Study turns pigeons into "art critics"

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You can have an eye for art. Or, you can have a bird's eye view of something.

But both at the same time?

A Japanese researcher is reporting that he has trained pigeons to tell apart "good" and "bad" children's paintings, making distinctions that largely agree with ordinary people's judgments.

Whether the birds are judging the works based on artistic quality, or on some other characteristic or cue, may not be fully ascertainable. But somehow, the birds can distinguish between pictures previously rated as good or bad by adults, according to psychologist Shigeru Watanabe of Keio University in Tokyo.

Perhaps, indeed, pigeons can "have the ability to learn the concept of 'beauty' as defined by humans," wrote Watanabe in the study, published in the June 16 issue of the research journal Animal Cognition.

Watanabe first asked a group of adults to judge several children's paintings. Sophisticated judgments weren't requested: the adults were simply asked to rate the products as "good" or "bad"—beautiful or ugly.

Later, pigeons were trained, through dispensation of treats, to peck at "good" paintings. Pecking at "bad" ones would net them no reward.

After some training, pigeons were shown new pictures "of both 'good' and 'bad' children's paintings to test whether they had successfully learned to discriminate," between the two, Watanabe wrote. They had, he found.

Pigeons continued to perform relatively well at the task when presented with reduced-size reproductions, he added. They got worse at it when the pictures were converted into black-and-white reproductions or reproduced with a mosaic effect applied.

"The results suggest that the pigeons used both color and pattern cues for the discrimination and show that non-human animals, such as pigeons, can be trained to discriminate abstract visual stimuli," he wrote.

Image: Can animals make artistic judgments? A researcher claims to have trained pigeons to tell apart "good" and "bad" children's paintings