A swine time at Wood Street Galleries

‘Panda Zoo,’ an exhibit featuring masked pigs, made its debut Friday

By Pete Bishop

“Artist Xu Bing calls it ‘Panda Zoo.’ Given that it features pigs wearing panda masks, it could be subtitled ‘The Days of Swine and Bows.’”

‘Panda Zoo’ is one of three components of “Xu Bing — Cultural Animal,” an exhibit that opened Friday and runs through Oct. 31 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. Admission is free.

Within a 20-by-30-foot cage, three frisky Hampshire pigs run, romp and nose through bamboo, around rocks and in a mixture of pine shavings and liquid while wearing white fake fur masks.

Replecating a zoo panda exhibit and partially disguising the pigs as pandas yields “a metaphor for the way we think about pigs in our society,” said Murray Horne, curator at Wood Street Galleries.

The pandas is at the top of the animal totem pole in the U.S. because it seems cuddly and the pig at the bottom because we deem it dirty,” Horne said.

Chinese culture, conversely, considers the pig is of superior status.

“The pig has a far greater social value than a panda,” Horne said.

“Horse is domestic use, and it has a great deal of intelligence. And they’re so pretty.”

He said Xu Bing, who lives in New York City and has lectured at Carnegie Mellon University, is “questioning our social values” and by extension the way we sometimes view other people.

“It looks at it the way we treat intelligent and artful as well.

Chinese artist Xu Bing places furry Western Pennsylvania pigs as part of his installation, ‘Panda Zoo,’ at the exhibit of pigs masquerading as pandas at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

Xu Bing, 55, who was born in China, said he doesn’t know why Western culture designates pigs.

“Actually, they are really cute and they are really sensitive. Each pig has a different personality.”

He agrees with Horne that Oriental artists also think that being an artist is not as worthy as, say, being a broker or merchant.

“I feel artists are very valuable in society,” Xu Bing said. “Artists can do anything! They can conceive of things.”

The pigs, one male and two females, are from a farm in Averdun, Westmoreland County, and weigh 35 to 39 pounds.

Horne said the farmer told him they’re very curious animals and will investigate everything and that they get bored very quickly, so they’re always trying to figure out what’s going on.

As for the masks, the pigs didn’t seem to know they were wearing them. They didn’t stop the animals from eating, breathing, eating, snoozing at a worker cleaning a portion of the cage or scurrying over to the wire mesh walls for a

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Staff Writer David Brown contributed to this story.

District.

Bornie Wilde, a member of Animal Advocates, said he hadn’t seen the exhibit and would reserve judgment on whether “Panda Zoo” is an ethical use of animals.

Wilde, of Polish Hill, said animals have been used in art before but “generally, to keep animals within a confined area is not what they would want. It would seem

Art historian Ann Harris Sutherland of Squirrel Hill agreed the scene had a degree of humor.

“He seems to be a very direct, unpretentious artist,” she said. “It’s sort of humorous to get us engaged … but there are serious themes underneath it all.”

“If nothing else, it is different,” said Leslie Johnson, 54, of the Hill

Art student Thad Kollstadt, 21, of Oakland, said the work conjured its own interesting environment.

“The environment creates a situation of interaction but separation,” he said. “It also poses a question and possibly makes a joke or social commentary.”

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