Debra Beers

January 23 to
March 9, 2014

Ronna and Eric Hoffman
Gallery of
Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College
Portland, Oregon

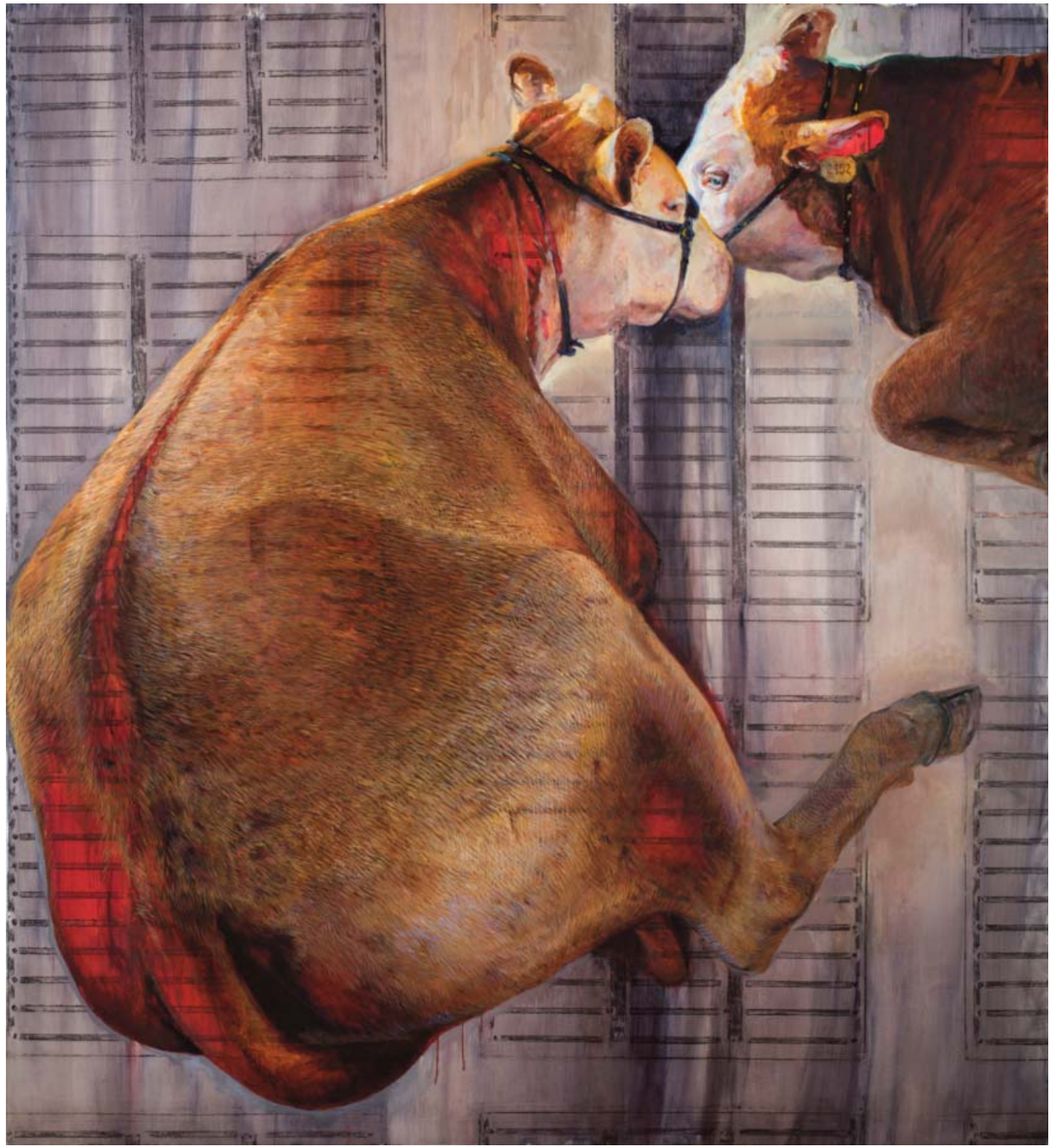
Debra Beers is an engaged artist in the fullest sense of the word: her art appears to grow directly from physical and emotional engagement with, attunement to, its subject. This directness gives it immediacy, an engaging air of spontaneity, like Zen sumi-e. But her engagement or involvement is also deeply moral, as was clear in her astonishing series of portraits of street kids and homeless people.

In this exhibition of new work, the big paintings of animals are disturbingly intense in their identification. Yet the keynote is, again, respect. The artist never claims or co-opts. Each animal retains its absolute animal presence; the penned cattle rest their beautiful heavy bodies in perfect dignity, the coyote is inviolate coyote even in death.

In the set of small paintings of what may be found in a half-wild suburban acre, animal vegetable mineral, live or dead, I read a possible comment on the limits of engagement. The paintings remind me of Albrecht Dürer in their intrepid accuracy, their rhythmic quality, and their reticence. Each one is paired or echoed with a sketch of the artist's hand, which mimics the shape of the plant, makes a gesture of shelter or welcome or worship, imitates, explains, reaches toward…. But the hand is in a heavy garden glove. Insulated in our humanity, we approach the reality of a fern, a mole, a root: in learning to see them, in seeing their intrinsic beauty, we may come very near to them, but can we touch them? A mystery remains. It is this mystery that Debra Beers explores.

Ursula K. Le Guin

The Space Between (detail)
2010–2013
Mixed media on wood panels
7 x 12.5 inches



"Two Head"
2013
Oil and frottage
on canvas
80 x 72.5 inches

Debra Beers's Natural History, from the Terrible to the Sublime

Many think of Debra Beers as an artist whose subject is the displaced, disregarded, or simply overlooked. Beers's best-known work may be her series of urban homeless and disenfranchised youth living in downtown Portland. In the 1990s Beers drew graceful portraits of street kids on discarded materials—often on slate panels, chunks of wood, or scrap metal that she scavenged. But Beers's subjects over the past decade have extended well beyond her iconic street youth portraits. Her eye has been drawn to other urban subjects: a Benson Hotel doorman, war protesters, police (in riot gear) "managing" the protest, a disabled TriMet bus rider (with a guide dog), and the fringe denizens of SE 82nd Avenue. She has also dealt with profound personal loss through her keenly observant drawings. As her father was dying, she drew elegant and compassionate portraits chronicling his passing. She later mourned the loss of a majestic Port Orford cedar tree that had to be removed from her property by repeatedly drawing its grandeur. Beers is constantly drawn to those who exist on the farthest rim from the hub of mainstream culture. For Beers, any subject in the sentient and insentient world is imminently deserving of her close examination and reverent regard.

Ahimsa

> There is no quality of soul more subtle
> than nonviolence and no virtue of spirit
> greater than reverence for life.
>
> *Mahavira* (540 BCE–468 BCE)

Paramount in Beers's work is her ineffable ability to regard her subjects with deference and even empathy. This will become evident when viewers experience her series The Space Between, but nowhere is this more apparent than in her recent paintings of nonhuman animals. Beers is an animal rights activist, but moreover, she is invested in righting the generalized lack of consideration demonstrated by society (including artists and curators) for animals as apperceptive and self-interested beings. Beers recognizes that present culture is stubbornly anthropocentric, but her sensitive portrayal of animals suggests another way.

Beers is an astute observer of nature, and her imagery is often literally found in her own backyard. *Brothers. January 15, 2013* is a portrait of two young sheep that were raised for meat by Beers's neighbors, animals that Beers came to know as she sat near them and sketched them. From the "other side of the fence" and over the course of these sheep's lives, Beers developed a relationship with them, which she memorialized in this painting. One imagines that it must have been an almost surreal experience, to communicate with the sheep as directly as Beers must have done as she drew and redrew their portraits, knowing that their lives would soon end for the dinner table. Beers quietly remonstrates the prevailing Cartesian paradigm that has to exist in order for urban farmers, such as her neighbors, to justify that ultimate action. Through her paintings, she challenges the predominant precept that animals are "property" of their "owners."

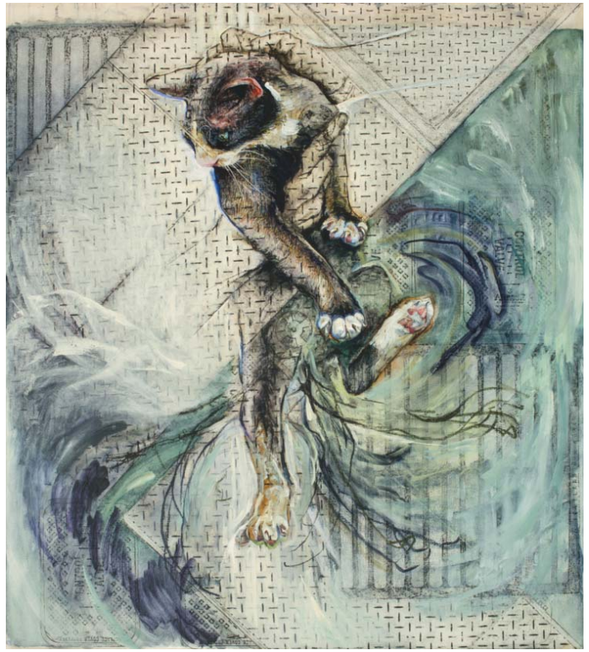
In Beers's recent paintings, she has introduced frottage as a formal element. Frottage simply means "rubbings." Beers lays thin paper over industrial elements found throughout the city—drain covers, grates, railroad tracks—then rubs the surface with black pigmented wax to pick up the texture of the material. These she collages onto her canvas. In the case of *Brothers. January 15, 2013*, two frottage elements suggest some sort of valve opener; in context with the sheep, one might assume that these are industrial agricultural implements. But the frottage of the wheel placed squarely between the eyes of the sheep on the right suggests the sight scope of a rifle with the sheep's head as its target. It also implies the practice of using a captive bolt pistol to stun an animal in a slaughterhouse before it is killed and processed. The subtle introduction of violence into an otherwise realistic and sensitive portrait of the sheep is not uncommon in Beers's work. Beers is a realist, not a sentimentalist. She does not shy from the paradox of humankind's purported love of nonhuman animals countered by humankind's supposed superiority over them.

Another subject that Beers discovered in her own neighborhood is the coyote depicted in *Mated for Life*. Beers lives at the edge of Johnson Creek in the southeast Portland metropolitan area, a place where the boundaries between human life, wildlife, domesticity, and industrialization frequently overlap. Beers's studio, housed in a virtually abandoned and discarded factory headquarters, is near Precision Castparts Corp., a manufacturer of components for the industrialized and militarized West. The Johnson Creek corridor is also home to coyotes that have adapted, uneasily, to the creeping gentrification of Portland's periphery. The coyote in *Mated for Life* was a dead female that Beers encountered as she walked between her home and her studio.

Above: ***Mated for Life***
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
60 x 94 inches

Overleaf: ***Cleo's Farewell***
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
39 x 84 inches

Beers conveys the most respectful and compassionate view of the coyote, even as she portrays its lifeless corpse. The coyote's fur, with undertones of blue and gold, is luscious; the eyes are enigmatic and not fully surrendered to death. Again, Beers has used a frottage element of a manhole cover to introduce the urbanity that has infiltrated the coyote's turf. The two manhole covers and the telephone pole suggest the coyote's route—from one human-made "landmark" to another. But the frottage manhole cover above the coyote also simulates a moon, and the coyote's head is slightly raised in a mute howl. While the coyote's body has died, its indomitable spirit has not.



Above: ***Petey***
2012
Oil and frottage on canvas
65 1/2 x 62 1/2 inches

Right: ***Hard Terms***
2013
Charcoal, pastel, and frottage
on canvas
75 1/2 x 74 inches

The other paintings in this exhibition—*Petey, "Two Head," Hard Terms*,[1] and *Cleo's Farewell*—are other observations of nonhuman animal life that Beers has witnessed and determined to preserve. Some of these images are very sad: the cattle in "*Two Head*" are livestock on exhibition in a county fair. Implicit in this scenario is the future moment when an anonymous 4-H youth will have to say goodbye to cows who were likely raised by hand. The severing of the human/animal relationship is, perhaps, always inevitable. The title, *"Two Head,"* alludes to ranching vernacular in which cattle are referred to dispassionately as "head"—a signifier that cattle are economic commodities.

Beers's portrait of these two cows is evidence that these beings are not only sentient, but that they have a genuine relationship with each another. Beers has captured the mystery of these two animals in communication. She does not suggest that we "know" what that communication is (to do so would introduce the arrogantly presumptuous and anthropocentric point of view that Beers counters). But in the tender way the two cows' heads are nestled close to each another, she honors the mystery of their communion. The animals' inevitable dispatch is also in evidence here. The background frottaged grates and the vertical element that bisects the cows' heads remind the viewer of the future reality of the slaughterhouse. The undertones of fleshy pink in the cows' faces, and the raw red of their haunches remind us that some view the cattle simply as meat, a biological assemblage of edible "parts."

Hard Terms portrays feral cats that scrounge an existence in a community near the train tracks in southeast Portland. "Tigger" and "Shadow" are known by name—and are affectionately regarded—by the stalwart community committed to caring for the feral cats in Portland.

The tenuous relationship between humans and feral cats is of great interest to Beers. She tends to the feral cats that live on the banks of Johnson Creek, she worries about them when the winter temperatures dip below freezing, and she acknowledges the realities of the natural world in which cats may become food for the coyotes that share their environment. Beers's elderly mother has also long practiced compassionate care for ferals, but *Cleo's Farewell* is a tribute to Beers's elderly mother and to her beloved cat companion, Cleo, who recently passed.

In *Cleo's Farewell*, the cat and the woman are gesturing to each another. Beers purposely chose the strong horizontal format as a means to underscore the nonhierarchical relationship between these two beings. The eyes are on the same level, and each figure is given commensurate space in the composition: there is an equality of *presence*. Beers's mother is offering her open palm to Cleo, an expression of vulnerability. The cat is also acknowledging a certain humility in exchange. In contrast to *Brothers. January 15, 2013*, here Beers uses a different, gentler trope to challenge the notion of Cartesian human dominance over the animal world.

The mullioned French door in the center of the painting is, again, frottage. It exists between the cat and the woman as an opening—an opening, perhaps, to a different way of seeing and an alternative way of thinking about the human and nonhuman animal relationship. As Beers's mother gestures toward Cleo, she is also reaching for the door handle, "allowing," or perhaps simply acceding, that Cleo's presence in her life is over. But moreover, the way in which Beers's mother indicates the door is an invitation to the viewer: there is another means, a new entry point, for the human/nonhuman animal relationship. In *Cleo's Farewell*, Beers has captured the antithesis of sentiment seen in *Brothers. January 15, 2013* or *"Two Head."*

Beers would not consider herself a practicing Jain or Buddhist. But she subscribes wholeheartedly to the Jain philosophy of living in the most nonviolent manner with humble veneration toward all forms of life. She titled this series of paintings Ahimsa, as this Sanskrit term so central to Jain teaching not only implies noninjury to other living beings, but also encourages the cultivation of an attitude of protection toward every other soul one encounters.

The Space Between

There is an Albrecht Dürer watercolor called *Muzzle of an Ox* (1523) in the British Museum in London. This small painting is literally just the snout of the animal. The rhinarium (nosepad) is crackled and leathery, softened by the whiskers and fur—the eyes and ears are unseen. One can almost feel the hot breath of the ox when viewing this simple painting, so present is this anatomical detail.

The quality of being—the quintessentialness—found in Dürer's watercolor is something that Beers has been investigating concurrently with her large paintings. For the past many months, Beers has balanced her painting practice with delicate investigations of the natural world, capturing her astute observations in simple and exquisite drawings. Beers's style nearly mimics the delicacy of Old Master drawings—and The Space Between includes a couple of silverpoint drawings, a medium used by Dürer and associated with early Renaissance drawings. Beers then pairs her botanical and biological drawings of the natural world with a human element.

The Space Between is a room-sized installation of intimate diptychs drawn on wood panels. One drawing in each of these pairings is a minute still life from nature. The other drawing introduces a human element, often abstracted in the form of a glove (or gloves)—a simulacrum for the human hand, but removed from the physical sensation of direct touch. Sometimes the gloves are placed at the end of a stick—like an arm—and the way in which Beers arranges these hybrid limbs imitates a gesture or a formal compositional element of the opposite drawing. The gloves suggest a human presence, but at a remove; the awkwardness of the "wrists" and "arms" introduces a fragility or even weakness in the human element. Like fraternal twins, the compositions are related, but not identical. Instead, the diptychs are almost a "call-and-response" exercise that Beers developed to focus her observations of the natural world and then formulate an artistic attempt, or gesture, to introduce some sort of symbiotic relationship between artist and subject.

Beers arrived at this compositional method first by determining that she would make drawings of the natural world on a ground that was roughly the size of her own hand. She was trying to convey, in the drawing, a literally physical sensation that she experiences when gardening, or even picking up a dead mole, but the still-life drawing alone did not seem to adequately convey this feeling. Beers is acutely aware of her actions, even when pulling out a weed from the soil. She vehemently questions the idea that human beings can appropriate virtually anything from the earth. And, while she concedes that human beings must avail themselves of the earth's resources to survive, she also adheres to the philosophy that humans must "walk softly." Each person must resolve this delicate balance for himself or herself; each of us must answer that Big Question. Early on, Beers experimented with pairing the still-life studies with a human hand, but she hesitated at the hierarchy this implied. She eventually settled upon pairing each subject from the natural world with a much smaller glove gesture as a compositional solution to offering a quieter human voice.

Opposite: ***The Space Between*** (detail)
2010–2013
Mixed media on wood panels (detail)
16.5 x 5 inches

For Beers, there is no element in the natural world that is undeserving of her rapt attention. A seed pod, a sprout barely emerged from its germ, a beetle, a dried leaf, the hind legs and tail of a mouse, a tiny dead mole, the roots of an overwintered carrot, an overripe fruit, still clinging to the tree—these are subjects that are endlessly fascinating to Beers. She makes virtually no distinction between the elegance of an unfurling iris blossom and the beauty inherent in an earthworm or a slug, so egalitarian is her regard for all forms of life. In the paired glove drawings, Beers reverses the archetypical human/nature hierarchy and poses the human element in a subjugable position of trying to imitate or even clumsily approach the grace and nobleness of nonhuman life. In a pairing of a drawing of a *daucus carota* (Queen Anne's lace) bud just at the verge of bursting open, the fingers of the human hand are closed, like the incipient stage of a blossom. But even in its mimicry, the human gesture cannot equal the elegance of the flower.

When the viewer enters Beers's exhibition in the Hoffman Gallery, the first body of work encountered is The Space Between. The installation leads to the larger and more challenging paintings in the next room. This is a purposeful placement, as Beers believes that one must learn to appreciate something—the natural world—before one can access feelings of empathy for it. In this exhibition, Beers reveals the enormous breadth and richness of her ambitious studio practice. She is equally at ease with a large-format painting as she is with her delicate studies. Her skill as a draftsperson is legendary and unparalleled. But Beers's vision is vastly more expansive than simply her ability to capture the realism of her world. Like Mahavira's exhortation to exist nonviolently with other beings, or Dürer's vigilant renderings of flora and fauna, Beers's invocation is paradoxically simple. She asks her viewers to *see*.

Linda Tesner
Director
Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art

[1] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Raksha," *Finding My Elegy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012), 130–32.

The Space Between (detail; studio shot)
2010-2013
Mixed media on wood panels
Variable dimensions

The Space Between (detail)
2010–2013
Mixed media on wood panels
7 x 12.5 inches

Debra Beers is a senior lecturer and studio head of drawing in the Department of Art at Lewis & Clark College, a post she has held since 1998. She has a B.A. from Western Washington University, pursued graduate studies at Stanford University, and has an M.A. and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. Her website is debrabeers.com.

Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy of the artist.

Ahimsa

Brothers. January 15, 2013
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
80 x 67 inches

Cleo's Farewell
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
39 x 84 inches

Hard Terms
2013
Charcoal, pastel, and frottage on canvas
75.5 x 74 inches

Mated for Life
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
60 x 94 inches

"Two Head"
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
80 x 72.5 inches

Petey
2012
Oil and frottage on canvas
65.5 x 62.5 inches

The Space Between

2010–2013
Mixed media on wood panels
76 diptychs, in four dimensions:
5 x 16.5 inches
7 x 12.5 inches
12.5 x 7 inches
16.5 x 5 inches

On the Cover:

Brothers. January 15, 2013
2013
Oil and frottage on canvas
80 x 67 inches

Photography
Dan Kvitka: cover, 1, 3, 6, 7, 8,
Robert M. Reynolds: inside front cover, 4-5, 10-11, 12, back cover

The Space Between (detail)
2010–2013
Mixed media on wood panels
7 x 12.5 inches

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