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ART IN REVIEW

Kathy Ruttenberg: 'Nature of the Beast'

By Roberta Smith

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Stux Gallery 530 West 25th Street Chelsea Through May 18

Kathy Ruttenberg's themes started taking shape in the early 1980s; her concern with the figure, the natural world and human relationships is evident in efforts that included painted papier-mâché sculpture, painting and jewelry. But she didn't come into her own until about 15 years ago, when she turned to glazed clay after enduring a painful divorce and moving to the country, where she lived full time with a retinue of rabbits, pigs, cats, dogs and goats. Inspired by them, the woods and their inhabitants, she began constructing a wonder world in which species merge and figures serve as landscapes. Trees grow out of heads and hips; they colonize the skirts and bodices of a spiky-haired woman (Ms. Ruttenberg's chief protagonist) and the pant legs of her occasional male figures, like the immense one titled "Manscape." Insects and animals abound, including owls peeking out of holes in tree trunks.



Kathy Ruttenberg's ceramic "Special Species" (2011), at Stux Gallery in Chelsea. Stux Gallery, New York

Ms. Ruttenberg's latest efforts make her a force to contend with as a narrator and symbolist, a form maker and colorist. Coating sexual tensions with a storybook innocence, she works in a triangle bordered by Louise Bourgeois, Viola Frey and Beatrix Potter. Her blunt figurative style relates to those of Stephan Balkenhol, Claudette Schreuders, Alison Saar, Kiki Smith and, in a way, David Altmejd. She also draws on the centuries-old tradition of porcelain figurines while studiously ignoring all boundaries, especially those dividing insider and outsider; art and craft; and high, low and kitsch.

The elusiveness of love may be Ms. Ruttenberg's über-theme. Her often large figures remind us that the animal kingdom has an order in its relationships — thanks partly to the food chain — while humans can suffer a chaos of ambiguity and ambivalence. In "Special Species" a tiger prowls over the shoulder of a woman with a third eye, while an alert deer dominates the front of her skirt; on the skirt's back the reality of the tiger killing the deer almost shocks. In another piece an anxious, seemingly female figure wearing a pink dress and holding a flower turns out to have stubble; the title — "He Likes Plants" — doesn't mention an attraction to female clothing. Again and again, Ms. Ruttenberg's environmentally astute fantasies assert that human companionship may be hard to sustain, but, like it or not, we are one with nature.