

## **Alan Belcher**

## JOSH BAER GALLERY

Alan Belcher's exhibition of photo-laminated animal pelts entitled "Schmozone," will probably go down as the most obscene show of the season. Like the sick jokes that circulated following the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster or the Wendy's commercial spoofing a Soviet fashion show that aired during the first U.S./USSR summit (the evening wear category featured a KGB matron in military garb, flashlight in hand, hitting the runway under the glare of searchlights), Belcher's black humor preys on our collective woes. The only difference is that Belcher cracks his demented jokes in galleries and then collects kudos for their supposedly edifying audacity.

Most of the skins Belcher uses are from animals that live(d) in the wild, many of which are endangered: ocelot, antelope, caribou, otter, adult and baby seals, bobcat, wolverine, zebra, arctic fox, honey-bear, cougar, and Kodiak bear. The effect of well over 60 animal

skins hung throughout the gallery was staggering; more than that, it seemed senseless and criminal if not plainly insane. (The use of the polar-bear skin *is* illegal, and a pelt laminated with an image of the inside of a refrigerator splattered with freon was kept in the back and omitted from the checklist because it had been smuggled into the country.) A great white hunter's trophy room stuffed to the rafters, this hall of horrors seems guaranteed to stop viewers dead in their tracks.

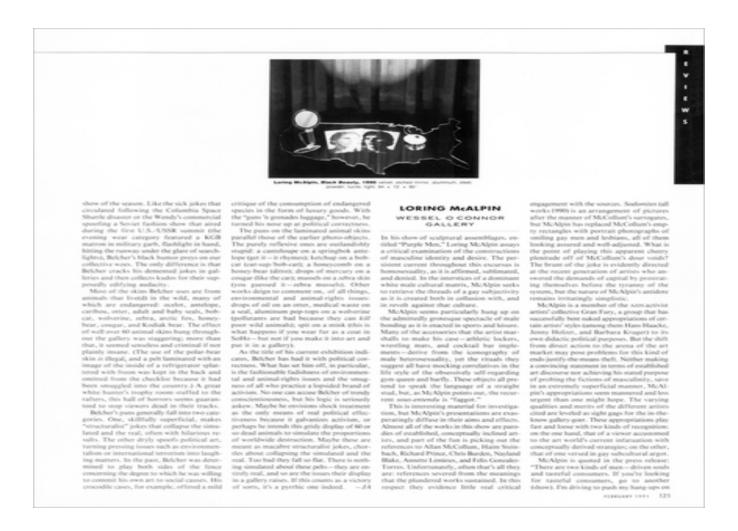
Belcher's puns generally fall into two categories. One, skillfully superficial, makes "structuralist" jokes that collapse the simulated and the real, often with hilarious results. The other dryly spoofs political art, turning pressing issues such as environmentalism or international terrorism into laughing matters. In the past, Belcher was determined to play both sides of the fence concerning the degree to which he was willing to commit his own art to social causes. His crocodile cases, for example, offered a mildcritique of the consumption of endangered species in the form of luxury goods. With the "guns'n grenades luggage," however, he turned his nose up at political correctness.

The puns on the laminated animal skins parallel those of the earlier photo-objects. The purely reflexive ones are outlandishly stupid: a canteloupe on a springbok antelope (get it —it rhymes); ketchup on a bobcat (*cat*-sup/bob-*cat*); a honeycomb on a honey-bear (ditto); drops of mercury on a cougar (like the car); mussels on a zebra skin (you guessed it—zebra mussels). Other works deign to comment on, of all things, environmental and animal-rights issues: drops of oil on an otter, medical waste on a seal, aluminum pop-tops on a wolverine (pollutants are bad because they can *kill* poor wild animals); spit on a mink (this is what happens if you wear fur as a coat in SoHo—but not if you make it into art and put it in a gallery).

As the title of his current exhibition indicates, Belcher has had it with political correctness. What has set him off, in particular, is the fashionable fadishness of environmental and animal-rights issues and the smugness of all who practice a lopsided brand of activism. No one can accuse Belcher of trendy conscientiousness, but his logic is seriously askew. Maybe he envisions shock treatment as the only means of real political effectiveness because it galvanizes activism, or perhaps he intends this grisly display of N or so dead animals to simulate the proportions of worldwide destruction. Maybe these are meant as macabre

structuralist jokes, chortles about collapsing the simulated and the real. Too bad they fall so flat. There is nothing simulated about these pelts—they are entirely real, and so are the issues their display in a gallery raises. If this counts as a victory of sorts, it's a pyrrhic one indeed.

## —Jan Avgikos



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