

## Wild behaviour

Ruben Bellinkx explores the absurdity of bringing animals into the home, reports **Zeenat Nagree**.

Ruben Bellinkx has spent most of the last two years looking for the perfect reindeer. The Belgian artist's hunt for a docile animal – one that would follow instructions and stand still when placed in front of a camera – ended in Hengelo, a small village in the Netherlands. However, the footage Bellinkx shot is anything but calm – the reindeer's head sticks out of one side of a wall while its body unnervingly remains on the other side, an effect the artist achieved by constructing a sliding wall to hold the reindeer in place. This fortnight, gallery-goers will get a chance to see Bellinkx's disconcerting use of animals in his films – including the Dutch reindeer in the 2010 work titled *The Trophy* – as part of the artist's first Mumbai solo show.

Over the last five years, Bellinkx has made three films that utilise animals as the central subjects. By introducing the beasts into domestic settings, the 35-year-old artist aims to evoke "the conflict" between nature and culture. "It's a tension we deal with every day," Bellinkx said. "I find it interesting to play with this condition by disrupting a familiar situation." One such situation plays out in the bare surroundings captured in *The Trophy*. The two-screen projection, which will be displayed to ensure that viewers won't be able to see the two parts

together, focuses on the body of the reindeer. On the first screen, the still head of the reindeer that hangs on a wall evokes the animal trophies that are preserved as souvenirs of hunting trips. What makes the film playing on the first screen seem bizarre is the projection on the second screen, which features the body of a reindeer whose head is stuck inside a wall. When looking at the fragmented images of the reindeer, the animal's slight movements get enhanced and evoke unease as it becomes apparent that the animal is not stuffed but is actually alive. The viewer's relationship with the

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creature has to be reevaluated as the reindeer head isn't an object mounted on a wall but an animal held prisoner by one.

Ordinary situations unfold into bizarre events in Bellinkx's films, making viewers question their

perception of reality. In his 2007 three-screen film, *The Musical Chair*, three dogs fiercely attack a chair while in the 2006 one-screen film, *Table Turning*, four turtles are strapped to the legs of a table as they struggle to pull it in different directions. The pieces of furniture, according to Bellinkx, are symbols of our civilisation and by destroying their functionality Bellinkx hopes to turn "the familiar into the unfamiliar". "The table is important to our society," he said. "It is where we eat, talk and hold discussions. The chair is like a throne. It represents the achievements of our civilisation. But in my work you can't rely on them anymore. The table is drifting away and the chair has is being torn to pieces."

Bellinkx conceives of these absurd situations while drawing in his Brussels studio. (The artist teaches drawing at the University College Ghent, Belgium). "Five years ago, I began using animals in my films because they say a lot about our society and human behaviour," he said. Yet the films don't capture the behaviour of the animals without intervention. Elaborate preparation is needed to get the creatures to in accordance with the narrative that Bellinkx

has in mind. So the tough part is finding the ideal animals to cast in his films. For instance, Bellinkx's search for three dogs, that would attack a chair led him to a man in Belgium who trains security dogs for the military, then looks after them when they have been abandoned by the government.

Bellinkx has faced heat from animal rights activists in his home country but has managed to continue working because he ensures that experts are present on the set of the film and the animals are treated respectfully. However, the disturbing situations that the animals are placed in heighten the unease of the viewers. The films are likely to make you uncomfortable, though that wasn't Bellinkx's intention. "I wanted to create metaphors for the impotence of man who wants to keep everything under control."

Animals haven't always been the focus of the Bellinkx's practice. His 1999 film *The Stream*, which will be displayed at the show, takes place in a bare room in which a lamp hangs over a table. Instead of light, water gushes out of the lamp. The hypnotic movement of the water isn't disconcerting like the films featuring the animals but attempts to draw attention to the central theme of the show – the tension between nature and culture. The dream-like work is likely to stand out among the darkened interiors of the gallery, which will be dominated by free-standing screens that feature violent, trapped and struggling animals. See *Gallery Maskara in Exhibitions*.



**Animal instinct** (clockwise) *Table Turning*, *The Trophy* and *The Musical Chair* are Ruben Bellinkx's attempts to understand society through the behaviour of animals