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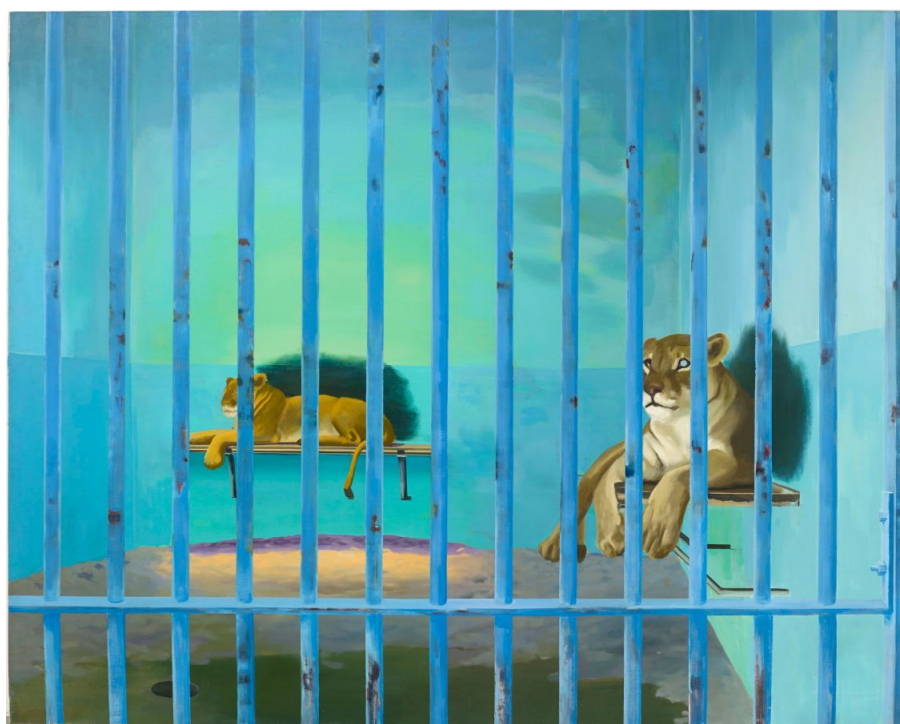
Gilles Aillaud

Centre Pompidou

Place Georges-Pompidou

October 4, 2023 - February 26, 2024

By Mara Hoberman



Gilles Aillaud, *Cage aux lions (The Lions' Cage)*, 1967, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 98 3/8". Photo: Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris/ Fabrice Gousset.

Gilles Aillaud's grandiose oil paintings of zoos offer masterful renderings of feathers, hide, fur, talons, and scales amid metal bars, wire fences, ceramic tiles, and glass walls. Dazzlingly realistic and heart-wrenchingly empathic, Aillaud's depictions of animals—particularly those in captivity—are pointedly ecocentric. Made between the mid-1960s and 2000, the works in this exhibition (which also include lithographs) resonate with today's increasingly urgent discussions of humanity's impact on the environment.

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“Gilles Aillaud: Political Animal” highlights the disgraceful conceit and the consequences of placing living creatures in cages for our entertainment. In *La cage aux lions* (The Lions’ Cage, 1967), a pair of powerful, vacant-eyed felines look like prisoners on thin wooden benches behind thick metal bars. In *Perroquets* (Parrots, 1974), one of two cobalt-blue birds hangs upside down in its cage, facing a tropical tree that is unconscionably just out of reach. Using the opposite perspective to strengthen his case, Aillaud also painted animals in their natural habitats. In terms of style as well as subject matter, these images are far less tame. In *Giraffes*, 1986, Aillaud applied sketchy brushwork to capture movement and camouflage. Literally blended with the sky beyond and the surrounding acacia trees, the long-necked beauties appear in total harmony with their environment.

Taking full advantage of the Pompidou’s glass-walled street-level Galerie 3, this exhibition cleverly heightens the artist’s critique of anthropocentrism by putting museum visitors on display. While moving through the show, one has the distinct sensation of being observed from the outside. This evocation of spectacle and surveillance is likely something Aillaud—not to mention his contemporaries Guy Debord and Michel Foucault—would have appreciated.

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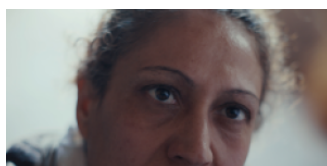
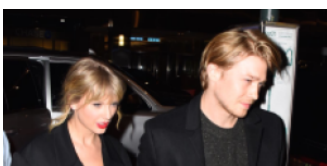
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