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Awakening animal instincts

Weekend Glitz | Katie Hung 19 Oct 2018



The City University of Hong Kong's latest Animal: Art Science Nature Society Exhibition brings new life to traditional art with new media technology. Audiences can immerse themselves in the stories of animals from ancient to modern times, as well as east to west.

It is the university's third collaboration with the National Palace Museum from Taiwan. Curator Jeffrey Shaw, chair professor of the School of Creative Media, said the take-off point is the historic scientific material from the museum.

"But we're also building on that narrative thread, by looking at the way contemporary art is represented," he added.

Divided into five sections, the exhibition first explores scientific research from the past to the present, showing a Chinese herbology volume from the Ming dynasty, the Compendium of Materia Medica, which includes animal parts used in traditional Chinese medicine.

Breathing more life into the exhibition is Marvels within the Sea - Immersive and Interactive Theatre, where visitors are invited to lie down and appreciate the living species from Qing-era biologist Nie Huang's Illustrated Album of Sea Miscellany. By pointing the ink spots on the screen, they can discover different species on their own.

Kids will not get bored as there is an Omura's whale skeleton playground with over 100 pieces of flexible whale bones made by 3D-printing. The original is twice the size, approximately 11 meters long, going by the carcass of the whale washed up in Tai Po four years ago. It is a relatively new whale species found in 2003.

The exhibition offers insight into the uses of auspicious symbols and homophonic puns. One is the painting Prosperity Multiplies a Hundredfold. Under projection mapping, the bats - which sound like fortune in Chinese - are shown onto the vase. As a visitor approaches the vase, the projected bats will start flying around.

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The displays are high-quality replicas of the museum's collection. For the sculptures, the team used videogrammetry, a technique that allows artifacts to be rotated and viewed from different angles. The artifacts, Shaw said, are "presented as 3D virtual objects in which you can interactively manipulate."

Visitors can even open the sculptures to see the inside - something they cannot do with the real ones.

Shaw believes that traditional art and new media can be merged in a harmonious way. "These days, the general public is very media-literate," he explained. "We felt we needed to use this language when we were preparing our exhibition because it's a contemporary language of presenting new images, giving new information."

However, he added, the team was very careful when utilizing new media tools so as to preserve the integrity of the objects. "We're not using new media as a gimmick. We're using it because we feel that we can express our ideas and give our messages more forcefully."

The mythical and robotic creatures section contrasts fancy creatures from the past - such as the characters from Chinese classic Journey to the West - and bionic animals created by German company Festo. Video clips show 12 robots simulating natural animal behavior.

Another section looks into the harmony and disharmonies of animals and nature. Taking prime position is artist Eduardo Kac's controversial GFP Bunny. On display is a plastic model of the original rabbit, which was genetically engineered to glow.

Shaw said: "Today if you are going to talk about animals, you have to also talk about the new situation: the social impact because of climate change and other environmental degradation." So the show also include works such as photographs showing a polar bear on shrinking ice floe to address the challenges animals and the modern society are facing.

The final section reenvision animal identity in art with pieces made by, or with, animals. Artist Ren Ri's Yuansu Series II, for example, shows a benign relationship between humans and nature as his beeswax works are made by actual bees.

Animal: Art Science Nature Society Exhibition runs until the end of December at Lau Ming Wai Academic Building at City University.