

Animal Imagery as a Representation for Social Commentary in Contemporary British Visual Arts

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Abstract

Artists, through various forms and contexts, express their observations, understandings, and questions about society. This paper aims, through visual analysis, to explore the diverse expressions of animal-related themes, issues, cultural significance, and artistic styles in the works of five contemporary British artists, and to examine how social issues are presented in artistic creation. This study utilizes content analysis, incorporating both document and artwork analysis, to examine the varied representations of animal imagery in art and their possible societal implications. This analysis utilizes Feldman's art criticism model to interpret both form and content, aiming to uncover their social and symbolic meanings. The findings indicate that various animal species function as visual metaphors for societal issues, reflecting the cultural, power, and economic dynamics present in society, shaped by the artists' creativity, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, mixed-media installations emerge as powerful channels for emotional expression. This research expands the framework for interpreting artworks and paves the way for greater social awareness and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Animal Imagery, Social Commentary, Visual Arts, British Artists

Introduction

Animals occupy a central position in human cultural expression. They frequently appear in art, literature, religion, and mythology as symbolic images, serving as an important medium through which humans understand and mediate their relationship with nature (Aftandilian, Copeland, & Wilson, 2007). From the cave paintings of the Paleolithic era to the religious imagery of the Middle Ages, and contemporary installation and conceptual art, animal

imagery has consistently functioned as a powerful visual language, carrying cultural beliefs, moral values, and social structures (Johnston, Mastrocinque, & Papaioannou, 2016). As biologist E.O. Wilson (1984) stated, animals are “nature’s metaphors and mythic vessels,” whose symbolic capacity enables them to transcend the boundaries between the physical and the conceptual, linking human experience with the natural world.

In the context of contemporary art, the function of animal imagery has undergone a significant transformation: from decorative and allegorical symbols to complex media embedded in social discourse and laden with multiple layers of meaning (Kallio-Tavin, 2020). As Baker (2000) points out, animal imagery in contemporary art is often used to question anthropocentrism, expose power structures, and reveal the ethical entanglements between human and non-human life. Increasingly, artists employ animal imagery as an entry point to address urgent issues such as environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, cultural identity reconstruction, and the climate crisis (Kallio-Tavin, 2020; Burlington Contemporary, 2019; Maria, 2021; Axios, 2025). This shift reflects a reconfiguration in the human–animal relationship: moving from a dominant, human-centered gaze toward a more critical, and even empathetic, re-presentation and dialogue with non-human life.

In the United Kingdom, contemporary artists widely employ animal imagery as a critical tool to engage with social realities. For example, Damien Hirst preserves the bodies of real animals, forcing viewers to confront the ethical dilemmas of death and the commodification of life (Hirst & Burn, 2007); Tessa Farmer subverts predatory relationships to reveal the fragility of ecosystems and the irreversible damage to environmental balance (Lange-Berndt, 2014); Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson adopt the display language of natural history museums to reflect on the ethics of collecting and the tangible impact of global warming (Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2006); Kendra Haste uses galvanized wire mesh to create animal forms with a vivid sense of life, subtly advocating environmental respect and species conservation (Haste, 2015); Polly Morgan breaks away from the naturalistic representation of traditional taxidermy, incorporating decay and transformation into the continuity of life, prompting viewers to confront the essential questions of life and death (Desmond, 2020).

This study situates the practices of these five contemporary British artists within the broader theoretical framework of “animal imagery as a medium of social commentary,” employing Feldman’s (1994) art criticism model. Through the four steps of description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, it systematically examines their formal characteristics, symbolic structures, and socio-cultural connotations (Alashari, 2021). The research aims to reveal how contemporary British art, through animal imagery, creates a tension between aesthetic innovation and social critique, and to demonstrate its unique ways of engaging with issues such as environment, ecology, ethics, and the value of life within the space of public discourse. Through this analysis, the paper not only deepens the understanding of animal representation in the artistic context of the 21st century but also offers a new research perspective on how visual culture generates sustained social impact at the intersection of science, ethics, and politics.

Literature Review

Animal imagery, as a symbolic and communicative tool, has a long history in art, literature, and cultural expression. As biologist Edward O. Wilson (2021) has noted, animals are natural

carriers of metaphor and myth, whose symbolic power enables artists to explore the complex dimensions of human experience. From the cave paintings of the Paleolithic era, to the allegorical depictions in medieval manuscripts, and to the scientific precision of natural history in the Enlightenment, the representation of animals has always evolved in tandem with shifts in cultural attitudes. In *The Animal in Human History*, Linda Kalof (2007) traces the evolution of animal imagery in Western art, arguing that artistic depictions not only reflect the sociopolitical and philosophical currents of their time, but also reveal the ongoing reconfiguration of the human–nonhuman relationship. For example, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on classification and control reinforced anthropocentrism, whereas contemporary practices tend to challenge such hierarchical orders and respond to environmental and social crises (Kalof, 2007).

In the context of contemporary art, the use of animal imagery has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from decorative or allegorical symbols to complex signs embedded within socio-political, ethical, and ecological discourses. In *Art & Animals*, Aloï (2011) points out that contemporary artists, through animal themes, break down the boundaries between nature and culture, making animal imagery both a reflection of human values and a tool for critique. Such critique often targets core issues such as speciesism, ecological degradation, and the commodification of life, and has generated cross-cultural resonance within artistic practices in Europe and North America.

Steve Baker (2000) further emphasizes that in postmodern art, animal imagery is no longer a passive object of representation, but an “active agent” participating in political, ethical, and environmental debates. This view aligns with Cary Wolfe’s (2003) posthumanist theory, which holds that art can, through animal imagery, challenge anthropocentrism and create tension between empathy and critical reflection (Medoro & Calder, 2003). Studies by scholars such as Aloï (2011) and Gregory (2012) also reveal that many contemporary artists borrow the display language of natural history museums—glass cases, classification labels, archival documents, and controlled lighting—to deconstruct the “neutrality” of scientific display, thereby questioning the ethics of specimen acquisition, preservation, and exhibition (Aloï, 2021).

Related case studies also provide an important reference framework for this paper. For example, Huang (2015) analyzed Damien Hirst’s installations where real animal remains are preserved in formaldehyde, noting how such works blur the boundaries between aesthetic spectacle and ethical confrontation, thereby provoking critical public discussions on death, ethics, and commodification. Zoidis (2010) explored how Hirst’s dissected cow installations reflect postmodern anxieties and compel viewers to face existential questions surrounding bodily fragmentation and mortality. Townsend (2008) interprets broader artistic engagements with death and ethical dilemmas, highlighting the role of such works in reshaping public understanding of mortality and environmental fragility. In terms of museological critique, Harris (2013) examines how art and capital intersect in contemporary exhibitions, using Damien Hirst’s works as key examples to interrogate the commodification of biological life and the legacy of colonial acquisition logics underlying institutional collections. Similarly, Henning (2007) discusses how unconventional taxidermy practices, such as those by Walter Potter and later adopted in contemporary art, including Hirst’s, reflect a shift from scientific display to emotional and ethical confrontation with death and decay.

While existing scholarship has offered valuable perspectives on the symbolic, ecological, and ethical aspects of animal imagery in contemporary art, much of it remains limited to examinations of individual artists or narrowly defined themes, without adopting a comparative lens across different practitioners. Moreover, relatively few studies employ structured frameworks of art criticism, such as Feldman's four-step model, to investigate how animal imagery operates both as an aesthetic strategy and as a medium of social critique. In response, this study undertakes a comparative visual analysis of selected works by five contemporary British artists, situating their practices within broader critical discourse. By combining literature review with close artwork interpretation, the research highlights how these artists engage with animal imagery to address social and cultural concerns, and how their artistic approaches converge with or diverge from those of other contemporary practitioners, thereby underscoring the significance of their contributions within the British art context.

Methods

This research utilizes content analysis as its main methodological approach, combining document analysis and visual artwork analysis to investigate the depiction of animal imagery in modern British visual arts. The analysis of the document will encompass a critical examination of various textual materials, such as books, peer-reviewed journals, exhibition catalogs, magazines, and newspapers, in order to establish contextual and theoretical foundations for the use of animal imagery. Simultaneously, the visual analysis will thoroughly explore the formal and compositional aspects of chosen artworks, focusing specifically on the arrangement and stylization of animal motifs to express meaning. To enhance the analysis, the research utilizes thematic analysis as an interpretive method to recognize and classify recurring patterns, symbols, and themes pertaining to social commentary that arise throughout both textual and visual data. This integrated method enables a thorough comprehension of how animal imagery serves as a medium for sociopolitical expression in the chosen artistic context.

This study employs a purposive sampling method to select works featuring animal imagery by five contemporary British artists. Purposive sampling is appropriate in this context because the aim is not to generalize across the entire field of contemporary art, but rather to focus on artists whose practices are particularly significant in engaging with animal imagery as both an aesthetic and critical device. The selected artists and their representative works were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives, namely their ability to highlight diverse artistic strategies and thematic concerns related to form, symbolism, and socio-cultural meaning. Through formal analysis, the study interprets how animal imagery, together with prominent formal elements and design principles, operates within each artwork.

The analysis applies Feldman's art criticism model—description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation—to examine form and content to determine their social symbolic meaning. This approach allows for an in-depth comparative understanding of the ways in which British artists use animal motifs to address broader artistic and social issues, thereby providing insight into their distinctive contributions relative to other contemporary practitioners. As Rosalind Ragans (1988) has pointed out, the four interrelated steps of Feldman's art criticism model can reveal the implicit meanings within certain works of art.

The art criticism model is as follows:

- i. Description: Involves examining the materials and themes of the artwork.
- ii. Analysis: Explains the design elements and principles.
- iii. Interpretation: Clarifies the meaning of the artwork.
- iv. Evaluation: Assesses the success of the artist's work, considering ideas, form, and content comprehensively.

Results and Discussion

Damien Hirst



Finger 1. The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991), Installation, 213×518×213 cm (84×204×84 in)

Damien Hirst is a representative figure in the British contemporary art scene, known for his controversial use of animal carcasses and specimens in his works. His “Natural History” series includes sharks, cows, and sheep that have been chemically treated and preserved, displayed within transparent glass vitrines. The most iconic work in this series, “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living” (1991) (Figure 1), presents a 14-foot tiger shark suspended in a formaldehyde solution and enclosed in a glass case, allowing viewers to observe its size and details at close range. The work’s industrial structure, minimalist transparent casing, and bright lighting create a clinical, laboratory-like austerity, which, while emphasizing objectivity, also confronts the viewer with the reality of death (Mohammadi-Zarghan & Afhami, 2019).

This installation centers on an industrially structured transparent glass vitrine filled with formaldehyde solution, within which a tiger shark approximately 14 feet in length is suspended. The high transparency of the glass, combined with the steel frame, creates a laboratory-like display context, allowing viewers to closely observe the shark’s size, skin texture, and oral details (White, 2013). The exhibition space employs uniform and austere lighting, with a minimalist color palette dominated by the neutral tones of transparency and metal, further reinforcing the objective quality of “scientific display.” The shark’s stillness and imposing scale generate psychological tension within the enclosed yet visible space; the viewer’s movement is guided around the vitrine, creating a 360-degree viewing path that deepens the simultaneous sensations of immersion and discomfort (Buller, 2014).

Hirst's works skillfully employ large-scale installation formats and industrial production techniques, creating a psychological impact through the stark contrast between organic matter and sterile environments (Mohammadi-Zarghan & Afhami, 2019). His compositions emphasize a sense of scale and a complete viewing perspective, with the transparent glass design allowing viewers to observe from multiple angles, thereby enhancing the visual experience (White, 2010). In terms of color, he retains the animal's natural tones while minimizing other visual distractions, thus highlighting the subject's life characteristics and state of death. The formal simplicity and the austerity of the materials together transform the animal into a dual existence—both a scientific specimen and an artistic symbol (Buller, 2014).

Table 1

Social coding, The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Biotechnology	Moral	Ethic

Hirst's animal imagery confronts the fragility and transience of life, placing life and death within the same visual framework to create a powerful existential paradox: although the shark is dead, it still hovers with a commanding presence, seemingly retaining a latent threat (White, 2010). This sense of contradiction prompts viewers to reflect on humanity's fear of death and the impulse to "control" nature through science and art. His works emphasize direct sensory impact and philosophical reflection rather than relying on specific cultural or historical narratives (Mohammadi-Zarghan & Afhami, 2019).

In summary, Hirst has successfully transformed animal remains into a visual medium that provokes philosophical reflection and discussion of social issues. His works transcend the boundaries of art, science, and popular culture, sparking widespread debate on death, ethics, and the commodification of life. This creative approach has also raised moral controversy—whether the pursuit of sensory shock and intellectual impact should come at the expense of other lives. Although some critics argue that his work tends toward excessive commercialization or sensationalism, the sustained attention and debate it has generated precisely demonstrate the effectiveness of his visual strategies in eliciting public emotional resonance and critical reflection. The large-scale installation format and strong sensory impact have made his artistic imagery deeply memorable and secured his significant place in contemporary art history.

Tessa Farmer



Finger 2. *Little Savages* (2007), Installation, 90×25×50 cm

Tessa Farmer is a British contemporary artist known for combining taxidermied animals, insect remains, and miniature sculpture. She excels at merging the display context of natural history museums with narrative-driven artistic interventions, creating works that possess both visual impact and critical thought (Lange-Berndt, 2014). Farmer often uses natural materials such as plant roots, insect wings, and bones to craft delicate miniature creatures, which she then combines with meticulously prepared animal specimens. Through extreme attention to detail and the construction of multilayered spaces, she explores the fragile and complex relationship between humans and nature (Arends, 2009). Her work not only focuses on survival and competition between species but also reflects interdisciplinary issues spanning museology, ecology, and environmental ethics.

This installation was presented in the central hall of the Natural History Museum in London, with a taxidermied red fox as its visual centerpiece (Lange-Berndt, 2014). Unlike the static, intact animal specimens found in traditional museums, this fox has matted fur and is covered with cocoons, as if being consumed by alien organisms (Rogers, 2018). Surrounding it are various insects and miniature fairies meticulously crafted from plant roots and bee wings, which appear to be “invading” and decomposing their prey through collective action. The work is placed within a white display case, retaining the visual order of scientific exhibition, yet this order is entirely disrupted by the microscopic violence it contains. In close viewing, the audience experiences both curiosity and unease (Lange-Berndt, 2014).

Farmer’s artistic style is deeply influenced by the aesthetics of natural history, yet she is not content with the static replication of natural forms. Instead, she disrupts and reconstructs the state of specimens to reveal traces of time and process (Arends, 2009). She skillfully employs reversed proportions and inverted species roles, turning predators into prey, and surrounding a large-bodied fox with tiny creatures, thereby breaking the traditional ecological hierarchy. This subversion not only generates intense visual tension but also undermines the scientific authority represented by the museum, suggesting that the natural order can be altered or even overturned at any moment (Lange-Berndt, 2014). Her handling of materials combines precision with absurdity, preserving the natural texture while imbuing it with a surreal narrative power, immersing viewers in a visual experience where reality and fiction intertwine.

Table 2

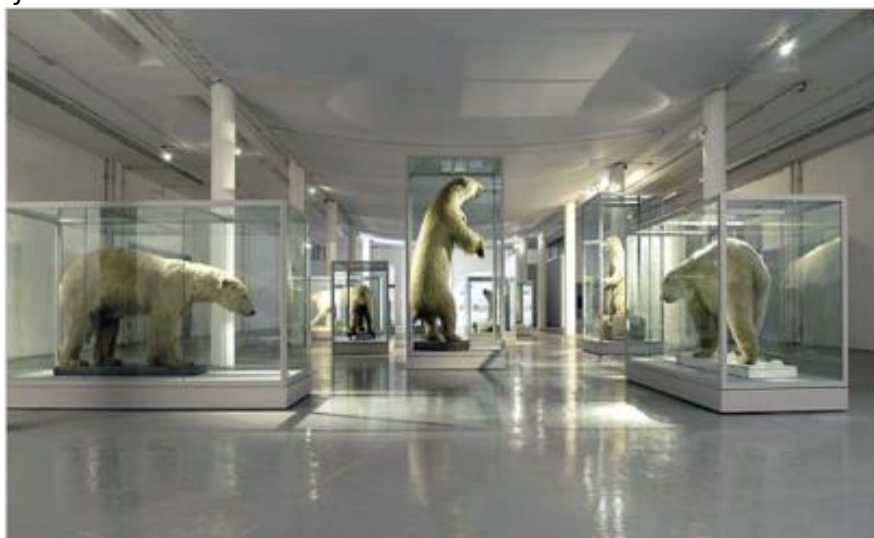
Social coding, Little Savages

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Environment	Ecology	Evolution

This work is regarded as a critical response to the display logic of natural history museums. Lange-Berndt (2011) points out that Farmer breaks the myth of the specimen's permanence and perfection, making decay, parasitism, and destruction part of the exhibition. This approach provokes discussion on social issues concerning scientific authority and the objectivity of display, while also closely linking the work to contemporary environmental concerns. The invasion of insects and fairies not only symbolizes the potential instability within ecosystems but also alludes to the realities of environmental degradation and imbalance in species relationships. Through the presentation of multi-species interaction and dynamic processes, Farmer's work visualizes the fragility and interdependence of ecosystems, while metaphorically evoking Darwinian evolution—adaptation, competition, and variation are always in progress (Lange-Berndt, 2014). The imagery of parasitism and symbiosis in the work prompts viewers to reflect on humanity's place and responsibility within the natural world, as well as to re-examine ecological ethics in the context of the global environmental crisis (Arends, 2009).

This artwork successfully integrates the aesthetics of natural history, meticulous craftsmanship, and ecological critique, forming an artistic language in which visual impact coexists with intellectual depth. It is both a feast of detail and an unsettling experience, compelling viewers to confront the fragility of life and the uncertainty of the natural order. Through precise miniature constructions and narratively charged material choices, Farmer crosses the boundaries of art, science, and popular culture, drawing viewers into a multi-species world that is at once real and fictional. This work holds significance in contemporary art history not only for its distinctive visual strategies but also for its profound engagement with social issues, the environment, ecology, and evolution, making it an important artistic text.

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson



Finger3. Nanoq: flat out and bluesome (2006), Installation, 250×80×300 cm

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson are an artist duo renowned for their long-term, cross-disciplinary research at the intersection of art, science, and culture. Through collaborations with biology and museology, they juxtapose the life histories of non-human beings with human narratives, and for over two decades have pursued practices that approach the Arctic environment from a multi-species perspective. Their published and touring research project, “Nanoq: flat out and bluesome (2006)”, systematically documents polar bear specimens within the British collecting system and their historical contexts, forming the foundation for their subsequent work on Arctic issues (Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2006).

This large-scale installation adopts the outward structure of museum-style display, with multiple polar bear specimens placed in individual glass vitrines, accompanied by labels, archival images, and controlled lighting, creating a hybrid visual context of “white cube meets natural history” (Desmond, 2020). The uniform, austere lighting reinforces the objective tone of “scientific display”; as viewers move among the vitrines, their gaze is guided into a circular path, shifting from the preserved, motionless bodies to the narratives and archives behind them, which recount their hunting, transport, and collection. The cleanliness and transparency of the exhibition space contrast sharply with the traces of age on the specimens and the stories of habitat degradation, making the “form” of preservation and the “reality” of disappearance coexist in the same space (Wilson & Snæbjörnsdóttir, 2014).

In artistic terms, the duo deliberately borrows and appropriates the authoritative visual vocabulary of the natural history museum—glass cases, labeling systems, and archival corroboration—using its strengths to counter-question the very mechanisms of knowledge production it embodies. Relevant museological and contemporary art studies have long pointed out that taxidermied animals on display are easily shaped into “frozen nature,” becoming objectified stand-ins within the economy of the white cube, whose static nature conceals the dynamics of life and the logic of evolution; it is precisely this institutionalized representation that they seek to mobilize as a subject of inquiry. Through the layered juxtaposition of scale, material, and narrative, the work shifts the viewer’s engagement from “object” to “system,” moving from the act of looking at “things” to a critical reflection on the institutional frameworks behind them (Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2020).

Table 3

Social coding, Nanoq: flat out and bluesome

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Environment	Ecology	Global warming

The work directly aligns archival facts with environmental realities, explicitly pointing to social issues: the provenance of specimens, the ethics of cross-border transport and display, and the pressures exerted on Arctic ecosystems by human activity are all interconnected. In their subsequent writings, the artists explicitly note that the year-on-year rise in sea level and the retreat of sea ice in the Arctic have already posed risks to Arctic flora, fauna, and local cultures—a trend corroborated by observational data, constituting a shared concern of environment and ecology (Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2010). The 2008 cases of two polar bears that swam from Greenland to Skagafjörður, Iceland, illustrate this: satellite imagery and sea ice records showed that at the time of landing, the surrounding sea lacked supporting ice, with the nearest ice field roughly seventy nautical miles away; such “long-distance foraging”

is closely tied to sea ice loss. Autopsies of the individuals revealed low body weight, signs of prolonged starvation, and physical exhaustion, indicating that the ecological conditions of their hunting grounds and migration routes had been disrupted. Within the context of the work, the static specimens are juxtaposed with these physiological, geographical, and institutional materials, generating a tension between “preservation” and “extinction”: the museum’s “retention” and the species’ “disappearance” are viewed simultaneously, anchoring the discussion firmly in the sea ice loss and habitat fragmentation driven by global warming (Wilson & Snæbjörnsdóttir, 2014).

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson, using institutional vocabulary as a medium and empirical evidence as proof, transform the art space into a speculative apparatus for ecological and social issues. The still bodies in glass vitrines are re-inscribed into the timeline of evolution and change; the specimen is no longer an endpoint but the terminal link in an evidentiary chain connecting global warming to the politics of habitat. Precisely because of this method of juxtaposing research, display, and action, the work occupies a unique position at the intersection of contemporary art and the environmental humanities: it is not a rhetorical act of speaking on behalf of nature, but rather one that renders natural history display itself the subject of interrogation, thereby compelling us to redistribute our attention, responsibility, and hope between the museum and the world.

Kendra Haste



Finger 4. Antelope Jackrabbit (2023), Sculpture, 35×50×10 cm

Kendra Haste is a British contemporary sculptor, renowned for her animal-themed sculptures created primarily with galvanized wire mesh. She has long explored the expressive potential between industrial materials and the forms of natural life, shaping and layering wire mesh to achieve remarkable flexibility and the capacity for detailed depiction (Halchynska & Navolska, 2020). Through this technique, Haste can present precise anatomical structures, dynamic postures, and subtle emotional expressions in her sculptures—faithfully rendering everything

from the muscle lines of wild animals to the texture of their fur. This sculpting approach inherits the linear modeling quality of drawing while breaking away from the traditionally cold and rigid impression of metal, imbuing the works with visual vitality (Haste, n.d.). Her subjects cover a wide range of animals, emphasizing the individuality and dignity of each living being, combining both documentary and aesthetic qualities (Brito et al., 2018).

In this particular work, these qualities are especially pronounced. The piece depicts, at nearly life-size, a hare caught in mid-leap, with the tautness of its limb muscles, the upright position of its ears, and the slight ripple of its fur all rendered through the layered and interwoven strands of metal wire. The transparency of the mesh allows light to pass freely across the sculpture's surface and through its interior, casting mottled shadows that create the visual illusion of motion in an otherwise static form. As viewers walk around the piece, the changing angles of light continuously reveal different layers of form, enhancing the animal's agility and vitality (Halchynska & Navolska, 2020).

In terms of artistic language and technique, Kendra Haste skillfully exploits the plasticity of galvanized wire mesh, transforming an industrial material into a highly expressive sculptural medium. This dual process of weaving and shaping not only gives the work structural strength but also allows for extremely fine detail, making it visually close to a natural form. As Halchynska & Navolska (2020) note, wire-weaving, due to its malleability, durability, and capacity for interaction with light and shadow, is widely used in contemporary land art and sculpture. Haste's practice pushes this technique to its limits, achieving a full spectrum of expression—from structure to texture—using a single material.

Table 4

Social coding, Antelope Jackrabbit

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Environment	Ecology	Conservation

The choice of species in this work, along with its highly realistic rendering, implicitly reflects a concern for biodiversity and the ecological environment (Brito et al., 2018). Against the backdrop of increasingly urgent contemporary ecological discourse, works of this kind subtly cultivate an emotional foundation for environmental respect by awakening viewers' perception of the beauty of animals and the dignity of life. Rather than engaging in environmental politics through direct accusation, it allows the uniqueness and fragility of natural life to be remembered through the extreme fidelity of its representation (Halchynska & Navolska, 2020).

Using galvanized wire mesh as her medium, Kendra Haste integrates the physical structure of sculpture, visual dynamism, and lifelike realism into a unified whole, enabling viewers, in close observation, to sense both the strength and fragility of the animal. This creative approach links industry and nature, craftsmanship and sensibility, occupying a distinctive position between realist sculpture and environmental art. The work is both a frozen depiction of an animal's form and a tribute to the enduring vitality of the natural world—life revealed within steel, and motion implied within stillness.

Polly Morgan



Finger 5. A Nest of Vile Serpents (2020), Installation, 80×80×35 cm

Polly Morgan is one of the most recognizable taxidermy artists in British contemporary art. Through the reconstruction of animal remains, she explores death, transformation, and cultural attitudes toward the end of life. Morgan's practice not only continues the meticulous craftsmanship of traditional taxidermy but also removes it from the context of natural history display, repositioning it within the philosophically charged and sensorially impactful realm of contemporary art (Desmond, 2020). This work is one of her representative works, in which the artist coils a preserved venomous snake into an unnaturally contorted posture against an industrial backdrop, creating a defamiliarized visual effect.

In appearance, the snake's scales glisten under the light with a metallic coldness, sharply contrasting with the icy industrial surface behind it. Its coiled, serpentine form not only defies the natural logic of a snake's movement but also transforms it into a near-abstract sculptural figure. Morgan skillfully employs spatial composition to guide the viewer's gaze along the curves of the snake's body, evoking a moment where life is frozen between tension and contemplation (Desmond, 2020).

In artistic language, Morgan intentionally breaks from the convention of traditional taxidermy that pursues naturalistic representation, instead revealing the traces of death and the physicality of the body. The introduction of the industrial backdrop enables the work to transcend the boundary between biology and industrial civilization, intensifying the complex relationships between humans and non-human life forms under the intervention of technology and biotechnology (Desmond, 2020).

Table 5

Social coding, A Nest of Vile Serpents

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Biotechnology	Relationship	Value

This work, through the artificial shaping of the snake's posture and the use of preservation techniques, directly addresses the role of biotechnology in human–animal relationships and

the value judgments underlying it (Gregory & Purdy, 2015). The reuse of a living being after death—whether as commemoration, artistic transformation, or a renewed appropriation of life's autonomy—is here presented without romanticized purification. Instead, decay, deformation, and preservation are shown together as integral parts of the life cycle. This unvarnished directness provokes polarized reactions among viewers, yet it is precisely this tension that enables Morgan's art, while expanding the conceptual possibilities of taxidermy, to deepen public reflection on the relationship between life and death (Desmond, 2020).

Conclusion

In summary, this study confirms that animal imagery functions as a complex and critical medium for social commentary within contemporary British visual arts. The primary motivation for this research was to address a significant gap in existing scholarship: although animal symbolism has been extensively explored in historical art contexts, its role as an explicit vehicle for socio-political and ecological critique in contemporary British art has not yet received sufficient attention. By examining the works of five prominent artists, Damien Hirst, Tessa Farmer, Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson, Kendra Haste, and Polly Morgan, this study seeks to elucidate how animal representations are strategically employed to address pressing issues such as ecological vulnerability, bioethics, colonial legacy, and the commodification of life.

The main contributions of this research are threefold. First, it establishes a clear comparative framework that reveals two distinct yet interconnected critical trajectories: one centered on biotechnological intervention and ethical ambiguity, as exemplified in the works of Hirst and Morgan; and another focused on ecological interdependence and environmental urgency, represented by Farmer, Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson, as well as Haste. This divergence is not only thematic but also materially embodied through choices of medium, from taxidermy and formaldehyde to wire mesh and archival juxtaposition, each shaping the narrative and affective impact of the works.

Second, the methodological contribution of this study lies in its application of Feldman's model of art criticism to uncover how formal and material strategies, such as scale, transparency, lighting, and institutional mimicry, are deployed to generate critical tension and provoke viewer reflection. This approach moves beyond traditional iconographic interpretation to reveal the intrinsic connections between aesthetic choices and ethical or political statements.

Finally, this research underscores the unique position of British contemporary artists within global discourses on art and ecology. By mobilizing animal imagery as a lens through which to critique anthropocentrism, scientific authority, and environmental negligence, these artists not only expand the possibilities of visual art as a form of social engagement but also invite viewers to reconsider their relationship with the non-human world. Ultimately, this paper affirms that animal imagery is not a passive symbolic tradition, but an active, evolving, and highly articulate mode of commentary—one that both reflects and challenges the complexities of contemporary society while opening pathways for cultural and ethical transformation.

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