



Title

Nashashibi/Skaer: Chimera

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Cover image: **Fig. 1** Still from *Bear*, by Nashashibi/Skaer. 2021. 16 mm film painted with ink and transferred to HD video with additional digital drawings by Regina Ohak, duration 5 minutes. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; exh. Cooper Gallery, Dundee).

Nashashibi/Skaer: Chimera

by Greg Thomas • 10.11.2022

If a painter should wish to unite a horse's neck to a human head, and spread a variety of plumage over limbs [of different animals] taken from every part [of nature], so that what is a beautiful woman in the upper part terminates unsightly in an ugly fish below; could you, my friends, refrain from laughter, were you admitted to such a sight?¹

Horace's *Ars Poetica* (c.19 BC) begins with a description of a monstrous beast with a mixture of human and animal parts that, he assures the reader, ought to reduce them to disbelieving and scornful laughter. This characterisation, and the presumed response it would conjure, indicated the Classical author's yearning for formal harmony that the beast's appearance offended. By contrast, *Bear* FIG.1, one of three films by Nashashibi/Skaer (Rosalind Nashashibi, b.1973; Lucy Skaer, b.1975) at the heart of their exhibition at Cooper Gallery, Dundee FIG.2, assigns a different expressive potential to the figure of the chimera.² Footage of sheep in a pen, as they graze and give birth, is overlaid with digital drawings and ink brushwork, creating marks that grant the animals the ghostly outlines of bears FIG.3. They appear to flicker and mutate before our eyes, which the exhibition notes connect to the interspecies transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 AD).

In the film *Lamb* FIG.4, which was shot the previous lambing season on the same farm on the Isle of Lewis, these visual transformations are replaced by a cultic soundtrack consisting of isolated drum beats and high vocal trills. Here, one senses that some ritual significance is being assigned to the birthing of new life, which is captured in visceral detail: crowning heads, blood and placenta dangling between sheep thighs. Nature has its own, innate magical and metamorphic dimensions, the film-makers appear to suggest.



Fig. 1 Still from *Bear*, by Nashashibi/Skaer. 2021. 16 mm film painted with ink and transferred to HD video with additional digital drawings by Regina Ohak, duration 5 minutes. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; exh. Cooper Gallery, Dundee).

The nature and extent of engagement with Horace's tract on poetic composition and his description of the chimera – a figure already common in Greco-Roman mythology when *Ars Poetica* was written – could be taken as a litmus test of critical and creative sensibilities at different points in art history. Hans Holbein's sixteenth-century sketch of the creature, for example, reflects the permeation of Classical thought into European culture during the Renaissance; whereas Salvador Dalí's lithograph *Dalinean Horses Horace's Chimera* (1972) indicates the place of the monstrous in the Surrealist imagination, as a talisman of the untrammelled id. For Nashashibi and Skaer, who have worked together since 2005 under the banner of Nashashibi/Skaer, the chimera seemingly occupies a different position altogether. The artists are interested in semiotics and the play of meaning at the threshold between perception and reality. More precisely, they investigate how common motifs and symbols from the history of painting and traditional media – in particular those expressing ideals of femininity – can become vessels for inherited bias and invisible power structures.

Their film *Why Are You Angry?* (2017), not on view in this exhibition, typifies the more polemical aspect of this undertaking. Shot in Tahiti, the film shows women carrying out everyday activities, interspersed with scenes of them recreating poses from iconic Post-Impressionist paintings. The piece unpicks the androcentric myths of female beauty and passivity that inform, and are perpetuated by, Paul Gauguin's portraits of Tahitian women. At the same time, it gestures to the possibility of new

creative and empathetic relationships between artist and sitter. It is difficult to assign a similarly overt, didactic sentiment to *Bear* and *Lamb*, despite their focus on the female lifecycle, albeit animal, and the fact that the chimera is usually characterised as feminine. Rather, these works invite the viewer to celebrate the plastic power of the imagination to find links between different visual forms and symbols: how is it that a sheep can become a bear through just a few gestural strokes of the brush? We are also encouraged to consider birth as a secular miracle of transformation, of comparable grandeur and beauty to anything that the human mind can usher forth.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Nashashibi/Skaer: Chimera* at Cooper Gallery, Dundee, 2022. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; photograph Sally Jubb).

The artists' interest in the play of the symbolic imagination takes on more obvious connotations of semiotic slippage in the older film *Our Magnolia* FIG.5, which takes Paul Nash's Surrealist war painting *Flight of the Magnolia* (1944) as its point of departure. The original painting includes a large human ear on its petalled flank, a strange airborne entity pictured against a background of lilac-tinged clouds. Using their characteristic approach of creating narrative links between fragments of found footage, the artists lead us through clips of blossoms, past a decomposing cetacean carcass, to images of Margaret Thatcher, finally alighting on a jarring sequence of a screaming woman surveying the wreckage of a looted Iraqi museum during the First Gulf War.

This unravelling of images nudges us towards the social and political realities where we form associations between different symbols. However, we do not appear to be invited beyond this point of acknowledgement to take any particularly engaged stance on those realities. Allusions to the Reaganite-Thatcherite era of Anglo-American imperialism and the threat of airborne invasion

during World War Two, which informed Nash's original painting, are among various thematic aspects of the exhibition that are difficult to fit into a cohesive overall reading. Somewhat more integral, the doctoring of film in *Bear* with ink might remind the viewer of Chinese ink-wash painting or of East Asian pictographic scripts. The fact that the exhibition has emerged through a collaboration between the University of Dundee and OCAT Shenzhen – and includes such works as a woodblock print **FIG.6** used to publicise *Bear* when it was shown in Shenzhen – strengthens associations with Chinese artistic traditions. That said, it is hard, again, to place that inference within any overarching summary of the exhibition, which seems primarily concerned with archetypes of the Western art-historical imagination.



Fig. 3 Still from *Bear*, by Nashashibi/Skaer. 2021. 16 mm film painted with ink and transferred to HD video with additional digital drawings by Regina Ohak, duration 5 minutes. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; exh. Cooper Gallery, Dundee).

A set of mottled, pigment-coloured hangings **FIG.7**, and minimal stone and bronze sculptures by Skaer round off the selection of works. It is possible to draw connections here with the format of East-Asian hanging scroll paintings, and perhaps with the megaliths that Paul Nash discusses as sources of inspiration in his essay on the conception of *Flight of the Magnolia*.³ A copy of this piece is included among a set of exhibition reading materials, alongside works by Ursula Le Guin and more. It is tricky to make all this data mesh together: is there any binding theme or animus that led the artists to leave us this particular breadcrumb trail, or are the surprising segues, pivots and diversions the whole point?

Nash's article discusses the free flow of visual associations, from ancient stone monuments to modern war machines, which led him

to conceive of his painting. Perhaps the selection of works in *Chimera* reflects a comparable logic of endlessly receding symbolic connection – the semiotician C.S. Peirce used the phrase ‘unlimited semiosis’ to describe this infinite chain. There is, however, arguably another imaginative dimension to the show, rooted in the imagery of non-human birth and intimacy, which suffuses *Bear* and *Lamb*: a fascination with the bloody, hairy, fleshy reality of animal life that, as per the curiously occult quality of the latter film’s soundtrack, is endowed with a quality of mystery and magic to match the power of the human imagination. It is this feeling, and this connection to a world beyond the symbolic, that we might finally want to nourish.



Fig. 4 *Lamb*, by Nashashibi/Skaer. 2019. 16 mm transferred to HD video, duration 6 minutes 19 seconds. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; photograph Sally Jubb).



Fig. 5 *Our Magnolia*, by Nashashibi/Skaer. 2009. 16 mm transferred to HD video, duration 5 minutes. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; photograph Sally Jubb).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Nashashibi/Skaer: Chimera* at Cooper Gallery, Dundee, 2022, showing *Bear*, by Nashashibi/Skaer in collaboration with Xu Zhiwei. 2021. Woodblock print, 109 by 79 cm. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; photograph Sally Jubb).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Nashashibi/Skaer: Chimera* at Cooper Gallery, Dundee, 2022. (Courtesy Cooper Gallery, Dundee; photograph Sally Jubb).

Exhibition details	<u>Nashashibi/Skaer: Chimera</u> Cooper Gallery, Dundee 30th September–10th December 2022
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Footnotes

- 1 Horace: *Ars Poetica*, transl. C. Smart and E.H. Blakeny, available at www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69381/ars-poetica, accessed 8th November 2022. Bracketed text is the translators' interpolations.
- 2 The chimera is an imaginary beast composed of incongruous parts, although the term can also refer to an idea or fear cooked up in the mind, with no basis in reality.
- 3 See P. Nash: 'Aerial flowers', in A. Causey, ed.: *Paul Nash: Writings on Art*, Oxford 2000, pp.155–61.

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