

Lin May Saeed

STUDIO VOLTAIRE

“Animals are the main victims of history,” writes the historian Yuval Noah Harari. That dismal fact was fleshed out in a one-room survey comprising six wall works, a stack of A3 posters, and four animal sculptures by Berlin-based artist and animal rights activist Lin May Saeed. Often working with storytelling, she crafts materials of school projects (Styrofoam, colored paper, string), and the frontal compositions of children’s museum dioramas or didactic imagery, Saeed conflates the deep time of geological history with that of childhood, both tinged with lost innocence.

Near the entrance was *Cambrian Relief*, 2016, depicting an underwater Paleozoic scene in the style of a textbook natural-history illustration, with labels in Arabic. It features probably the first-ever car—niv-or-ous predator, *Anomalocaris*—a prehistoric, three-foot-long killer shrimp with hideous bulging eyes and spiky pincers—hunting a few now-extinct water creatures. Saeed may be loosely expanding on Darwinian evolution theory here: While all human beings are descended from primates, meat-eating humans are also the distant behavioral descendants of this repulsive sea monster. Saeed’s use of Arabic in *Cambrian Relief* might seem mystifying to those of us who don’t know the language—but why? Had the labels been written in Latin instead, bearing unfamiliar words such as *Anomalocaris* (Greek for “abnormal shrimp”), we’d likely assume these to be scientific explanations and, even without understanding, accept this fictitious scene as “scientific.”

The final wall piece, *Agri-Relief*, 2017, was based on a diagram the artist once spotted on a poster (hanging in a vegan shop) demonstrating the extreme energy inefficiency of meat eating. Like a twenty-first-century hieroglyph written with graphic symbols, *Agri-Relief* visualizes how eight to ten times fewer grains and less sun energy are needed to fuel a human being with plants than with meat, spelling out our chronic environmental mismanagement (at animals’ expense) in terms that even a kindergartner could grasp. Overall, Saeed’s condensed history seems to suggest that meat eaters are not only as repugnant as *Anomalocaris*, but perhaps as stupid, too.

At the far end of Studio Voltaire's former Victorian chapel hung *Bee*, 2018, the stylized image of a smiling figure on the verge of killing an innocent bee. (The exhibition was titled "*Biene*," the German word for "bee"). Cut from transparent paper and lit from behind like stained glass, this illuminated individual presides as the high priest of speciesism—but the congregation is in revolt. Facing the happy bee destroyer was a stately procession of fabulously crafted animal sculptures: an anteater, a serval (a wild cat native to Africa), a calf, and a spotted hyena. Standing on the frames of their shipping crates as if liberated from cages, Saeed's creatures were more *Planet of the Apes* than Noah's Ark. Her careful rendering of these animals was more sophisticated than her treatment of imagery in the wall works. Perhaps they have lessons for us, whether in the spotted hyena's functioning matriarchy, or in the peaceful anteater's ability to lap up ants without disturbing the creatures' anthill. In his riveting essay "Violence of the Lambs," 2008, John Jeremiah Sullivan noted that despairing animals today, faced with lost habitats and declining food supplies, are fighting back in terrifying ways: gangs of turkeys attacking schoolchildren, squadrons of hermit crabs wielding their claws in the air—"kung fu style," as witnesses attested—in an attempt to drive a jogger off a pier. It's crazy conspiratorial stuff, but if the animal revolution ever takes hold, its spiritual home might resemble Saeed's South London chapel.

—Gilda Williams