**Press Release**

**Urban Zellweger – Where Am I Reptile**

**19 November 2016 - 13 January 2017**

**Opening Friday 18 November 2016**

\*\*\*\*

In the past, Urban has exhibited paintings aflit with voluptuously ass-ish butterflies in coito, others in which figures (markedly headless) waned to wan outline are restored to parodic dimensionality in a gesture of meaty disegno, in still others a hairless dog is perplexingly hybridized with a human torso - joined to it perpendicularly at the neck- a centaur drawn without visual aid from a rather lacking verbal account, maybe. At first blush these procedures and attitudes seem surreal in the narrowest descriptive sense: presenting the fleshy distortions and distentions, the bodily fragmentation, transposition, and coadunation, and rampant anthropomorphism most readily associated with the term. This can be felt even in the opalescent color that floats across the paintings like oil pools on the surface of bad consommé. But, most central of all to such a reading is the prototypically psychoanalytic gesture, often employed by the artist, of obscuring colorful acrylic underpainting with translucent white oil. Here and there this is literalized as snow, though why it is snow and not dirt from which these forms and figures are to be turned from their interment is not entirely clear.

Despite all this, to classify these paintings in this way would be a disservice. They are not the results of the natural outworking of psychic forces. Rather, a surreal vocabulary is only deployed to demonstrate that its claims are themselves the domain of fantasy. Viewed through this lens, the repeated veiling of motifs behind Urban’s characteristic white oil signals a desire to fabricate a sorely-missed unconscious. Like the Piltdown Man, things are buried only so that they might be dug up later and called ancient. When we look at Urban’s pictures, which by all appearances should be reflections of an internal life, the pleasure we obtain is in pretending we recognize ourselves in them, which is to say, in pretending we have an internal life at all. In every dream home, a heartache.

\*\*\*\*

In a small untitled drawing from 2015, Urban rendered in pen and oil the covers of an open book, superimposed over a face and through which covers the eyes of this face can be seen. The transparency of the book in this way grants us visual access not only to what it would otherwise obscure, but also to the visual perspective of the book itself, which sees the face of its reader. We might imagine a similar work in

which the words on the pages could themselves be seen, only reversed. If such a drawing were to be placed in front of a mirror, we would be able to read these words in its surface, which is to say assume yet another perspective: that of the reader himself.

\*\*\*\*

In the works now on display at Karma International, the caprices of Urban’s past exhibitions have been exchanged for animals, diligently rendered with the characteristic horizontal/vertical distortions of a closely-copied photograph. The pervasive white scrim remains, though it now plays the role of water, wind, and in one case (The Great Rabbit which Upholds the Earth) aids in visualizing the underlying physics of a

Roman hypocaust. In those works from which animals are absent two include couches. One painting shows both a couch and an animal (The Visitor). The one that does not include either is called Wildlife.

When I see a picture of an animal I always feel as though I’ve just been reminded of a word or phrase or fact it had been my intention to remember and which I had not exactly forgotten – but whose presence I had become so accustomed to that it ceased to impress itself upon me – like certain features of one’s own personal home or body. “Melted into the furniture” as they say. It is difficult to be sure whether I have not thought about animals for a long time or if they are on my mind night and day.

Like the sense one sometimes has with history: that one’s being in the same world in which it occurs should entitle one to complete knowledge of it- I have the feeling that knowing about animals is difficult to separate from life itself. And because of this I find it hard to imagine Animal Planet playing anywhere but in a hospital room.

There have almost definitely been jokes made about how the very thing that lets us love animals as though they were people, is that they aren’t. The silent companionship of a cat may take the place of a friend or lover for damaged people, not because anything in the cat so much as resembles what is being substituted, but because it is so unlike it in every way.

It is the vanity of man to think that if our gaze tends to alight on something human in the animal, this can only be because – sentimentalists that we are – we generously attribute our best qualities to what is probably nothing more than nature taking its way along its brutal grinding course.

It is the vanity of man to imagine that nature is a dial tone in which we make out a symphony, remarking “it’s certainly a subtle ear that hears a melody where there is none.”

It is the vanity of man to notice, between two Komodos, a caress, and say “a mighty love indeed which finds itself reflected even in the low born lizard.”

To see that it is vanity, one need look no further than the fence’s other face, from which the lizard, whether he be in love or not, sees nothing of himself in us. If nature is a mirror, it ministers to an empty room.

Consider this: A few years ago I was taking care of a black and white pitbull terrier for a former sub-lessee because of certain clerical errors. One day I accompanied the pitbull to a fenced-in public dog run, wherein were arrayed other dog-owner/- caregivers and their dogs. While the dogs played, the humans hung back, each brandishing a leash like it were a sign of the dignity of their office. Intermittently one would yell something to their dog, an admonition or word of encouragement (e.g. “Bentley! Stop that!”). At some point, it occurred to me that there lived the very real possibility that the dogs had, in fact, neither owners nor names and that these outbursts were directed at the shouters themselves. The command to Bentley then becoming an attempt on the part of the woman who shouted it (presumably named Bentley), to dissuade herself from some destructive course or action or another.

*– Hardy Hill*