

Art in the field

Through her work, painter Skye Holland celebrates the unspoilt and often challenging beauty of wild animals. By Janet Menzies

THE POET TS Eliot famously remarked that Jacobean dramatist John Webster ‘saw the skull beneath the skin’. Skye Holland sees it too and is deeply moved. “The skull is a shocking thing,” she says. “It feels like a relic, and at the same time it refers back to art history, where it is often used as a vanitas – a memento mori acting as a parable, warning mankind against hubris.” Yet every artist who wants to paint animals successfully must engage with the anatomy of bone and sinew and skin. It is something important to Holland, who says: “You confront a large, wild animal that has evolved to be a perfect physical expression of function and fitness for purpose, and you must respect it.”

Holland’s painting technique has led her to fuse these two impulses into a single artistic statement. She explains: “I start with drawing, and my understanding of the main muscles and bones and the skeletal structure is something that is studied and internalised. Then I work in layers from the inside outwards. I often use inks, which pool and spread over each other as they dry, so that gradually it builds this very visceral form.” For Holland, her intuitive feelings come as she works, without ever really being verbalised. She remembers: “When I was a child my mother had horses, and I fell in love with these enormous animals and the way they made me feel. I had such empathy and connection with them; I could sense their warm breath and would look into their living eyes.”

Later, on a trip to the British Museum, she encountered the Elgin Marbles: “It is the most incredible frieze of warriors going to war on these magnificent horses. It is 2,000 years old or more and you can hear it – the snorts of the horses, the beating of their hooves – and you can feel the heat and sweat of those bodies. That was my earliest impression of how an artist can powerfully convey physicality and meaning.”

“Many people don’t have enough respect for the dignity of these perfect, living animals”

When living in South Africa, where she spent a period as a sign language interpreter covering the election process of Nelson Mandela on South African television, she came to know African wild animals in the bush and realised just how threatened they were by human actions. “There is illegal hunting, poaching and trade in animal products, and destruction of habitat and loss of range. I don’t understand how it is that people can ignore the fact that we may lose these iconic species; that people don’t get it. Sadly, many people don’t have enough respect for the dignity of these perfect, living animals. I fear that people just don’t care enough. So I want to use my talent to raise awareness – but I don’t want my work to be a sledgehammer on someone’s head or guilt-tripping anyone. It’s a sensitive and difficult line to tread but I am walking that path.”

This links her back to the Dutch masters and their visual reminders to wealthy patrons to beware of arrogance. She relates the on-demand ease of modern human life to our lack of connection with the natural world around us. “People want to have everything, and to conquer and control the whole planet from the deep ocean to the wild bush. Perhaps this has come from fear and the evolutionary process. We have domesticated and subdued animals. Social media is full of images of animals being dressed up for ‘likes’. Why do we tolerate and encourage this?”

So her subjects draw attention to and celebrate the wild, unspoilt and often challenging beauty of animals. Holland says: “I have a series of works on the theme of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and singed his wings. I think it is the perfect motif to express the danger of man’s impulse to control his environment. It works as a powerful graphic image and metaphor for the climate change issue.”

Holland sometimes uses materials such as diamond dust and gold leaf to create a rich, tactile work that is really exciting



Top: *Icarus*, one of a series of works by the artist expressing the danger of man’s impulse to control his environment. Above and middle: *The Tomb Leopards I and II*, from the painter’s Wild Series

to look at, but the underlying narrative remains. It’s a story that unfolds for Holland throughout daily life. She describes the inspiration of her painting *On a Wing and a Prayer*: “I was on a walk one morning and discovered this bunch of feathers, and there was a bird of prey circling overhead, so a small bird had somehow met its end. Then I noticed a little tunnel through the hedge that it looked like a fox had



The artist uses materials such as diamond dust and gold leaf to exciting effect. Top: Shadow Leopard. Above: Longhorn

used, and there was this whole story unfolding about the fragility of the natural cycle and what a delicate balance it is in. Every day it seems there are a hundred instances of things that are moving, that you feel joy or sadness over, and I do feel these things intensely, so it comes through in my work.”

Holland hopes to bring the strands of art and conservation even closer with her new projects. She is especially excited about a possible collaboration with Nature’s SAFE (Saving Animals from Extinction), a charity that is setting out to gather living cell tissue from the world’s more than 42,000 endangered species so that it can be frozen and preserved for the future. ■

For further information on Skye Holland’s upcoming projects, visit: skieholland.com

To find out more about Nature’s SAFE, visit: natures-safe.com