

SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN

by

LINDSAY PICHASKE

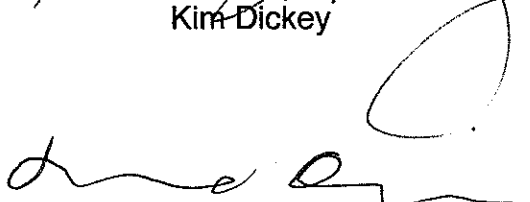
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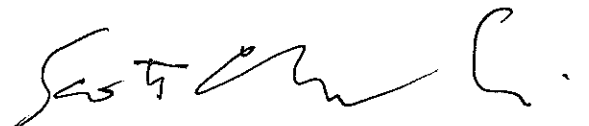
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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### **Abstract: A Short Statement**

What separates human from animal? What borders exist between the real and the imagined, the beautiful and the repugnant, the living and dying, the creator and the made? These questions have driven my recent work.

Through the act of making, I swim in and around these margins, revealing how slippery the answers to these questions are. I create animals that blur species boundaries. They challenge the perceived order and comfortable classifications of life. These animals are tricksters; familiar but also alien, seductive but also scary, animal but also human, alive but also dead. In a world where petals mimic fur and hair impersonates bone, even materials upset their expected roles. These creatures are not to be trusted, for as soon as we identify with them, we admit that perhaps the definitions they upturn are not so clearly defined as we would like to think.

Material and process are the tangible means through which I contemplate the lines separating these opposing worlds. I use inanimate materials that rely on touch to take shape. I sculpt and articulate animal forms to generate a semblance of life. The fleshy coverings are meticulously and lovingly applied, allowing me to both control and understand the figure as it comes into existence. The labor I exert over the animal becomes an empathetic gesture. As the creature comes to life, the line between myself as the maker and the material as the object softens.



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## **In the Beginning**

### **Relatives**

When I was a child, I spent my time in the backyard, surrounded by imaginary gorillas in a make-believe African forest. My tree house doubled as a prison, equipped with fantastical methods of punishment for the gorilla poachers I caught.

I was obsessed. To say that apes, and gorillas in particular, were my favorite animal would be an understatement. I refused to go anywhere near the Great Ape House at the National Zoo, where they put my fellow beings behind bars for visitors to mock. They were too human for this treatment.

I consumed images and books about the famous 1970's primatologists Diane Fossey and Jane Goodall. I pictured myself as them, living amidst the gorillas and chimpanzees. To live in the *wild* with the great apes, to eat, forage, nest, and pick mites out of each other's hair – these were my childhood fantasies.

Despite the fact that I had never even touched or been that close to a living ape, I believed that I was closer to them than any other living being. I understood that when I looked into their eyes in a photo or stuffed animal, I was looking at my friend, my parent, myself.

### **The Inquisition**

Growing up my family had four cats. Inevitably, there would be the remains of a dead mouse left on the doorstep as a present, stray feces in the hamper, or scratch marks on my favorite coat. Determining who to punish was futile, like trying



to assign blame in a field of dandelions, trying to figure out which one let its seeds blow away.

Unlike my parents, I was more interested in communication rather than punishment when these incidents of transgression occurred. I would gather all the cats in the bathroom for a group meeting. Sitting on my throne, the toilet with a closed lid, I would look down on each of them. I would search their eyes, trying to see the guilt. In my memory, they looked up at me with equal inquisitiveness. In reality, though, they probably ignored me, taking naps on the warm radiator, or rubbing against the closed door. I interrogated them about the incident in question, wanting them to confess in a way that I could understand. It was not an aggressive interrogation, but more like a gentle and concerned mediation. I wanted us to work as a group, to get to a place where we each felt good about what happened in the meeting. I badly wanted them to understand me, to become human. With equal fervor, I wanted to understand them, to become cat.



## Becoming Animal

“Nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf; it is as if the fur she thought she wore had melted into her skin and become part of it, although it does not exist. Like the wild beasts, she lives without a future. She inhabits only the present tense, a fugue of the continuous, a world of sensual immediacy as without hope as it is without despair.”<sup>1</sup>

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*

In the biblical story of creation, God gives Adam ‘dominion over’ the animals. In the ancient Aristotelian biological classification scheme, ‘scala naturae’, human male is at the top of a hierarchical ladder that relegates animals to the lower rungs. There has been an effort throughout history to “make the case that we [humans] are something more, better, and higher than the animal kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> What happens to this superiority, though, when Darwin reveals that species differences are simply genetic mistakes? When human organs are grown on rats and pigs? When geneticists prove that we share most of our DNA with fleas? What then separates us from animals?

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose that the answer lies somewhere in between animal and human. Rather than a fixed, strict definition of human and animal, they offer a more malleable one in which both entities are in a constant state of becoming.<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of ‘becoming animal’ suggests that because of this lack of boundaries, humans and animals can

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Christoph Cox, “Of Humans, Animals, and Monsters,” in *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* (North Adams: MASS MoCA Publications, 2005), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 233-245.



transcend their species and meet each other in a shared space in the periphery of the two. In his catalogue essay for the 'Becoming Animal' exhibit at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, philosopher Christoph Cox states that "to become animal is to be drawn into a zone of action or passion that one can have in common with an animal."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to write that "this process increases our sympathies with—and relationships to—our fellow creatures, who are no longer essentially other than us but creatures from whom we can learn about the true, the good, and the beautiful."<sup>5</sup> Rather than moving humans down in the hierarchy of classification, this 'becoming' elevates us, as we learn from, empathize with, and exist as the other.

I find a path to understanding and becoming the animal other through making with my hands. Touch, a sense we share with animals, is key to this understanding. As I touch the clay, hair, or string, the animal form comes into being, and begins to dictate what form it needs to take. Thus, the material disrupts the expected hierarchy of maker and the object, taking on the role of the creator, controlling my actions. The line between myself and animal blurs and we meet somewhere in between.

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<sup>4</sup> Cox, "Of Humans," 24.

<sup>5</sup> Cox, "Of Humans," 24.





## Becoming Alive

“No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his father so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life [...]”<sup>6</sup>  
 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

I am a mad scientist, frantically assembling disparate body parts to create monsters. I am a mother, gently nurturing my offspring into existence. I am the divine creator, generously bestowing life upon the inanimate. I am a sculptor, patiently articulating form from formless material.

The desire to create a believable sense of life pulls me forward as a maker. In accordance with Ruskin’s “pathetic fallacy,” I imbue inanimate sculpture with life by imposing upon it my own emotions.<sup>7</sup> As the creature comes into existence, it develops personality, sentience, soul. I look at it, and it looks back at me. The sense of parental love I feel for my creations is undeniable. I spend endless hours stroking hair onto their backs, arranging the fur on their heads, looking into their eyes to make sure they are just right. My process is a labor of love, as I give impossibly slow birth to each one, and they, in turn, grow up and develop lives of their own.

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994), 48.

<sup>7</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters by John Ruskin* (Boston: D. Estes, 1912), 204.



## Becoming Timeless

“Since labor-intensive and handmade works of art take a long time to make – sometimes a *very* long time-- they seem to be at odds with the evolutionary, progressive, monochromic sense of time that informs the high art tradition...It’s the kind of time experienced in the long and complex processes of embroidering, lacemaking, knitting and quilting. Polychronic time is inherently nonhierarchic and doesn’t lend itself to scheduling or prioritizing in the way the monochromic time does. The ‘outsider’ artist, for whom time is not likely to be experienced monochronically, is therefore said to be disconnected from a sense of temporality altogether.”<sup>8</sup>

Marcia Tucker, catalogue essay for “Labour of Love”

The deliberate process of these creatures coming into being means that I must work slowly and patiently. These methods are counter to the fast-paced, time-is-money mentality of our society. The fruitions of this labor exist in a world apart from typical notions of time, one where there is no hierarchy of skill or priority. Each task is treated with equal importance, from the sculpting of eyes to the gluing of flower petals. In this alternative sense of time, every tedious and minute addition to the piece breathes that much more life into it.

Not only does this sense of time test typical notions of progress, but also the divide between the mind and body. Tucker states, the slow and tedious process in fact “connect[s] the spiritual with the material dimensions of life.”<sup>9</sup> The meditation inherent in the process allows the conscious mind to relinquish control, letting intuition and sensory impulse take over. The distinction between mind and body disappears, and the maker enters a more instinctual, primal, but perhaps more in-

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<sup>8</sup> Marcia Tucker, “A Labour of Love,” in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, ed. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 125.

<sup>9</sup> Tucker, “Labour,” 125.



tuned state of being. The mind and body are no longer separate entities, just as the animal and human are no longer separate beings.

Apart from my fastidious process, I am trying to defy typical experiences of time by fixing the transitory. As much as the act of creation is an act of love, it is also an act of control. I dominate the beings I make into states of permanent becoming. They morph between species and between various states of living and dying. Yet, they are paradoxically fixed. They exist forever in these in-between, fleeting moments of time, when life leaves a face, or when the soul leaves the body.

Hair is a vital ingredient in this sense of timelessness. For the most part, we all grow hair and recognize it as part of our living bodies. What happens, though, when it is removed from the body and becomes its own entity? Unlike other body parts, which wither and decay, hair remains colorful and unchanged. A ponytail cut off of a child looks the same twenty years later as it did on her head. Hair seems to escape the fate of time and aging, and therefore, seems to defy death. However, when cut from the body, it does not continue to grow. Neither alive nor dead, hair separated from a living body is caught in a permanent state of in-between-ness.



## Becoming Other

“[T]he grotesque is defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them. Put more bluntly the grotesque is a ‘boundary creature’ and does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation.”<sup>10</sup>

Frances S. Connelly, *Modern Art and the Grotesque*

The animals I create are ‘boundary creatures’, strange hybrids that blur species classifications within the animal kingdom, and with humans. They are monsters--beings which house parts from other species within the same body, and elicit fear as well as empathy.<sup>11</sup> In crossing natural boundaries, these familiar aliens and lovable beasts possess otherness within themselves.

As fawn becomes lamb, cat becomes horse, ape becomes human, and craft materials become living matter, my works demonstrate a confusion of species as well as multiple states of existence. We know the eyeballs are made of clay, yet their gaze fixes us in a way that we feel these beings are alive. We recognize logically that they are material only, but it seems like they might start breathing, stirring, entering our world. They slip in and out of animate and inanimate, life and death.

Robert Storr expands upon the definition above, offering a purpose of the grotesque. He states:

“to be grotesque, something must be in conflict with something else, and yet indivisible from it. [T]hat conflict must in some fashion already exist within the

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<sup>10</sup> Frances S. Connelly, “Introduction,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Nick Capasso, “Monsters Everywhere and Forever,” deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum website, <http://www.decordova.org/decordova/exhibit/2001/terrors/essays.htm>.





mind of the beholder such that the confusion stems not only from the anomaly to which we bear witness in the world, but the anomaly that is revealed within us."<sup>12</sup>

As these hybrid creatures elicit our empathy, we cannot dismiss them as the other. Perhaps we recognize something of ourselves in them. Perhaps when we see an unidentifiable creature lying on the floor and covered in our own human hair, we want to love it even as we reject it. Perhaps these 'boundary creatures', these monstrous hybrids, are more like us than not.

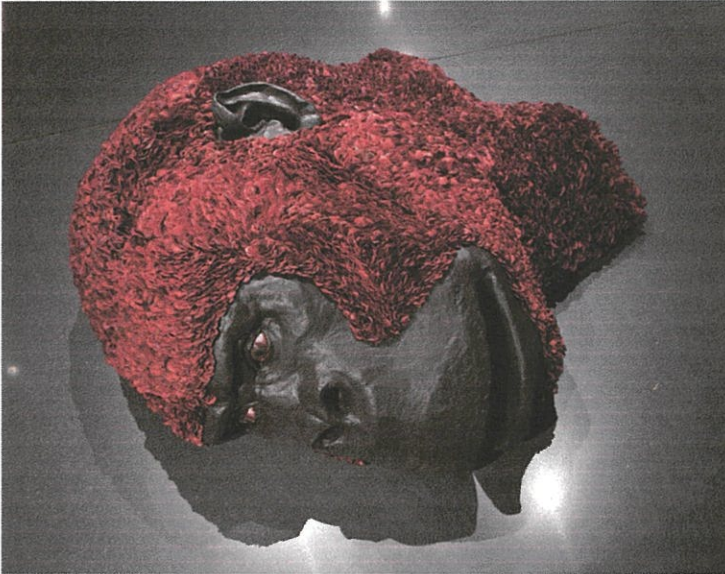
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<sup>12</sup> Robert Storr *Our Grotesque: Disparities and Deformations* (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2004), 18.



## Lives of Their Own: Description and Interpretation of Works

### *Aristotle's Foil*



The largest object in the exhibition is titled *Aristotle's Foil*. This giant ape head rests on its side, deflating against its own weight on the slick floor. Coil-built from ceramic, the piece is hollow, like a mask that has been shed. Its placement directly on the floor furthers the notion that this head is a mask, or part of a living creature. Although it references poaching and hunting because it is a decapitated head, we cannot simply objectify it as a trophy or collector's item. It is in our space, on the same floor we walk on.

The scale distortion and lighting makes the piece fantastical and dramatic. Its enormous size inverts the typical animal-human relationship with apes. This animal, were it full-bodied, would dwarf humans. Yet, rather than elicit fear, he draws our empathy, as he lies docile and harmless at our feet. The lighting enhances the theatricality. It delineates a ring-like border, illuminating the head



while the surrounding space on the floor disappears into darkness. Thus, rather than poaching, beheading, and violence, this head resides in the world of theater, performance, and beauty.

The proportionally diminutive eyes glisten and reflect in the light, and feel like they belong to a sentient being. Staring out into the distance, they are the only indication of life within. They are at once human and aware, yet also vacant and glazed over. This sense diminishes towards the nose and mouth, which gradually deteriorate into less-formed, lifeless 'flesh'. The mouth is cavernous, gaping open to reveal a dark abyss on the inside. It is lopsided, and feels as if, in conforming to the floor, the jaw slipped out of joint. Simultaneously suggesting life and death, the facial features elicit the haunting and impossible feeling that against all logic, this beheaded and empty creature may be alive.

The face and ear are the only parts left uncovered, painted ceramic. Here the skin is pockmarked and heavily touched, forever bearing the evidence of my hand in the clay, my mark on his being. These parts are painted a leathery black with violet undertones. The color and texture imitate the real flesh of an ape, while the violet removes it slightly into the realm of the fantastic.

The rest of the head is painstakingly covered in fake petals. These petals mimic the inner facial and cranial musculature of the ape. This pattern is intended to create a sense of natural movement in the fur rather than connote actual muscle. The petals are a range of reds and violets, all coalescing to create an oxblood red towards the face and a deeper purple towards the neck, as though he



is blushing. Alternately, blood is draining from his face, a reference to beheading and skinning. Each petal similarly transitions from an inner red to a deeper burgundy on the tips. Applied vertically with the red closest to the ceramic skin and the purple on the outside, the inner red becomes blood and the outer darker color becomes a bruise. The overall texture created by the rippled edges is an ornamental and surreal fur.

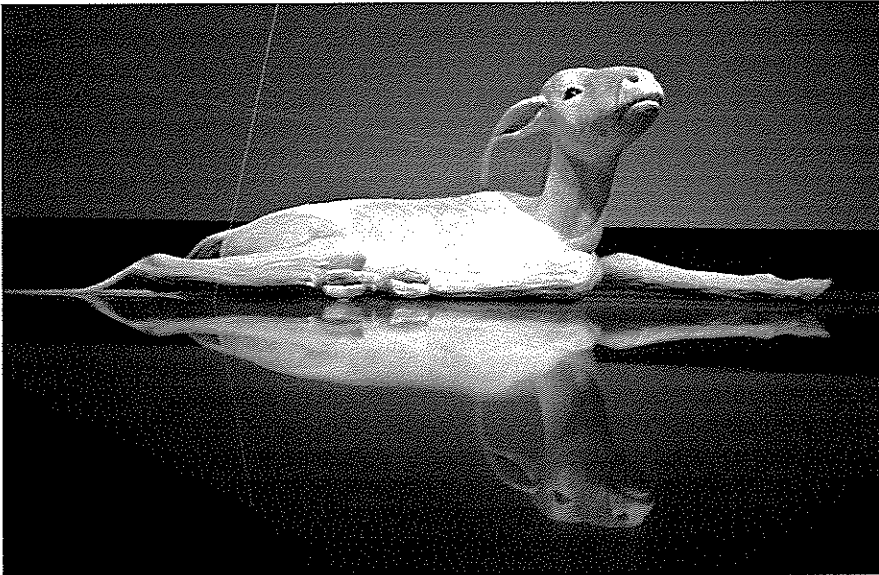
The head straddles the line between artificiality and reality. While he evokes a sense of sentience, the artificial flower petals remind us that he is merely made, stripping this sense away. Further, flower petals inherently denote life's cycles of living and dying. These silk and polyester petals, however, escape the fate of death. While he lay living/dying on the floor, his coat remains unchanged. This head is paradoxically fixed in a state of change.

As a result of this 'mask' closely resembling a human, in face, expression, and evolutionary biology, it is as if it is shedding a version of myself as his maker. Conversely, the heavy ornamentation renders it an object to be desired. It is beautiful and bizarre. It places the viewer in the role of colonialist in the midst of exotic objects, needing to possess it in order to understand it. *Aristotle's Foil* draws out human compulsion to own, to possess animal-ness.





### *Love's Labors*



*Love's Labors* is a life-sized ceramic figure, which, like *Aristotle's Foil*, rests helplessly on the floor. A hybrid, *Love's Labors* depicts a young animal that is at once lamb, goat, deer, and horse. The underlying ceramic form is entirely covered in a sleek coat of platinum blonde human hair. This combination of human element to animal form brings this piece into the realm of the grotesque. Although we recognize it as human hair, it is alien and strange on this creature. Once a living part of a fellow human body, it now insulates the body of an entirely different species. It is a beautiful monster. The coat has the particular sheen of silky hair, which causes the animal to glow as though lit from within.

So platinum that he is almost white, his bloneness also becomes an absence of color. He is albino and otherworldly, angelic in his lightness. This uniform paleness also makes him seem bled. The same blood that flows in our veins and makes us blush and bruise, is missing in him.



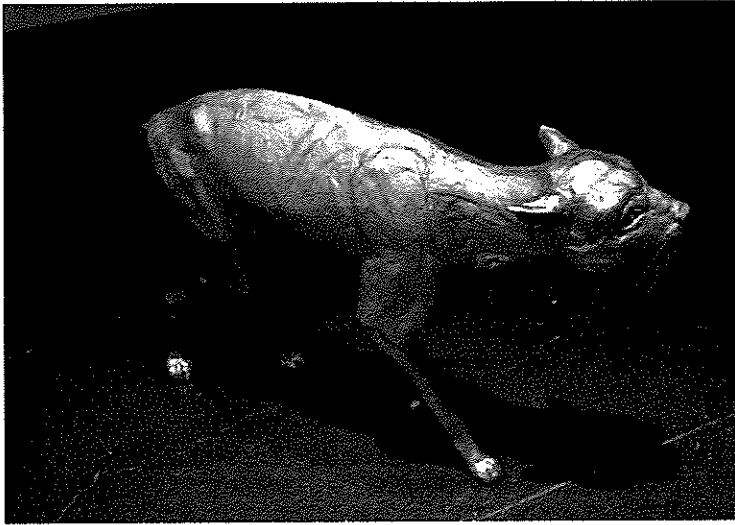
Like the ape head, the hair on this animal is applied in a pattern mimicking inner musculature, especially around the face. The truth to anatomy in the face gives this creature an identity. He is not merely a strange hybrid covered in hair, but a conscious and feeling being. The pattern is less true to anatomy as it flows onto the rest of the figure, where the hair simply follows the bodily contours, making longer, sleeker lines. On the tips of the ears, knees, and spine, the hair extends beyond the body, pouring off these parts to create elegant, tapered tails. These details make it a mythical creature, further removing it from our reality.

*Love's Labors* is the scale of a real ewe or foal. Three legs curl protectively close to his body, while one splays out awkwardly in front. His head tilts upwards expectantly, his human-like eyes demurely pleading for attention. With his mouth the slightly open, he appears poised to suckle. He seems fresh to the world, as though he was just born. He is adorable and vulnerable, yet also alien and unsettling. His sleekness becomes fetal and amniotic. It is as if I, his creator, just gave birth to him and now here he lay, dependent and monstrous on the floor.

Despite his weirdness, he begs our empathy and love. Instead of turning away, we want to cuddle and soothe him. But how do we mother and care for an infant that is neither human, nor specific animal, who is, in fact, a monster?



### ***Something of a Smiler***



*Something of a Smiler* is a true-to-size cat sculpted of ceramic and covered with copper, silver and gold metallic powders. The head and paws are obviously cat, but the rest of the attenuated body is ambiguous. While the body could be that of a boar, sheered sheep, or sinewy dog, it seems at once all of these, and none of them at the same time. She is understood as a cat, a being with nine lives and a sixth sense, a mysterious loner. Yet these other body parts render her unrecognizable and not of our world.

A horse's tail, which also has the shape and body of a woman's pony-tail, cascades off her rear. This feature is the part of the cat that is recognizable as of our world. While it does bring her into the realm of familiarity, it is an unsettling familiarity. This is not a tail that belongs on a cat and feels stolen and Frankensteinian on this creature.

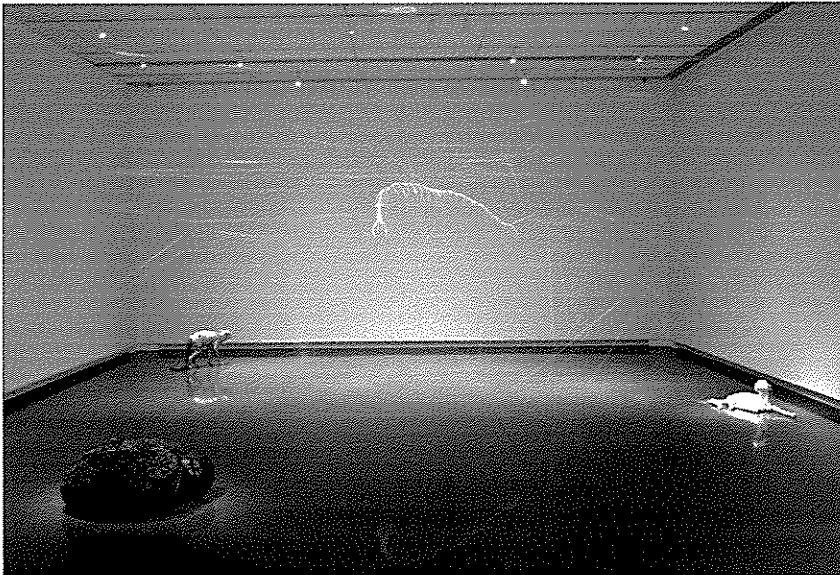
The green metallic surface makes her seem like she has risen from the dead. This 'skin' becomes a sleek veil of rigor mortis, shiny and seductive, but also rotten



and repellent. The metal also references bronze figure sculpture and mechanical parts. While her face begs that we love her as a cat, the rest of her alien body and metal skin makes this love complicated, if not impossible.

The only animal actively 'moving', *Smiler* stands on all four paws on the museum floor, posed as if walking. Lurking in the back of the overall installation, she looks inquisitively at a band of light created by the strings from *Preparations*. Caught between movement and stillness, her gesture is simultaneously innocent and sinister. She seems curious about the light coming in, but also poised to pounce on, and thereby destroy it.

### ***Preparations***









Situated in the recessed space in the museum, *Preparations* depicts an abstract skeletal animal form made with hair, suspended in a network of gold thread. Although delicate and ephemeral, it takes up the most physical space in the exhibition. The lines of the thread extend diagonally in all directions, from wall to wall, and wall to floor. Tied to sewing needles embedded in the wall, the strings seem to shoot directly out of the walls. Similarly, they grow up from the floor, and it appears as though the walls and floors are just planes dissecting a larger network of gold strings. These lines create a complicated yet free-form system that suggests spider web and crystal growth.

While the majority of the network is drawn with individual overlapping and intersecting strings, there is one grouping of the threads that convenes to form a thick plane. This gossamer band resembles a ray of light, connecting the walls and ground to one another, and hinting at the supernatural. Located towards the back corner of the installation, the beam becomes light coming in from a hole in a cave,



or light shining in from the heavens. It suggests an outside world beyond this structure.

The gold thread creates a confusion of materials, as precious metal is stretched into thin thread, and this soft thread is in turn pulled to make hard lines. The metallic shimmer becomes dew on a spider web and the string bands become beams of light as the natural and familiar slips into the mystical and otherworldly.

Looming inside this larger network are the mysterious remains of an unidentifiable animal. While the head and pose suggest a quadruped, the spine and ribs suggest a maritime animal, rendering identification impossible. This cross between land and water species enhances the sense of magical impossibility.

The way it hangs in the space further complicates its existence. It seems to ascend and descend at the same time. Although it dangles limply, it is also rigid. Full-bodied yet empty, its 'bones' become a cage holding its soul. It is as though the entire structure were built to keep this creature with us, to preserve the fleeting moment when a soul leaves the body, to stop time.

The entire creature is tied to the larger scaffolding with individual strands of almost invisible blonde hair. The thicker sections of hair that make up the skeleton are tied in strategic places to mimic the shape of bones, similar to the way form is delineated in a contour drawing. It is oriented horizontally, and its spine creates an elegant arch. Equally spaced sections of hair dangle down vertically from the spine, delineating ribs. Close to the spine, they resemble the rounded shape of real ribs, but as the line extends away from the body, form gives way to limp,



lifeless hair. Similarly, the articulated eye sockets, brow, and jaw of the head melt away, as bone becomes hair and the flesh seems to leak out of this animal.

The sense that the life is pouring out is enhanced by the color, which ranges from light blonde close to the top, to deep crimson towards the bottom. The spine consists of blondish grey hair and subtle additions of a sea green fiber. The ribs and head transition from this light color to dark red as they move down from the spine, like blood draining from the body. It is as though the creature is being bled, but also ascending up to the heavens, caught in a purgatory between life and death.

Lighting plays a crucial role in this piece. Strings lit in certain parts glisten one moment, and disappear the next as they slip into darkness. Thus, the entire structure seems to be held up as if by magic. As we approach the delicate structure, we become hyper aware of our own physicality. The glittery strings shoot up near our feet, and we tread carefully, afraid of bringing down the entire structure. As we enter the cave-like network and the angle of the light changes, individual strands of hair that were once unseen begin to glow around the animal. Similarly, sections of strings slip in and out of our visual awareness as we physically navigate the piece. This is an enchanted space where something invisible one moment could entangle us the next.

Although the four works are separate pieces, *Preparations* frames the context for the entire exhibition. From the cat stalking the band of light in the recesses of the gossamer web, to the infant albino protected by individual threads in the front



corner, the pieces have their own separate existences, yet all engage with one another. Individually they are caught in various states of living and dying. Collectively, they transport us into a magical allegory about life and death.

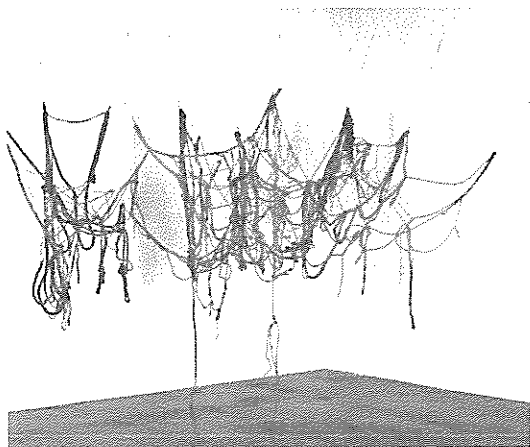




## Related Artists

### Eva Hesse

Postminimalist sculptor Eva Hesse created installations that were experiential and required physical engagement with the exhibition space. A tangle of latex-covered strings and ropes suspended in midair, her 1970 piece *Untitled*, is “audacious in [its] command of the floor, walls, ceiling, and ambient space.”<sup>13</sup> The fibers are pulled in all directions, strung from wall to wall, and dangling down all the way to the floor in some instances. Although the individual strings and ropes are ephemeral, the entire structure is expansive and takes over the space it occupies. It requires the viewer to navigate as though exploring a jungle, rather than examining an object. “[A]morphous and strangely beautiful...it hovers between something and nothing.”<sup>14</sup> It straddles the lines between heavy and weightless, chaotic and controlled, formless and formal, ugly and beautiful.



Eva Hesse, *Untitled* (1970, latex and filler over rope and string with metal hooks, dimensions variable)

<sup>13</sup> Robin Clark, “Hanging Works,” in *Eva Hesse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 274.

<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, “Letting It Go as It Will: The Art of Eva Hesse,” in *Eva Hesse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 17.



*Preparations* harks directly to *Untitled* in the way it is visually and physically experienced. Both works resemble three-dimensional drawings, whose individual lines are subtle and delicate. However, when tangled and stretched into a larger network, they become grandiose in scale. These monumental networks require extreme physical awareness in the part of the viewer. When interacting with the piece, the viewer is no longer a patron in an art museum, but instead an explorer in uncharted territory, finding her way in the unknown.

### **Ron Mueck**

Sculptor Ron Mueck makes realistic human figures that cross the boundaries between plastic material and sentient being. His sculptures are so lifelike that we are forced to understand them as mirrors of ourselves. Embodying complex psychological states – depression, anxiety, and curiosity—these kindred spirits reflect our own emotions and stages of life, drawing us into their contemplative existence. His figures alternately dwarf or giganticize us, this manipulation in scale taking them out of the realm of the real and asking that we enter into this alternate world with them.

Our emotional response to them—empathy—is at odds with our logical response to them, which is that we know they are made of inanimate materials (silicone, fiberglass and resin) and therefore not alive. Susanna Greeves of the National Gallery in London states “despite our intellectual understanding of their man-made status, tension arises from the conflict between the material's inertia and its impression of liveliness; the fear of the lifelike which haunts the warring



perceptions of the image as reflection, and the image as reality.”<sup>15</sup> We know that they are sculptures on pedestals. But they have skin, hair, eyes, even details down to the tiniest wrinkle, which so accurately mimic our own bodies, we feel they are real humans.

We wonder, “what distinguishes animate and inanimate matter; what is the essence that animates, the spark that constitutes life?”<sup>16</sup> At what point does a facial feature, a body part, an entire figure transcend the material it was made from to become living, breathing, conscious matter?

These questions plague my studio practice, as I attempt to blur the lines that distinguish the made from the living. Mueck’s self-portrait *Mask II*, which is a larger-than-life frontal, hollow mask, directly relates to *Aristotle’s Foil*. My giant ape head, like this giant human head, rests in a state in between life and death on its limp side. Mueck’s face, however, sleeps with its eyes closed, whereas the eyes on the ape head are open. There is an uncanny sense that both beings are alive, even though we can see their hollow insides. In Mueck’s case the entire back is exposed, revealing it as a mere mask. There is a tension between the fact that we know these are mere sculptures, but we also sense that they might start breathing, snoring, blinking. We almost expect them to, like waiting for a corpse’s chest to rise and fall with breath at a funeral.

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<sup>15</sup> Susanna Greeves, “Ron Mueck: A Redefinition of Realism,” in *Ron Mueck* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>16</sup> Greeves, “Ron Mueck,” 47.





Ron Mueck, *Mask II* (2001, Fiberglass, resin, mixed media, 30 3/8" x 46 1/2" x 33 1/2")

### **Patricia Piccinini**

Patricia Piccinini's 'figure' sculptures similarly straddle the line between real life and artificial creation. Like Mueck's figures, their skin is hyper-realistic; made of fiberglass and painted to resemble human flesh, layered, pink and luminous. Rather than realistic humans, though, this flesh belongs to mysterious hybrid creatures that are at once animal and human. That their outer coats so remind us of our own flesh intensifies the empathy and disgust we feel towards them. We cannot reject them as monsters other than humans, or animals without greater consciousness, for we recognize physical aspects of ourselves on their strange bodies.

In *The Young Family*, we even see our own psychological states and stages of life in these monsters. The basic elements of the human condition reveal themselves, as the hybrid platypus-canine-woman mother lies curled on her side, several young suckling and playing around her. Although obviously maternal, she





does not seem nurturing. Drifting off, her gaze is disengaged and unfocused. She is lost in her own thoughts. The fact that she has thoughts, emotions, feelings, renders her more than a mere monster. She is a mother, a sentient and layered being.

Her protective, inward pose is similar to that of the hybrid animal in *Love's Labor*. They are both vulnerable, and both essentially scenes of motherhood and complicated affection. Additionally, her distant gaze resembles that of the ape head in *Aristotle's Foil*. It is alive and gives both beings a sense of inner awareness. In both cases, despite their unfamiliarity, we identify with them as fellow beings deserving of our care and respect.



Patricia Piccinini, *The Young Family* (2002-3, silicone, leather, acrylic, human hair, timber, 80 x 150 x 110 cm)

Perhaps our easy acceptance of these monstrous hybrids as fellow beings can be explained through myth. Piccinini offers “myths and the creatures that inhabit them are there to try to explain things about a world that is often



inexplicable.”<sup>17</sup> It is impossible to accept the notion that we as humans might have deer, dog, platypus, or monster within us, without mythological creatures as the medium through which this harsh understanding is filtered and accepted.

### **Kiki Smith**

Myth as explanation of the seemingly impossible is nowhere more evident than in the works of Kiki Smith. Her sculptures create a world in which humans, particularly women, slip in and out of animal identities, as if there were no borders between animal and human at all. In works like *Born* and *Daughter*, Smith depicts women as empathetic beings who are birthed from animal bodies, and the hybrid products of human and animal unions. Rather than horrifying and warranting recoil, these fantastical instances of becoming are beautiful and deserve belief. The mythology in her work is a framework for which we understand our oneness with animals. In an essay in conjunction with Smith’s retrospective exhibit ‘A Gathering’, writer Marina Warner states “Smith is one of a number of artists, writers, and thinkers who are at work redrafting the map of creation, where man no longer lords over it and where humans must acknowledge their kinship with animals.”<sup>18</sup>

*Born* depicts St. Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris, being born from a doe.

*Daughter* depicts a fur-covered girl, supposedly Little Red Riding Hood. Both

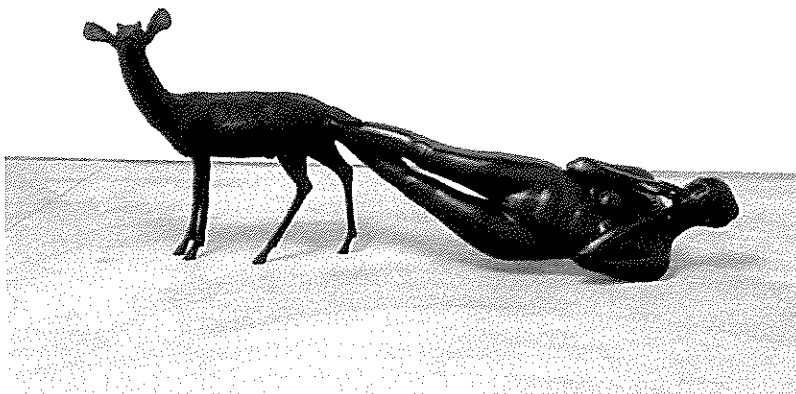
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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Piccinini, “Interview with Patricia Piccinini,” in *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* (North Adams: MASS MoCA Publications, 2005), 104.

<sup>18</sup> Marina Warner, “Wolf-girl, Soul-bird: The Mortal Art of Kiki Smith,” in *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 53.



pieces can be seen in relation to *Love's Labor*, as they depict a trans-species birth. While *Born* depicts human being born from animal, *Love's Labor* suggests animal that was born from a human. Further, *Daughter*, like the animals in *Love's Labor* and *Something of a Smiler*, is the hairy product of a strange, cross-species birth. Although the hair/fur in both cases is direct evidence of unnatural species crossovers, it does not make them less than the individual species. For the process of hybridization, or becoming, "transvalues its subjects, so that a monster or a beast acquires another character, not by simply rising in a hierarchy, but by drawing new perceptions toward his or her condition."<sup>19</sup> Instead of lowly monsters, these creatures are superior beings who perhaps possess a higher understanding of what it means to become other than their assigned forms.



Kiki Smith, *Born* (2002, bronze, 39" x 101" x 24")

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<sup>19</sup> Warner, "Wolf-girl," 52.





Kiki Smith, *Daughter*, (1999, in collaboration with Margaret Dewys, Nepal paper, bubble wrap, methyl cellulose, hair, and glass, 48" x 15" x 10")

Up to this point, the act of artistic creation has been discussed in terms of begetting life. The point at which the artist imbues something with life has been dissected. But what if the artistic creation of a figure is rather an act of death, of taking lifelike material and rendering it lifeless, objectifying it to the point of killing it? In her analysis of Smith's work, Warner asserts that Smith "paradoxically forces us to face art's closeness to the threshold of death; through such sculptures and drawings, we enter the intrinsic artistic condition of material inanimateness, and it embraces death as a form of reality, equal in presence to life."<sup>20</sup>

This reversal of artistic creation is crucial for my work. If the moment of creation, of bestowing life upon inanimate matter is rather seen as an act of killing, of stripping life away from material, then death must be seen with equal reverence

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<sup>20</sup> Warner "Wolf-girl," 50.





as life. For my work, where the borders of life and death are already tenuous, this equal value given to death means that it is just another boundary to cross. As humans, we are always dying. Forever in a state of becoming, we are mutable, possessing the other within us, whether this other is animal or death.



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