flop and slump into their places, leaving trails of blood across the furniture and the floor, they serve as a haunting reminder of what happens to those who cannot or do not comport themselves in alignment with dominant cultural values.



Refiguring and reveling in the raw remains of the rodents, Wilson evokes disgust and raises doubts about her respectability, as well as curiosity and concern. As she plays with her new toys, they sully her white outfit and the white space with dark bloody paw prints. White, a color (or lack of color) associated with purity, goodness, and innocence in Western culture. Whiteness, an ideal associated with some bodies that is predicated on the dehumanization of others. In classic literature and films, pretty little white girls play tea party with other pretty little white girls, their dolls, or their fuzzy stuffed animals, rehearsing roles scripted for them by generations past. Damsel. Princess. Maiden. Queen. Mother. Wilson, girl-like in her white hair bow, performs a horrific adaptation of the afternoon tea party, implying the insidiousness underscoring this whitewashed, gender normative scenario. The riches, privileges, and entitlements embedded within the game are anything but innocent. She turns them inside out, red handed.

The affective responses to *play #1* demonstrate the power of performance to both intellectually and viscerally engage an audience in a way that lingers. As I sped away from the gallery on my bike up Ashland Avenue, I replayed Wilson carefully tearing the pelts away from those carcasses in my mind's eye and became queasy. It was as if I were watching the scene all over again. For me, this queasiness signaled a connection with the bodies of these once living animals. It reminded me of my own mortality, the fact that my status as a living being, as a human, is temporary rather than permanent. When Wilson transformed the dead and bloody rodents into puppets and manipulated their bodies into replicating behaviors and pastimes associated with the upper echelons of society, she brought the violence of anthropomorphism and its complicity with human socialization into sharp focus. At what cost are dominant social roles and etiquette maintained, and for what? To preserve some calcified notion of the human? To determine which lives have value? During *play #1*, Wilson skins not only the rodents, but the façade of humanity, suggesting that it may not be a viable concept after all.