

MICHEL SAULNIER

BESTIARY ANIMAL FIGURES, HUMAN METAPHORS





“Every animal is a tremor of appearances and an entry into the world.”

Jean-Christophe Bailly.¹

The exhibition *Lièvres, ours et corneilles* (hares, bears and crows) features works that draw on the Michel Saulnier's characteristic animal figures. It also evinces organic connections between his works of public art and his studio work (the human figure being the exception in his production). The focus, then, is on the bear, the hare/rabbit, and the corvids, which are represented in both his public art and the smaller sculptures, models, etchings, and drawings. In this text, I examine how a reflection is developed through the dialogue established between his public or studio works, or rather, how one form may conjure another and transform it.

Saulnier does not prioritize one type of work over another. The public art, defined (though not characterized) negatively for the occasion, does not lead the artist away from more conceptual or hermetic work. It is a deliberate choice, and his apparently accessible works nonetheless carry references to art history and reflections on the creative endeavour. The circulation between these two forms of practice results in shifts between a figure's various states of being and an elaboration of artistic purpose.

A Bestiary

For the purposes of this exhibition, the body of work was selected from the three animal figures most familiar to the artist's production—bears, corvids, and hares/rabbits—although his work hosts an entire menagerie, including dogs, boars, foxes, and whales (the dog likely occupying a separate sphere, as a friend of the studio). These animals come from the world of childhood and stuffed animals, but also from the world of fantasy, which, in the vein of fables and fairy tales, holds pride of place with Saulnier, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, which he cited in his master's thesis, or La Fontaine's *Fables*, such as "The Fox and the Crow" and "The Tortoise and the Hare." A world, then, in which rabbits have tea with young girls, teddy bears travel between planets, and where reality is deprived of its grip.

Fairy tales allow children to master their fear in a reassuring context and to develop non-rational spontaneity in a fantastical environment. This unbridled adherence to the marvellous disappears in adulthood, yet it persists in the folds of memory. It is this residuum of childhood that Saulnier wants to revive through the observation of his works. As in fairy tales, however, one object may conceal another: the grandmother has changed into a wolf and the apparent simplicity of forms is an illusion. Gestalt theory has identified some major visual principles, among them the reversibility of images (the Rubin vase), the figure/ground opposition, and the perception of the whole before the parts, strategies that Saulnier uses. A recent work, *Molinari, l'ours et le lièvre* (2019), illustrates this theory: the positive outline of a hare fits within the negative space forming a bear. Also, with its citation of a work by Guido Molinari, this work playfully yet very cleverly shows the influence of minimalist art on Saulnier (another work, *Molinari et la corneille*, a small relief, refers to the same artist).

The combined appropriation of minimalism and certain surrealist procedures, such as the fusion of two motifs into one and the emphasis on the imagination, has given rise to a unique practice, expressed in the hand-crafted construction of the studio works, and sometimes even of the public art. This mix of craftwork and visual arts has fuelled the development of a remarkable production—which, on occasion, is even self-recycling, as the wood moulds for the public art works have sometimes been transformed into works of art.

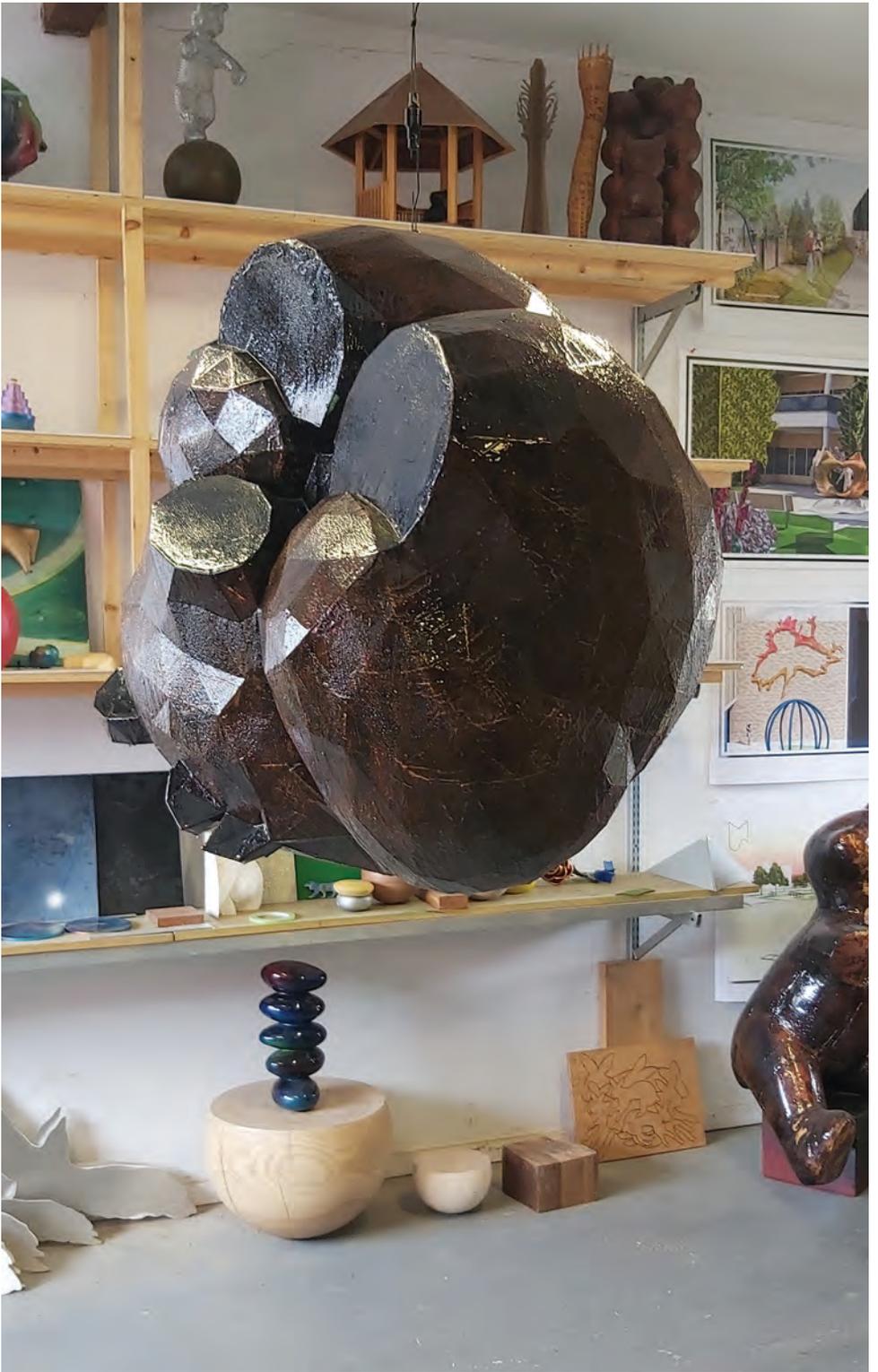
The public art and the studio works allow for incursions into separate spheres while broadening the intersections between them. The bear figure is indicative: for the public works, the animal is benevolent and active. In *Rencontres* (2012) and *Le jardin des délices et un coeur habité* (2022), two interlocking bear shapes form the negative image of a heart. This same stylized silhouette derives from five works created in the 1990s, *Abécédaire* (1992), *Prends-moi la nuit* (1992), *Anatomia ursus* (1994), *Vita sexualis (chimères)* (1995), and *Vita sexualis (chromosomes)* (1995), all of which are sexually explicit—and could not, of course, be reproduced in a school setting or a children's hospital. Moreover, thanks to public art, Saulnier can explore monumentality, the contrasts of scale it engenders between viewer and sculpture as well as between the objects themselves, and the resulting effects on meaning. Monumentality and the demands of permanence also provide an opportunity to work with different materials and techniques, diversifying the artist's formal vocabulary—in *Mon trésor* (2015), for instance, he adds transparency, with an openworked aluminum bear's head that reveals the diamond shape within, which enhances the wonderful effect.





Personal as Saulnier's animal references may be, they nonetheless form part of an artistic constellation. After abstraction's nearly two-decades' dominance over the visual arts, animal (and human) figures have been making a comeback since the 1980s, in such movements as Figuration Libre, in France, New British Sculpture, *The Pictures Generation* in the United States, and the *Transavanguardia* in Italy. In Great Britain, Damien Hirst built his first installations of animals in formaldehyde solution, and Barry Flanagan began his elongated bronze hares in 1979. In the United States, Jeff Koons began using the hare motif in 1986. In France, Xavier Veilhan proposed bestiaries starting in the late 1980s. In Quebec, apart from the animal figures of Jean-Paul Riopelle and the strange creatures of Alfred Pellan, bestiaries have been rather few in number. René Derouin made birds of prey the theme and metaphor of a recent exhibition, however.²





Bear, Teddy Bear, or Black Bear?

The bear has been a feature of Saulnier's work since 1984, and his preferred figure, particularly in sculpture, but also in drawing and collage. Like many animals, its representation can be ambivalent, both reassuring and threatening. In early mediaeval Germanic mythologies, it personified the king of animals.³ In Quebec these days, Serge Bouchard tells us in *Bestiaire*, the brown or black bear is symbolic of gluttony.⁴ In a child's imagination, it is a teddy bear. "I believe that my houses, landscapes, and bears are schematized to such a degree that the same type of recognition [as provided by archetypes] is produced in the viewer. Also, I've got to confess here that I never had a teddy bear when I was young. But who really ever had one?"⁵

The teddy bear, invented in both Germany and the United States in the early 20th century,⁶ is certainly a fundamental reference for the artist, but it isn't the only one. The bear (of no particular species) transits throughout his work. Never menacing, it is rather a condensation or metaphor of the landscape. It appeared in Saulnier's animal vocabulary during the 1984 Baie-Saint-Paul painting symposium as a quasi-apotropaic figure, meant to "protect" him from the visitors. Appearing in what would become Saulnier's *Polyptique*, roughly cut with a chainsaw, the art-loving bear, an ironic presence and stand-in for the onlooker, contemplates the landscape of logs.

I am the Bear

Je suis là (2014) is undeniably Saulnier's major work of public art. It is informed, however, by several similar works that make various statements about art and emotion. At the Montreal Children's Hospital, part of the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC), the oversized teddy bear (standing 12.5 metres tall!) does a balancing act on a planet while greeting the children outside: the sculpture can thus transform into a reassuring messenger. At night, it lights up and sidereal swirls form within, opening up a path for the imagination and transporting passersby beyond the often-difficult moment at the hospital. The work combines the wondrousness suggested above with a protective benevolence while also inscribing itself in the postmodern era, along with its forerunner, Jeff Koons' imposing plant-based *Puppy*, first erected in 1992 in front of Arolsen Castle, in Bad Arolsen (Germany), near Kassel, where Documenta IX was taking place.⁷ The monumentality of Saulnier's teddy bear earned it a place in on-line image banks and on a very popular website on Montreal.

The same ursine balancing act appeared atop the Maison de la culture de Mont-Joli, in 2014. This time with no cultural bearings or symbols, its size is diminished but not its visibility. Brought back to the ground and at human scale, it comes in two variations: in *Moment d'inertie* (2013), where its two paws are firmly planted onto the sphere, and in *Ours vert sur une planète* (2020-2021), placed in a window







display at Materia, where it takes up the pose on one foot while inverting the movements on the forward paws. The textured wood of the sphere and the vibrant green colour introduce other variables: the metallic bear is not on the same register as the wooden one, in the grips of the materiality of wood and colour.

Saulnier's recurring use of the teddy-bear head motif testifies to the influence of both minimalism and modernism (here, specifically Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*) in such public works as *Écho* (2001) and *La famille* (2003), as well as in the studio work, *Composition à huit baisers* (1998-2022). Themes of affection, family, and solidarity are explored in these pieces, and we observe that his work in studio has had repercussions on his public art.

Rabbit or Hare?

Let's first clarify the issue of species identification: there are great similarities between rabbits and hares. The rabbit is both a farm animal and a pet, but it is also wild (the wild rabbit, for example). The long ears on both animals and their benign aspect have made them favourite cartoon characters and a staple of children's books. The hare/rabbit appears in Saulnier's work as early as 1993, during a residency in Japan, with his *Contes de la pleine lune*, five sculptures with ears forming Kanji characters that signify full moon, power, heart of the forest, wild animal.

The hare symbolizes speed in racing—and in reproduction (its only means of survival). This is the trait the artist highlighted in the drawn or engraved representations of his *Liber abaci* (also the title of the book by Leonardo Fibonacci (1202), in which the growth of a population of rabbits is calculated, called the “Fibonacci sequence”). Profiles and colour swaths are highlighted, along with the number of animals in each image, respecting the sequence: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, and so on.

The same silhouette was taken up again in *Vertige* (2019). Saulnier used hollowed out silhouettes and negative space in both drawing and sculpture and transitioned easily from one to the other. The animals







in *Vertige* and in *Molinary, l'ours et le lièvre* adopt nearly the same set of primary and complementary colours: vivid hues meant to enliven while also, arrayed in stripes and blocks, showcasing Guido Molinari's influence. It would have been unthinkable for Molinari to incorporate figures in his works. The freedom with which Saulnier mixes stripes and figures testifies to the diminishing sway of prescriptive standards in the visual arts.

Corvid Stories

La Fontaine's crow ("The Fox and the Crow") is a sap, whereas Saulnier's corvids typify freedom and soaring flight through the sky. Curiously, his birds have no thickness, only lines. And where the bear and the rabbit/hare are embodied in wood, a dense material, derived from the very substance of reality, the corvids, all silhouettes and flat surfaces, are composed of dream material. These are paper birds, metaphorical birds.

Generally speaking, as a scavenging black bird with a harsh, loud cry, the corvid is not greatly appreciated. Yet studies have shown that the crow is intelligent, to the point of fashioning tools, and that it may even be capable of empathy.⁸ The corvid (crow or raven) has held a significant place in various mythologies (Amerindian, Scandinavian, Gallic, Irish, and even Northern Asian),⁹ information that gives it a less grating resonance.

The background of the corvid engravings features a motif resembling waves, traversed by eddies and currents. The birds, their black or coloured silhouettes in transparency, are deployed atop this all-over. Transposed to public art, as in *Paréidolie* (2020), the treatment of the metal bird wings mimics the gouge or pencil strokes in the bird prints. *Rideau* (2014), a two-dimensional work installed at the entrance of a performance hall, comes close to the rendering of the



etchings although produced in painted and anodized aluminium, which demonstrates once again the cross-over between studio and public artwork. In *Voltiges* (2022), some birds are outlined as negative space cut out of the expanse of the main bird, becoming apertures into the sky, a *mise en abyme*. The bird's colouration is worked upon in an expressionist, no longer a minimalist style, the shades lined with uneven patterns, all contributing to the illusion of gliding flight.



Animal Figures, Human Metaphors

In the visual arts as in literature, animal figures are metaphors for the human condition. Every era, every culture, endows them with real or imaginary powers and varied significance, as Michel Pastoureau has shown in *L'ours, histoire d'un roi déchu*. The bear, once the king of the forest at the time of Germanic kingdoms, gradually gave way to Middle Eastern myths of origin, thus the lion, which was not part of Nordic fauna, as burgeoning Christianity strove to destroy pagan symbolism to better impose its own.

Our era is inscribed under the aegis of decadence, if one is to believe philosopher Michel Onfray, but also under that of climactic changes and disenchantment. Historically informed, always friendly, sometimes mischievous, Saulnier's animals allow us to access another level of consciousness—wondrous, playful, erotic—in a thoroughly contemporary production.

Pascale Beaudet

A PhD in art history from the University of Rennes 2 (France), Pascale Beaudet is an independent curator and author. She has more than thirty solo and group exhibitions, including several international. As author, she has written over 150 catalogues and articles on modern and contemporary art.

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1. Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le visible est le caché* (Paris: Le Promeneur, 2009), 27. (Translated by RR. Original: "Chaque animal est un frémissement de l'apparence et une entrée dans le monde.")
 2. *Rapaces*, at the Musée d'art contemporain de Baie-Saint-Paul, in summer 2019, an exhibition I had the pleasure of curating.
 3. Pastoureau, *L'ours, histoire d'un roi déchu* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 11.
 4. Serge Bouchard, *Bestiaire* (Montréal: Éditions du Passage, 2006), 16.
 5. Michel Saulnier, *Rêves éveillés* (Saint-Jean-Port-Joli: Éditions Nathalie Caron, 1992), 11. To the artist's question, this author would very much like to respond, "me!"
 6. The expression, "teddy bear," originates from an anecdote involving American president Theodore Roosevelt. Pastoureau, *L'ours, histoire d'un roi déchu*, 327.
 7. "Puppy," Guggenheim Bilbao, <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibition/puppy> (accessed January 30, 2023).
 8. Agatha Liévin-Bazin discusses this in an on-line article for the Muséum de Toulouse: <https://www.museum.toulouse.fr/-oiseau-de-malheur-le-corbeau-familier-des-sorcieres-et-genie-incompris> (accessed January 30, 2022).
 9. *Ibid.*, and Serge Bouchard, *Bestiaire*, 98.

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