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Upgrading lowly pig mission of N.Y. artist

■ *Porkers strutting about in masks? To art devotees, it's a clear philosophical statement.* BOBUC

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Americans see pigs as dirty, greedy slobs, but in China, the pig is regarded as a superior animal.

To installation artist Xu Bing, the American disdain for pigs is a metaphor for the all-too-human failing to recognize the value in certain other people.

He expresses that idea through his exhibit, "Xu Bing — Cultural Animal," at the Wood Street Galleries in downtown Pittsburgh, in which he displays three black-and-white Hampshire piglets wearing panda masks.

Pigs, he said, have many good qualities.

"Actually, they are really smart, they are really cute and they are really sensitive. Each pig has a different personality," Xu said.

The artist lives in New York and has lectured at Carnegie Mellon University. The pigs come from a farm in Avondale, Westmoreland County.

Murray Horne, the museum's curator, explained that Xu chose the panda disguise because Westerners esteem the panda, which seems cuddly to them.

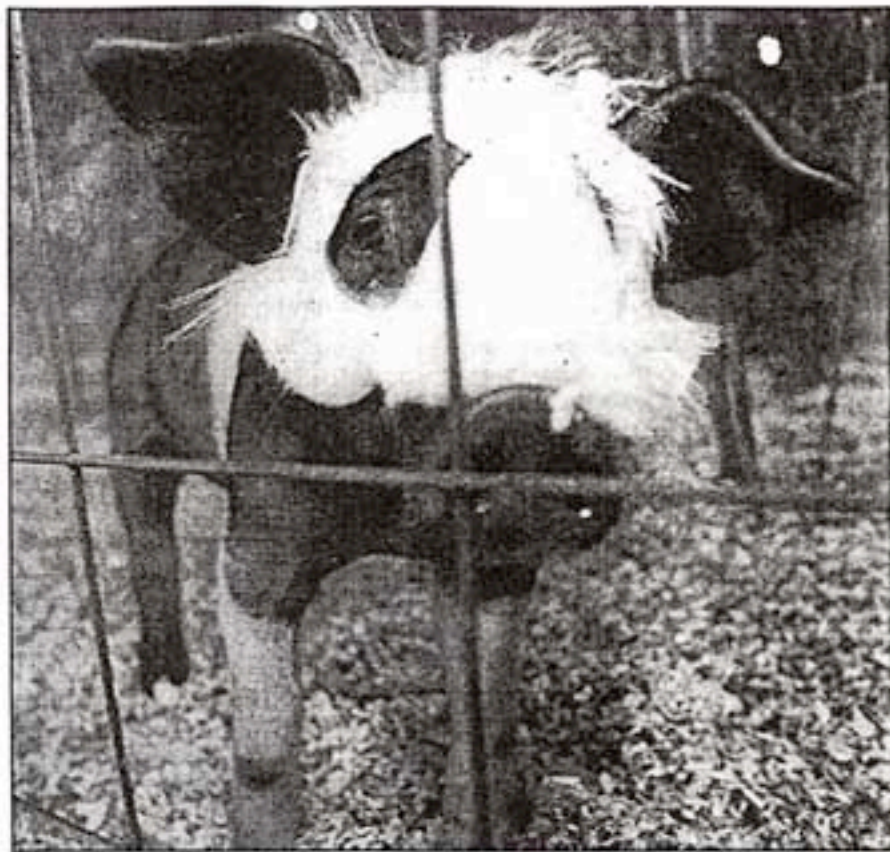
The fake-fur masks leave eyes and snouts free, and the pigs were able to eat, investigate a worker cleaning their cage and walk over to the edge of the cage to be patted. Their floor was covered with pine shavings and topsoil, and rocks and bamboo were placed in their cage.

Bernie Wilke, a member of Animal Advocates, said he hadn't seen the exhibit and couldn't say whether the "Panda Zoo" portion of Xu's show used animals ethically. However, confining any animal runs counter to its interests, he said.

"It would seem that animals would like to be free and forage for their own food," Wilke said.

Spectators' reactions varied.

"It doesn't seem to be anything very specific. Everyone here is just talking it out," said Richard Pell, 22, a CMU art student. "He's not preaching, he's just stirring the pot."



AP PHOTO

Pigs masquerading as pandas are featured in 'Panda Zoo,' an installation by artist Xu Bing. These pigs wearing furry white masks are part of the world premiere of Bing's works, featured Friday at the Wood Street Galleries in Pittsburgh.

"I'm not sure what's going on," said Julie McAfee, 37, an artist from Wilkinsburg, a suburb of Pittsburgh. "I'm looking forward to understanding more of what is being said."

"The environment creates a situation of interaction but separation," said art student Thad Kellstadt, 21. "It also poses a question and possibly makes a joke or social commentary."