

Clarence H. Carter “Over & Above”

“Over & Above” is a series of different animals staring across walls that Clarence Carter painted in the 1960s and 70s. This series was a departure from Carter’s earlier regionalist works, entering the realm of surrealism or, designated by Carter’s preferred description – “magic realism.”



“Over & Above #23,” 1965

This series and the series of ovoids that followed were inspired by Clarence & his wife, Mary’s, pet geese, Cora & Hector. In the winter, Carter had to build a pen to house the geese so they wouldn’t roost on his porch roof. Previously, the geese had free run of the property. Carter recalled, “I went out one cold evening to feed them, and Hector looked over the sheeting rim at me with piercing eyes accusing me. ‘We were close friends, what happened? Why do you separate us from you?’ It occurred to me that this is what we do to all creatures on Earth. We separate them from ourselves.”

Many modern scientists would dismiss Carter’s musings as misplaced anthropomorphism, forcing human characteristics onto unconscious animals. Dating back to 17th century French

philosopher Rene Descartes, animals have been denied conscious perception and reduced to mindless automatons. Even in the late 20th century, science was still arguing about whether or not animals are capable of experiencing pain. This is not surprising, as even today scientists, including the highly regarded Stephen Hawking, liken humans (not just animals) to “biological machines” devoid of mind or soul, operating with reflexive conditioned response to stimuli.

To Carter, the consciousness of animals is not a question, but a matter of individuality. Philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) reflects Carter's sentiment: "I saw a muskrat come out of a hole in the ice....While I am looking at him, I am thinking what he is thinking of me. His is a different sort of man, that's all."

Carter describes the motives behind the series, "It is the mysterious & magical elements in life which have always captivated me, things suggested but only partly seen. One element in this strange world of partial knowledge is the world of other creatures. We look at them in fascination and wonder. From this strange world of fact & fancy stare back images, both real and unreal, of what perhaps we might be to others, but never to ourselves – the Somebody Else." The barrier that separates the understanding of an animal's inner life is no different, to Carter, than the barrier that separates the inner stream of thought of one person from another.

"The barrier creates a tension that heightens the mystery of the subject and isolates it



from us. It is across this barrier that we perceive the silence and pervading mystery which transport the subject to the realm of conjecture," says Carter.

When approaching the barrier in the "Over & Above" series, the viewer knows that he or she did not build the wall, and neither did the animal – after all, animals do not possess the hands or tools to construct it. The barrier is the symbol of the universality of life that is beyond human control and the inherent isolation of subjective experience.

"Over & Above #3," 1963



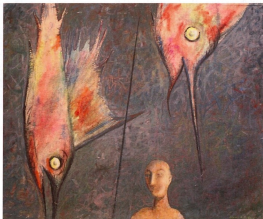
"Over & Above, Diagonals," 1965

paintings is unclear, but if size is any indication of importance, the fish, and not the fisherman, are the focus of the works. In "Fisherman," the swordfish dominate the composition. With a fish that can have five times more mass than a person, for some reason, sheer magnitude makes it more difficult to apply the adage that it is okay to eat fish because they don't have any feelings. The man's pupil-less eyes contrast with the large, understanding eyes of the fish which showcase the spark of life.

Carter, in his huge "Over & Above" canvases, forces the viewer to confront the animal on equal footing instead of looking down on them from a position of superiority. The barrier also symbolizes the limitations of human knowledge. How can one purport to be more important than another animal when one does not even know what that animal's experience entails?

Concepts explored in the "Over & Above" series can be seen in Carter's earlier 1961 paintings, "Fisherman" & "Day's Catch" where fish loom large above a man. The men are rendered generically, with blurred features and a gaping expression. The fish, on the other hand, are presented with an intelligent eye and a nose and mouth far more distinct than that of their captor.

What exactly Carter is expressing in these



"The Fisherman," 1961

The importance of the eyes in these images cannot be understated. The eye is the window to the soul, and Carter, in his paintings, agrees with Pythagoras' (Ancient Greek philosopher, 582-507 BC) sentiment that, "The animals share with us the privilege of having a soul."

Carter describes his use of the eye:
"It says a lot. It says the whole person... [T]hey allow those inside to look out and take in the world outside. They fascinate us from the outside as we study their expression and get a glimpse of what is going on inside. They fire your imagination and wish to pierce their mystery."

They eye is an instrument of connection between the viewer and an array of conscious creatures in the "Over & Above" series, ranging from the king of the jungle to the lowly spider. Obviously the experiences of these two animals are very different, but that does not diminish their importance or interconnection.



"Over & Above #17," 1965

When seen in this context, the exploration of consciousness and life experience is fluidly extended from the "Over & Above" series to Carter's Ovoids. Given this, one cannot make the assumption that the egg is the symbol of the human soul alone, but, instead, a universal symbol of being that encompasses the other mortals that share our planet.

Famous author, and avid collector of Carter's work, James A. Mitchner, relates the appeal of the "Over & Above" series, "They are very successful in creating a mysterious sense of animal life and are of increasing interest to those of us who are trying to determine what man's relationship to nature should be."