



Expired Medicine Creates Abstract Animal Paintings

Tanja M. Laden — May 24 2016



Tripoli Hippo, 2016 (Potassium permanganate, charcoal tablets, Calamine lotion and Med-Lemon on canvas)

In the ever-expanding range of unconventional media available to contemporary artists, few would consider using over-the-counter treatments, including topical antiseptics and effervescent vitamin C tablets as raw material in paintings. But South African artist Jo Voysey sees creative opportunities where others only see medicinal remedies. As it turns

out, her unorthodox choice of media couldn't be more appropriate for the subject of her latest collection of both small and large-scale paintings, *Animal*, currently on view at [Commune.1](http://www.commune1.com/) (<http://www.commune1.com/>) in Cape Town.

Born in Johannesburg and based in Cape Town, Voysey first realized the potential behind using medicine as a medium while an undergraduate art student. "At the time, I was working with ideas of hurt, loss and healing related to my experience of the sudden and traumatic deaths of my three uncles," she says.

Voysey was looking for a medium that could evoke the human form, which she didn't want to depict naturalistically. "Medicine offered to be the perfect 'paint,' and continues to function analogically with loss and healing in my work, except now I am primarily concerned with giving painterly form to the complex relationship between humans and animals," she explains. "My medium and my process results in works that, to me, are the embodiment of the harrowing narrative of abuse, tragedy, and ignorance."



Malooh, 2016 (Copper sulphate, potassium permanganate, gastropect, Sedacur tablets, Med-Lemon, vitamin C fizzy and charcoal tablets on canvas) All images courtesy of the artist.

From farm animals such as sheep and pigs, to more exotic mammals such as hippos, wildebeest, and big cats, the creatures in Voysey's *Animal* series serve as subtle yet profound reminders of humankind's often brutish and typically careless attitude towards nonhuman, though no less sentient, lifeforms.

In depicting her subjects, Voysey works with artistically unstable substances such as charcoal tablets, iodine tincture, potassium permanganate, antiquated antimalarial medication, and other treatments for common ailments such as the colds and flu.

"When I first started using medicine, I only worked with what I could find in my medicine cabinet at home. I then slowly started receiving expired medicine from my lecturers and classmates, which broadened my color palette. I now work with a vast variety of medicines, all based on what was once donated to me."



Kliwon, 2016 (Savlon antiseptic, Sedacur tablets and potassium permanganate on canvas)

Voysey says she initially chooses which medicines she'll use based on their color. "Before starting a painting, I spend some time working out which medicine I will use where, in the hope that some of what I envision in my mind will be interpreted on the surface—although it very rarely turns out that way."

As far as using medicine as paint, Voysey admits there are a number of obstacles. Because she works with medicine in liquid form, she has to paint flat on the floor as opposed to upright. But that's not all.

"I think the thing I struggle with the most is the inability to lighten the work or bring light back into the painting," she says. "Once the medicine has stained the canvas, it is impossible to remove it. Sometimes I am able to scrub away at certain marks, lightening them to a degree, but never fully removing them. At times I simply have to make a new painting directly over one that is not working, and at other times I just have to allow for the work to get very dark; sometimes it works, and other times it does not."



Four Hundred and Fifty Sheep, 2015 (Gastropect, Friar's Balsam, iodine tincture, charcoal tablets and potassium permanganate on canvas)

While Voysey says that every medicine has its pros and cons, she's especially fond of Mercurochrome, the name brand for merbromin, a topical antiseptic that's not available in the United States because of its high mercury content. Its bold color and independent nature

allows Voysey to relinquish control and let it "do whatever it chooses to do on the surface."

Charcoal tablets, which Voysey dissolves before placing on her canvases, are another matter.

"The black liquid is is forever changing in consistency and in color density, making it incredibly temperamental before it is even on the surface," she says.



Sixteen Thousand Pigs, 2016 (Calamine lotion, Friar's Balsam, Mercurochrome and charcoal tablets on canvas)

Either way, Voysey's method and its unexpected results serve as visual representations of the human interference with the natural order of the animal kingdom, and its unforeseen and unfortunate consequences. The lack of control over our interactions with animals is the very lack of control Voysey is exploring in her artwork through the use of medicine over traditional media. As she says, "The unpredictable nature of the medicine's chemical makeup makes it incredibly difficult to know what is going to happen on the surface."

Still, it's the unpredictable quality of the medium that is what Voysey actually loves about it, too. "For me, one of the greatest advantages is the lack of control and the idea that the medicine guides me," she says. "Working with this medium has encouraged me to be brave and prevented me from becoming too precious about the works."



Ten Thousand Wildebeest, 2016 (Med-Lemon, charcoal tablets, potassium permanganate and copper sulphate on canvas)



Twenty Thousand Squid, 2016 (Mercurochrome, Sedacur tablets, Friar's Balsam and iodine tincture on canvas)



War, 2016 (Charcoal tablets, potassium permanganate, iodine tincture, Friar's Balsam, vitamin C fizzy, Sedacur tablets and Mercurochrome on canvas)



Wounded, 2016 (Charcoal tablets, Mercurochrome and Calamine lotion on canvas)



Burnt, 2015 (Mercurochrome, charcoal tablets, gastropect, Friar's Balsam, vitamin C fizzy, Pectrolyte, Sedacur Tablets and iodine tincture on canvas)



Untitled, 2015 (Med-Lemon, Mercurochrome, gastropect, Pectrolyte, potassium permanganate and charcoal tablets on canvas)

Animal is on view at Commune.1 in Cape Town through June 3, 2016.

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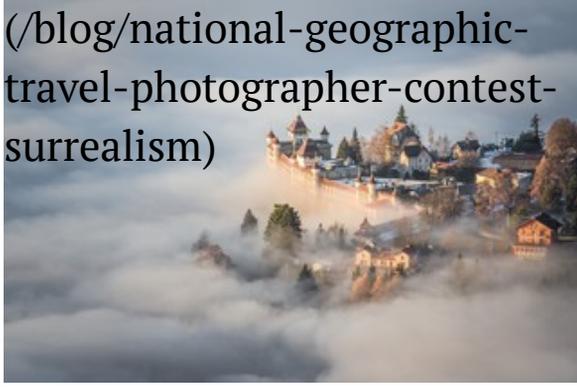
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