

Higher Animals

Jun 1 — Sep 29, 2024 | Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, PA, US

Marcus Jahmal is best known for his large-format paintings of evocative scenes populated by figures seemingly pulled from his subconscious and set within cryptic, dreamlike narratives. Employing bold colors and incorporating a loose patchwork of art-historical references, Jahmal's paintings have a sumptuousness and visual rhythm to them that is less to be decoded than experienced and felt.

In this most recent body of work, Jahmal draws inspiration from the traditions of taxidermy, natural history museums, and hunting-trophy displays. In this new suite of paintings and drawings, many of which are presented publicly here for the first time, the artist distills these cultural traditions of animal representation and display to interrogate something more fundamental about the human condition.

The exhibition's title, *Higher Animals*, comes from Charles Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, a revolutionary text whose conclusions—that all animals stemmed from a shared lineage, with a common origin and destiny—radically undermined the anthropocentric viewpoint that nature was structured hierarchically, with humans occupying the highest position and considered distinct from all other organisms.

For Jahmal, the cultural practices of taxidermy, hunting trophies, and natural history museums reflect just such an imagined hierarchy. And in the artist's metaphorical menagerie that we might glimpse some essential, uneasy truths about ourselves, namely that the clearly delineated differences that separate us "higher animals" from all other nonhuman animals, may not be as clear or as delineated as we might like them to be.

Higher Animals marks the first solo museum exhibition of Jahmal's work in the United States.