

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET  
HARTFORD CT 06106  
860 232 1006  
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Don't Trust Anyone Over 30" competition in 2003, which requested proposals from emerging artists age thirty and younger, living in New York or New England. Under 30 was juried by Jennifer Gross, Curator of Contemporary Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Barbara Hunt, Executive Director, Artists Space, New York, and Barbara Krakow, President, Barbara Krakow Gallery.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Under the Milky Way, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 62", 2004. (detail)

# Sarah Emerson



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Endless Night, acrylic and rhinestones on canvas, 66 x 56", 2003.

## The Darker Side of Sweet

By Denise Markonish

*Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises.*<sup>1</sup> —John Berger

On December 15, 2004 the woodland creatures revolted. They were messengers all right but not quite in the way that John Berger was speaking of; they didn't bring promises or any type of virtue, instead these seemingly benign critters brought evil. Only in the twisted minds of Trey Parker and Matt Stone could this scenario play out, that is...only on *South Park*. In the season 8 episode entitled "Woodland Critters Christmas" a gang of cute little animals, big-eyed deer, twitchy nosed mice, and curly tailed squirrels, find Stan (one of the show's characters) and enlist him to build them a manger for the anticipated birth of their "lord and savior." Unsuspecting Stan can't resist the cute critters and he helps them out only to find that they are celebrating the birth of Satan.

This scenario just goes to show, in an admittedly exaggerated manner, that we as humans really do not know who animals are and what they do when we are not present. We have ideas about

Sarah Emerson graduated from the Atlanta College of Art in 1997 and went on to complete her Master's Degree in 2000 at Goldsmiths College in London, England. She has been living and working in Brooklyn, NY since 2001. Over the last ten years, she has exhibited her paintings in museums and galleries throughout the United States and Europe, including at White Columns, New York, Cosmic Gallery, Paris, and Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT.

the lives animals live and what they do when we are not looking. We also anthropomorphize animals to such a degree that they become almost human in our eyes, which is why we are so often shocked when an animal attacks, or acts like, well... an animal. When I happened upon this episode of *South Park*, I was immediately reminded of the paintings of Sarah Emerson, which contain a similar dichotomy between a Disney-like saccharine sweetness and a lurking darkness beneath this surface. Emerson's paintings catch animals and they in turn catch us looking at them, a confrontation not unlike Stan and the woodland creatures, where man and animal can really see each other, even if only for a brief moment.

Emerson's paintings present viewers with highly stylized versions of nature by taking patterns already visible in the natural world, ground cover, leaves, moss, flowers and branches, and painting them in pastel hues and pop-like repetition. These pictures almost look like paint by numbers, but Emerson adds in references to animation and folk art both in her use of decoration and color. A colorful bird sits on a cartoon-like tree, or, in *Under the Milky Way*, a Bambi-like deer gazes at the full moon amidst a field of flowers. All of Emerson's landscapes are then inhabited by animals. However, it is the dichotomy between sweet and terrifying in Emerson's paintings that is most striking, as cute woodland



*Wrest Away*, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 66", 2004.

critters are engulfed by flames, then wolves growl, and crows peck at the ground.

Most often Emerson depicts deer, a nod to the influential 1942 Disney classic *Bambi* in which innocence and terror go hand in hand. Emerson's deer, however, are less innocent than their Disney-fied cousin. In *Endless Night* a male and female deer confront the viewer as crows menacingly peck at spots of blood in the background. The deer stare straight out at us, almost challenging our trespassing in their forest. In viewing this painting you can feel the protective stare of the stag as he stands in the foreground, protecting both his mate and his forest, a gesture that is both startling and tender.

Emerson adds yet another twist to her images by adding to these already stylized paintings Swarovski crystals. Pools of blood are covered in red crystals that shimmer and sparkle from across the room, as if sunlight is glinting off the blood's surface. It is strange to see something so horrible made into a thing of beauty, it draws you in from across the room, only to have you recoil at the thought of what is actually represented. In other instances the rhinestones highlight the delicate curves and contours of flower petals. Seesawing back and forth between the sweet and the sick, the use of these reflective elements adds yet another level of eerie enchantment to these images.

In other paintings, Emerson gets even darker. Still employing her signature pas-

tel tones, Emerson has painted a series of wolves and birds. In the painting *Wrest Away*, two wolves glare up at the viewer as one more continues feeding upon a deer carcass. You get the sense that you are interrupting something you shouldn't be. It is one of those moments that humans don't usually see animals in, unless it is on the safety of the television. But Emerson paints her wolves with such visceral emotion that you can almost feel their bloody slobber as they growl at your intrusion.

A similarly bloody mess is present in *The Bend*, where a motley crew of crows picks at bits of carrion, ripping dead flesh from felled deer. You can almost imagine the scenario where wolf kills deer and in come the birds. Or is it man

who has caused this destruction, as in *Bambi*, and the woodland denizens just leapt at the opportunity? What is most striking in both of these instances is that once the reality of the scenes wears off, Emerson still manages to present to us images possessing amazing elegance and beauty that once again enchant us with the idea of what animals can be and mean to us.

Sarah Emerson's work provides insight into the activity of animals but these images, just like *Bambi* or *South Park*, are fictions drawn from reality and twisted in the mind of the artist. Emerson makes us think about what animals do when we are not looking and what happens when we intrude into their territory. She also allows us to look deeply and discover, in nature, patterns and artifice that we never knew before. Her work embodies a merging of fact and fiction, reality and stylization and most importantly innocence and despair. In the end, the animals of Emerson's paintings do indeed enter into our imagination as both promises and messengers of the darker side of sweet.



*The Bend*, acrylic and rhinestones on canvas, 70 x 56", 2002. Collection of Claudia Cargnel and Fred Bugada.

*Denise Markonish is the curator at Artspace in New Haven, CT.*

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals" in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). Page 2.

*Under the Milky Way*, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 62", 2004.

