



ACROSS TIME: Daniel Naudé's *Ralles with his Pack of Hunting Dogs* and John Ferneley's *Thomas Ashton Smith and the Tedsworth Hounds* are part of the *Neither Man nor Stone* exhibition.

FROM PERSONAL TO POLITICAL

Getting animals down to a fine art

NEITHER MAN NOR STONE. An exhibition of works from the Iziko SA National Gallery's Permanent Collection. Curated by Anthea Buys. Until February 29. **LUCINDA JOLLY** reviews.

NEITHER Man Nor Stone explores the relationship between, and roles of, humans and animals in SA art. It focuses mainly on the way in which this relationship has been represented by artists since the 1980s.

This title may have been taken from a chapter, *Neither Man Nor Stone: The Enigmatic Being* from Luc Ferry's prize-winning book *The New Ecological Order*.

In the book, neo-humanist philosopher Ferry warns that radical environmentalism has become fascist. He goes so far as to suggest it is as dangerous as Stalinism or Maoism. He suggests that we "acknowledge animals' sentience and avoid reducing them to mere things".

Ferry writes that animals arouse both sadism and compassion in human

beings. There is a hauntingly poignant scene in Cormac McCarthy's book *The Crossing* which expresses the same sentiments.

Billy Parham, a cowboy who is at the end of his tether, comes across a dog in a barn where he intends to sleep. Like Parham, the barn for the dog is a safe haven, a last stop.

Previously Parham had bonded with a wolf and risked his life to save it more than once. However, this time the tables are turned and he wants the dog gone.

McCarthy's ability to evoke the penetrating howl uttered by the dog on leaving is a most powerful piece of writing. It lodges tenaciously like a deep chill in the bones and psyche of the reader.

Parham's chance to connect with another damaged sentient being is lost forever and his recognition of the cost of that loss is devastating.

In photographer Jo Ractliffe's photographic installation *Love's Body*, which commemorates the death of her beloved dog, the howl is not that of a dog but that

of a human. In *Love's Body*, the viewer looks down at a photograph, which is installed in a white structure suggestive of tombstone.

At first, because the tones are those of freshly turned earth, it is not clear what the image is. Then comes the shock of what we are looking at – a dead dog wrapped in a blanket with just its head exposed.

But what is most striking in this image is not so much that we are looking at death, but the way the rim of the blanket in which the animal lies has caught the light so that it appears to transcend the ordinary, becoming a ring of ethereal light.

From the charge of the highly personal we move to the personal political. As curator Anthea Buys writes on the wall plaque: "Animals hold a confused and confusing place in South Africa's political and home life."

Photographer Alf Kumalo's grainy photograph *Women and Police Dogs*, from the 1980s, shows two black women

bravely confronting police-dog handlers and their dogs. The role of dogs in the hands of the oppressors and that of the oppressed is always revealing.

In their piece on artist Willie Bester, authors Michael Godby and Sandra Kloppers write about Bester's shock as a young boy at seeing "labourers food presented on the ground next to the dishes of farmers' dogs".

Then there is David Kobane's *Street Dogs*. A hell-hued painting, it shows a pack of confrontational pit bull-type dogs. They are as threatening as the 26 vicious dogs in the recurring nightmare of Bashir's friend in the Israeli animation *Waltz with Bashir*, about the horrors of the Lebanon War in the 1980s.

From our colonial past is the work by Alexandre-François Desportes titled *Fox with a Partridge*, the animal with its eyes aglow, as well as one from John E Ferneley, the English painter who specialised in sporting horses and hunting scenes in a more stylised way and was considered second to George Stubbs.

Ferneley's *Thomas Ashton Smith and the Tedsworth Hounds*, in all its colonial splendour, is placed next to Daniel Naudé's photograph *Ralles with his Pack of Hunting Dogs, Waterkrans Farm, Richmond, Northern Cape*. It shows a contemporary traditional Xhosa man on a horse with a homemade saddle surrounded by his hunting dogs.

The exotic is provided by Steven Cohen's *Golgotha Portrait* photographs.

Finally, as an antidote to all this intensity, is a darkly amusing ceramic piece titled *Zebra* by the late Bonnie Ntshalintshali. It's of an upside down zebra caught in ceramic eternity between the threatening wriggings of a serpent and keeping the jaws of a toothy croc up and away from its tender belly.

Look out too for the beautifully carved wooden staffs by unknown artists.

● *The Iziko National Gallery in Government Avenue is open from 10am to 5pm from Tuesdays to Sundays. For information, call 021 467 4660.*