

House of Beasts at Attingham Park

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Kids in Museums volunteer, Mar Dixon visited Attingham Park in Shropshire and discovered that contemporary art can attract all ages...

House of Beasts is a fun, playful, quirky and very well-thought out family-friendly contemporary art exhibition, funded by Meadow Arts and set in the gorgeous Attingham Park National Trust site in Shropshire.

I've been to see the exhibition once before. On that occasion I was armed with my very informative House of Beasts booklet, but this time we had Meadow Arts curator Mandy Fowler to guide us. Our private tour allowed us to get behind the thought process that went behind this unique exhibition.

First thing you notice is the obvious animal theme going on, with almost all objects somehow connected to animals. (While the exhibition uses taxidermy and feathers, no animals were harmed.) Mandy explained how Meadow Arts looked at the surroundings and let the house determine where the exhibition should go. Looking around the estate and its history, with the deer park, cattle and the Earl of Attingham's passion for dogs, animals seemed an obvious place to start. With this in mind, the team went about collecting the pieces. Interestingly, some pieces were commissioned while others already existed, but they just knew they would be perfect.

As soon as you walk in, you're greeted with Katie MccGwire's 'Vex', which at first glance looks like a piece of sculpture you'd see in a huge estate house. However, upon closer inspection you see how playful this exhibition is, as the sculpture is actually made, not of marble, but of pigeon feathers! To add to the playfulness some of the feathers still have the 'I'm lost' stamp on them, indicative of racing pigeons.

Throughout the exhibition, both inside and in the grounds of the estate, there is an obvious agenda – contemporary art can be fun for all ages. Another point of this exhibition is that you don't have to like everything; it's ok to have opinions. Those who like Polly Morgan's *One for Sorrow* or Kate MccGwire *Evacuate* might not appreciate Kathleen Herbert's *Stable* (16mm film).

While most of the art is not touchable (understandably), they have ensured this collection is fun for kids by putting touchable objects near the art, and making the trail part of the exhibition (following the booklet through each room and trying to find the objects is fun on its own). They've also coordinated several events that are very kid/family friendly, such as Pigeon Talk, Create a Temporary Artwork, Spawn and Owl Pellet dissection.

The non-traditional setting, added with the quirky and playfulness of the whole exhibition is a formula that shouldn't necessarily work, but it definitely does at Attingham Park.

House of Beasts is on at Attingham Park until 15th July 2012. Tickets: Adults £9, Children £5.25, Family ticket £20.



Kate MccGwire 'Evacuate'



Polly Morgan 'One for Sorrow'