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Julien Bismuth: The Golden Ass

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[The Box](#), Los Angeles
16 December – 29 January

By Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

For his second exhibition at the Box, Julien Bismuth spent some quality time with a bunch of wild asses in rural California. The artist shot his new two-channel video, *The Golden Ass* (all works 2010), over the course of two trips to visit the Wild Burro Rescue in Olancho (rhymes suggestively with Don Quixote's La Mancha) and Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue in Tehachapi, two sanctuaries for the nonnative feral donkey populations increasingly endangered across the southeast of the Golden State. Both of the video's channels are shot in an artless, hand-held manner befitting the dumb reputation of Bismuth's subjects. One plays on a monitor, showing the donkeys in their refuge, alternately curious about and indifferent to several giant white weather balloons that the artist introduced to float and bounce through the landscape. Roughly the same scale, donkey and balloon are foils for each other's discrete opacity. Punctuating the scenery like so many inflated periods (enough to constitute several scrambled ellipses denoting asinine speechlessness), the balloons often catch the light and appear, fleetingly, like big holes punched in the picture, as if abstracting or redacting the documentary.

The video's other channel is projected large on the wall, dominating the main gallery and picturing the unemployed beasts of burden nearly life-size (feral donkey as recession-era symbol of the Democrats?) as they mill about, graze and bray in the rescue's protected pen. At a distance, their sandy, dun hides camouflage them against the greyish-brown and ochre terrain of the low Sierras, as inconspicuous and thing-like as boulders – or rather, disappearing in plain sight, just like Bismuth's adjacent suite of monochrome *Dun Paintings #1–6*, where each square canvas, presented in varying degrees of completion, is hung on a section of wall painted the same unique hue.

Bismuth locates the viewer in a hybrid pastoral by flipping between wildlife and domestication, openness and enclosure, nature and labour, animate and inanimate, animal and thing, animal and human. A couple devoted caretakers brush, pet and murmur intimacies to their charges, shifting our focus to the relationship between minder and donkey – a dynamic shaped by the titular invocation of Apuleius's picaresque novel, *The Golden Ass*, in which a young man's (read: the artist's) fascination with magic leads to his accidental transformation into a dull and dumb donkey. Bismuth's supplementary text hints at his project's interest in the possibility of interspecies subjectivity, and in an expanded notion of consciousness that would be wide enough to empathise with the inanimateness of things as well as with the affectless mystery of animals.

Bismuth's prolonged looking at and cohabiting meditation on this particular imperilled, misfit species is an apt consideration of the status of the animal in general at a time when research is beginning to indicate greater intelligence and awareness in nonhuman beings. The animal – representing the fear of the unknowable and the exploited – has always occupied an unresolved and tortured place in politics and human affairs, beginning with the perennial figure of the scapegoat, a close cousin to the heavily saddled ass.

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