



"PROTECTED," 2012, Carol Selter
TAXIDERMINED PARROT, BEETLE FRASS, ACRYLIC,
MIXED MEDIA
PHOTO: COURTESY GALLERY 16

SAN FRANCISCO
Carol Selter: "Animal Stories"
at Gallery 16

The environmental damage due to humankind's heavy footprint seems obvious enough these days, but our political and economic decisions remain seemingly fixed in amber. Scientist-artist Carol Selter speaks for the animals and ecosystems threatened by our heedlessness, adducing museum specimens as exhibits of proof—along with mordant parodies of calendar-style nature photography and animations that subvert our tendency to anthropomorphize animals as cute human sidekicks. In 1821, an Irish legislator, prosecuting a man for animal cruelty, brought the lacerated donkey into court, erasing the smiles of the jury; Selter summons her mute plaintiffs to make the case against human asininity.

The Calendar Pictures depict dead animals—"dilapidated specimens," in Selter's words—restored to their natural settings, in "acts of symbolic reparation." A coyote, reduced to grimacing head and skin, frisks in the snow; two prairie dogs mounted to a

wooden base roll a log uphill through boulders and brush; turtles and frogs swim in formaldehyde baths at the edge of a marsh; a hummingbird, its wings stilled, hangs from a string beside succulent blooms; and tiny pickled opossums suckle, eyes closed, within their mother's severed, bottled womb, by a rural road. *A Turtle and Two Squirrels Walk into a Bar*, (2011), comprises ten short video animations, humorously low-tech, featuring animal specimens given bewildered falsetto human voices. In *No comment*, a sea turtle tangled by plastic garbage flows past a bleached coral reef. In *Where's the water?* a migrating fowl seeking directions receives no answer from a local skeletonized dead duck. In *Goddamn cars*, a turtle, towed by string, negotiates a busy road. In *Burning Down the House*, (2010), Selter presents, without commentary, the brownish head castings (or death masks) of zoo animals—anteater, gibbon, dolphin, coyote, raccoon, elephant calf and seal pup—which she rescued from the dumpster. The abject museum pieces comprising *Protected, Neglected and Lost*, (2012), similarly speak for themselves; a parrot, an owl and a pair of burrowing rats, entombed within wooden and glass vitrines, have been set upon somehow by demisted, i.e., flesh-eating, beetles. (Nature finds a way. We may be off the forensic hook for that one.)

—DEWITT CHENG