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Leopards in the Temple, Sculpture Center, New York

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In 1917, Franz Kafka fashioned a short parable about how even the fiercest misfits sooner or later find their way into the fold. "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers," he wrote. "This is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony."

It's a pithy paradox. Savageness succumbs to ritual; tradition adapts and reintegrates whatever rises to challenge it. As a metaphor for the art world, this little tale feels especially apt. The avant-garde systematically infiltrates the canon; yesterday's outrage devolves into tomorrow's platitude.

The Sculpture Center, a progressive redoubt in Queens, has mounted *Leopards in the Temple* in homage to Kafka's fable. There are a few remarkable pieces here that sit perfectly with the spirit of the parable, recapitulating that clash of feralness and husbandry. Lucy Skaer, a finalist for the 2009 Turner Prize, starts with an enlarged photograph of an obscure crime. Perpetrator and victim alike wear 19th-century costumes, as do the two ghostly witnesses, but we can't know whether this phantasmic photograph documents a long-ago attack or a recent re-enactment. Skaer amplifies the mystery by coating the surface of the entire work with a silvery layer of aluminium leaf, over which she paints a triangle tracing the dynamics of the attack, connecting victim, perpetrator and perhaps not-so-innocent bystanders. On the floor, yet more triangles echo the shape on the paper, reiterating the disposition of the figures in pure geometry.



Lines of force: Lucy Skaer's untitled photograph (2009)

Skaer transmutes villainy into decorative abstraction. Her palimpsest encodes the process by which artists spin reality into rarefied products fit for the opera house, theatre or museum. It is the leopard tamed, at home in the temple but with its supple limbs still tensed.

The beast also haunts the photographs of Berlin-based Nina Hoffmann. In one, projected on to a screen, we see the back of a girl with silky dark hair, apparently encircled by a furry white halo. Or maybe she's confronting something bright and luminous just out of sight. Gradually, it becomes clear that the girl stands face to face with another person, whose presence we know only by the nimbus of pale, frizzy hair. One illusion has replaced another: what seemed initially to be a ring of light now looks like the negative of the dark-haired girl. It's not too much of a stretch to see in these reflective images both wild and domesticated leopards, the animal at once alienated from and reunited with its own savagery. Kafka indicates that we accommodate and absorb unruliness; Hoffmann demonstrates that the animal is us.

"Metamorphosis", by Lothar Baumgarten completes the temple trio. Baumgarten photographed a pair of eerily realistic masks in the Pitt Rivers ethnographic museum in Oxford. The two heads could be twins: both have shellacked eyebrows, pallid faces, alarmingly scarlet lips, and black hair slicked back and parted down the middle. They could be a music hall duo at some Weimar dive, or a set of ventriloquist's dummies sundered from their puppet torsos. The two masks have a lopsided sort of relationship: one gives its mate a suspicious sideways glance. The other's eyelids droop impassively.

Not content with the innate weirdness of his subjects, Baumgarten has slapped a mirrored triangle like a bandit's bandanna over each face, making them multiply strange. Any reflective patch invites the viewer to position his or her own features in its frame, but those who take the bait and search for their reflections will find them subsumed by those uncanny masks. In that moment, Baumgarten's visages take on a vitality that we ourselves lack. We have become their *doppelgänger*s, roaming the world while they slumber on the gallery walls. The uncanny doubling prompts another disturbing thought: which of us is the temple leopard, comfortable but out of place, and who is left to struggle in the wild?

If curator Fionn Meade had confined himself to those three artists' deft enigmas, he would have had a tiny but brilliant photography exhibition. Instead, he stretches the metaphor further than it will go, folding in a range of sculptures and installations that are more mystifying than mysterious and lack the vividness, tension or economy of Kafka's few words.

For her sculpture "Erratum", Latifa Echakhch scatters shards of coloured, gold-banded tea glasses on the floor, in a wan echo of Robert Smithson's "Map of Broken Glass: Atlantis" from 1969. Where Smithson made something epic and scary, Echakhch dismantles lovely domestic objects into pretty debris. Kitty Kraus does similar with fabric for men's suits laid out as if waiting for a tailor's ministrations. These allusions to destruction or assembly are the artistic equivalent of a nudge and a wink: you know you're supposed to get what they're saying but actually, you don't. And by relying on this diffuse rhetoric, Meade has put together an exhibition that's considerably more superficial and less taut than the metaphor that inspired it.

Until March 20