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Art | Christopher Russell Shows Nature's Fury at Julie Saul Gallery, New York

By Bill Rodgers

When you're listening to the birds sing in the park on a warm spring day it's easy to forget that what you're hearing is part of a larger, grittier drama of creatures fighting for the rights to eat, avoid being eaten and mate. If you want to represent nature realistically, you need to accept that the same living thing who makes those sounds you enjoy so much is also locked in a coarser life-or-death struggle that you'll (hopefully) never have to experience.

New York City-based artist Christopher Russell has realistic ceramic works at the Julie Saul Gallery that give a fuller, slightly-uncomfortable representation of this dynamic. *Mean Birds with Apples*, is a 2009 piece done in glazed white terracotta. It depicts two songbirds, one of which appears to be taking an aggressive stance against the other. With *Tooth and Claw*, Russell created a centerpiece bowl overflowing with grapes and fruit. The food attracted the attention of a few fat rats, who in turn caught the eye of a hawk, which is seen clamping down on one of the rodents. Even though I can picture the piece sitting comfortably on Anton LaVey's dinner table, Russell's severely Darwinist creation isn't meant to shock; it's showing a whole.



Russell explains further:

"In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin famously borrowed Tennyson's phrase "Nature, red in tooth and claw," and now I have clipped it.

"Still life always has an element of death to it—there has always been a worm eating the rose. I have just made the food chain theme a bit more obvious. The players have turned on each other—and maybe a truer nature has come out.

"I look at decorative arts. That's where I always head in the museum. I am seduced and awestruck by the beauty and skill, and a little overwhelmed by all the stuff that people make and want. My process is very traditional, very much inspired by the artisans whose work I look at.

"The work is labor intensive—I make my own glazes and do my own firing. I often imagine all the people before me who sat at workbenches like I do, and figured out how to make the beautiful, at times unbelievable, things that I have learned so much from. I think of my work as both carrying on their tradition and as casting a light on it."

Also pictured in this post are Russell's sculptures depicting bees crawling over a honeycomb. While they lack the blood-sport survival narrative of the larger piece, the daily grind of nature is here as well, showing component geometric cells created by component workers to make one large cross section of a hive.



Russell's works, paired with photographs by Tanya Marcuse, are on display at the gallery through June 14.

