

Szabolcs Bozó

Soulmate (Lelki Társ)

May 30 — Sep 7, 2025 | NEO Contemporary Art Space, Budapest, Hungary

The way Szabolcs Bozó's painting has been appreciated, ever since the start of his career, has been determined by the attractive quality of his representations of animals. He is commonly cast among artists who cite the characters of animated films and the illustrations of children's books in a similar manner, and who are labelled as practitioners of "cute-ism" – partly in reference to the different trends of avant-garde art. However, this classification limits the possibilities of interpreting the works of Bozó and painters like him. The question is whether there is such a category in art as "cute"; what its origins are; and whether it can change the meaning of a work of art.

Animal caricatures go back a long way in the history of art, with literary and artistic examples abounding in both the Eastern and the Western tradition. With countless similarities between the behaviours of animals and humans, the animal kingdom has long been observed and anthropomorphized, providing metaphors for tales and representations.¹

Having said that, an aesthetic category – that of the grotesque – must also be introduced when discussing representations, and it expands references in a different direction. Exaggerated, ironic figures and faces have served to caricature behaviour and character, providing entertainment and opportunities to laugh at ourselves by holding up a distorting mirror in the manner of animal representations. It is thus misleading to describe Szabolcs Bozó's works as "cute" because their references go much further than that.

Before we take a closer look at Bozó's works, it may be worth establishing a broader context for our examination through citing a few historical examples of animal representations and grotesque art. The history of this genre can be traced back to cave paintings, or – if we want to concentrate on realistic representations – to at least the Roman period, but we must distinguish between encyclopaedic cataloguing of living creatures in nature and works that modelled human behaviour. One of the first such works is the Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga, picture scrolls from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that belong to the Kōzan-ji temple in Kyoto, showing animals playing and fighting, and considered the first manga because of its narrative mode, with the story unfolding from right to left.² Hieronymus Bosch's paintings belong in this tradition of ironic, grotesque representations of animals, as do the works of a lesser-known seventeenth-century artist referred to as the Master of the Fertility of the Egg.³ The fantastic beings or animals of the latter two served to caricature human weaknesses, sins and questionable behaviours, and to present the horrors of hell in vivid, discouraging ways. Personification, humanization and the grotesque interweave in these ironic works, and continue to inform this type of work throughout the history of art.

Animals and fantastic creatures play an important role in Francisco de Goya's art, usually functioning as expressions of anxiety. Yet the most compellingly critical, grotesque or surrealistic representations of man and society in the nineteenth century can be seen in the works of James Ensor, whose distorted figures offer a horrifying image of a demented humanity. Anthropomorphized animals seem to have fallen out of favour in high art by the beginning of the twentieth century, appearing instead in fairy-tale illustrations as colour picture books became widespread. The symbolic use in painting of various species endowed with human qualities appears to have become a marginal practice by the beginning of the twentieth century. The period saw the Hungarian Dezső Mokry-Mészáros remove his anthropomorphized beings from human society, and make them appear in happy symbioses in prehistoric times or on other planets. In the second half of the century, the work of Menyhért Tóth, who created a unique visual world with delicately drawn figures, included grotesque scenes in the vein of Ensor and humanized animals. For him, humans and animals were expressive of demonstrative emotions and states, with the representation straddling the worlds of reality and dreams. His paintings reinterpret the genre of the portrait; whether depicting country folk in his surroundings or animals, his brush always transformed them into complex characters.

The above, random historical examples were meant to illustrate the similarities between the human characteristics of grotesque portraits and animal representations. This also sheds a different light on the context of the animal characters in the animated children's film that became increasingly popular in the first half of the twentieth century: they followed patterns of literature and art that were thousands of years old. Whether cute or not, personified pigs, dogs, foxes or rabbits are the vehicles of meanings that point beyond the animals, especially when they are fantastic.

When a painting is devoted to a single figure in the manner of children's drawings, Bozó Szabolcs belongs to a "trend" with André Butzer, Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami; they all refer to the same complex visual tradition, whose manifestations include animated films and comic strips, and have references that lead, as we have seen, to a far broader cultural background. Although we tend to trace the characteristics of a particular artistic movement or group of works back to the Zeitgeist, in these cases we get closer to understanding the works by calling on classical categories and genres of art and aesthetics.

In his interviews, Szabolcs Bozó often mentions the popular characters of classic Hungarian animation or similar drawings by his grandmother – figures he saw in his childhood – but his painting is more than an evocation of these. Some of them may be recognizable in his works, but most are products of his imagination, which owe their visual effect to their uniqueness. Nor did his career start with the small drawings he made while being employed in catering; they became art when he enlarged them – when the figures he had drawn to entertain himself were magnified and subjected to unusual framing; when they became "pictures."⁴

In his case, the size of the "picture" that imitates reality became a significant component of its effect because the enlargement led to emphasis, spotlighting, an unusual focus. The effect was enhanced by the mode of composition, the fact that the figures, faces and body parts completely filled – sometimes almost burst out of – the frame.

The cheerful facial expressions of the imaginary creatures thus became dramatically accentuated, as if it were some narrow window that allowed a view into the world where these figures – which resemble dogs, birds or some mixed creatures – live happily side by side. Their faces could be taken for quotes of imaginary animated films for children, but their size, composition and framing make them portraits that seem to provoke our world with their own; they seem to long to come over to our side, while their naive carefreeness entices us to join them in their realm.

In recent years, Bozó has moved beyond the basic concept of one painting, one character, and has started to create both multi-figure compositions and black-and-white drawings.

This change has made his visual world more complex, more layered, with his figures appearing in life situations together; their relationship to each other, the overlaps and overpainting have led to compositions that are more and more painterly. Instead of creatures painted with vivid colours against a simple, white background, the works of recent years feature complex compositions and solutions that relate differently to the historical precedents of the genre. His most recent paintings testify to this new interest, which opens the closed world of his figures towards a painterly universe replete with possibilities.

Bozó sometimes finds inspiration in life situations he has experienced or imagined. The titles often refer to these situations, as in *Breakfast after School*, *Bad Driver*, *Trabant Copter* or *The Autumn Dream*. The multi-figure compositions are busy crowd scenes, situations dominated by the juxtaposition and mutual dependence of the figures, which look as if they were forced to handle some seemingly joyous situation together, with the different characters dissolved in the possibility of a solution. It is like when strangers find themselves in an unexpected situation, the resolution of which becomes a shared experience that unites them.

The exhibition borrows its title from one of the works, 'Soulmate', which shows a black-and-white figure on which a fellow painter sprayed the two words. The idea of the soulmate offers a reading of Bozó's works that centres on the viewer's attitude towards the figures; there is an important psychological component to the choice of motifs, which bring to mind childhood, the experience of which differs from one person to the next. What is common in children, despite the differences in family backgrounds and living conditions, is their turning stuffed animals into "soulmates," with whom they play, share experiences, emotions and ideas, engage in imaginary dialogues about family members, friends and foes, the things that surround them and the goings on of the world. Bozó's art is evocative of this situation. The key to its success is that animated films and stuffed animals are a mere starting point for the expression of complex emotional memories, which turns the figures into portraits, characters, whose presence and interactions are reminiscent of the patterns of human behaviour.

— Zsolt Petrányi, curator

1 Aesop (sixth century BC) is credited with the first collection of animal fables, but parables that feature animals are present in all tribal lores and date back to earlier times.

2 Grotesque animals and monsters continued to be common in Japanese art, including in woodcuts.

3 Maestro della Fertilità dell'Uovo (Master of the Fertility of the Egg) is the name given to an as-yet-unidentified artist active in Brescia, Italy, in the second half of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

4 Talking with David Hockney, Martin Gayford says non-abstract art is understood to be "devoted to the depiction of the world." Szabolcs Bozó himself devotes his works to the "depiction of the world," if the direct relationship is not always self-evident. See David Hockney and Martin Gayford, *A History of Pictures – From the Cave to the Computer Screen* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), 161.