

KATE CLARK: MYSTERIOUS PRESENCE

20 Jan - 10 Apr 2016



NEWCOMB

ART MUSEUM *of Tulane*



Kate Clark, *She Gets What She Wants*, 2013, zebra hide, foam, clay, rubber eyes, thread, pins

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Kate Clark uses the centuries-old craft of taxidermy to sculpt humanlike faces onto bestial forms. Her hybridized sculptures are at once familiar yet strange, insinuating primal similarities linking the animal kingdom and examining humans' place within the natural world.

Her sculptures' strong presence also ironically evokes a sort of absence, rendering the figures aloof and mysterious. Clark notes, "They seem to be looking at the viewer but their gaze goes beyond." Nonetheless, Clark's forms directly confront us, encouraging and challenging our willingness to accept difference."

Often working with live models and using a polymer clay, Clark creates realistic faces for her figures and then applies sections of shaved hide to match the animal's skin to the human fascia thus facilitating the inter-species transformation. Yet, she fastens sections using generic sewing pins, making visible her process and acknowledging the artifice of the work. By using real animal pelts, Clark presents us with something steeped in the real: a figure of unbelievable natural beauty and, conversely, a believable chimera.



Kate Clark, *Galant* 2015, Antelope hide, foam, clay, rubber eyes, thread, and pins

Kate Clark: An Interview

Conducted by William Morrow
December 2015

WM

You have emphasized the importance of using real animal hides in your work. Is this a reaction to our cultural desensitization to the artificial?

KC

I think, in fact, a viewer still does sense a material's quality, natural or artificial, and I see that this material, real hide, causes a visceral reaction when a viewer first approaches the work. I sometimes find it hard to believe myself—that I use animal hide, but using the animal's actual skin and transforming it, rather than putting two artificial things together, is the most important concept behind the work. The leather I use as skin for the human face is the skin that covered the animal's face. I attempt to match up sections of skin, for example, using the animal's eyelids and lashes around the human-looking eyes. I shave the fur so that the viewer might relate to the oily, porous features that we recognize in our skin. In making the transformation from animal to human as smooth as possible—and then having the animal's face reflect ours, not only in form and expression but also, undeniably, in its similar skin qualities—I am visually saying that although we have an enlightened existence, we are of wild origin, coexisting members of the animal kingdom.

WM

In both *Bully* (2010) and *Fortitude* (2011) the figures are physically touching but their gazes do not meet. The gaze of the sculpture seems to be an important relationship that you explore in many of your works.

KC

I do use the gaze as part of the narrative in the pieces, especially ones with multiple animals. In *Fortitude* there are two bears moving forward in a very direct motion and their gazes are focused ahead. These two, possibly a mother/daughter pair, have more of a wild animal narrative than a human one. For *Bully*, I referenced romantic, Renaissance style sculpture by positioning the wolves' back legs and tails to be entwined while bringing their bodies around to face each other. I then twist the expected romantic narrative by not completing the circle of their gaze. The female stands above him with a stern look and her ears forward. The male has his ears back, submissive, not quite meeting her gaze. Within their relationship he is being bullied. This narrative is meant to have subtle and human aspects. For the single animal pieces, there are a few looking at the viewer in a demanding way [*Little Girl* (2008), *Lit From Within* (2009)], but I generally allow the animals to be almost aloof, existing in their own world, and not having direct eye contact with the viewer. I try to develop a faraway gaze in the single-animal pieces that encourages an open narrative.



Kate Clark, *My Heart Beats Like Thunder*, 2012, cougar hide, elk hide rug, foam, clay, pins, thread, rubber eyes

WM

Why do you use unwanted or undesirable hides? You also purposely leave the tacks holding the leather in the face visible to the viewer.

KC

The hides I choose are slightly damaged or slightly dry—unwanted by taxidermists who do not want to repair them, especially if the face is the damaged area. I choose to use these hides, instead of fresh perfect ones, as part of the concept of my work. It's worthwhile for me to make the repairs, and I let them show along with the other transformations I've made. Even with slightly damaged areas, the hides are remarkably beautiful in their coloring, details, etc.—unlike anything I could make by hand. In making the work I challenge idealized

beauty, or the ideal in general. In fact, my work could be considered an aberration—combining two things that aren't usually combined. My effort to transform them into something believable, or at least suspend disbelief, usually results in the viewer initially resisting the work, but then coming around to find the work irresistible—finding some sort of beauty and personal meaning in it.

I want beauty in the quality of the craftsmanship, but I aim to make the faces familiar and recognizable as people in our day-to-day lives. I purposely use friends and family, rather than fashion-model types. Once the face is resolved and looks life-like, I pin along the stitched seams. The pinning shows volume, holds the leather in place, and, most importantly, shows the construction of the face while I'm still asking



Kate Clark, *Ceremony*, 2011, bear hide, foam, clay, pins, thread, rubber eyes, wood, and paint



Kate Clark, *Ceremony*, 2011, gemsbok antelope hide, horns, foam, clay, pins, thread, rubber eyes

the viewer to believe in the life of it. The visible seams show that the face has been undone and redone, which feels brutal yet the final portraits are refined to reveal consciousness, emotion, and experience—characteristics we could consider beautiful.

WM

Your work often gets referred to in the context of environmentalism. How do you see your work in relationship to cultural evolution? Are there specific pieces in this exhibition that you feel speak to contemporary identity politics such as race and gender?

KC

I'm making my work in Brooklyn, so fortunately I have a wonderful range of ethnic backgrounds to choose from among my models. If I'm working with a hide from an animal that lives in Africa or Asia, I usually will not choose an African American model or an Asian American model—I prefer not to feel bound by that prescription. Instead I will put an Anglo American face on a zebra or an African American face on a cougar. I also try not to be predictable with gender, giving myself the freedom to make a huge male antelope with large horns have a delicately featured female face. The bust piece



Kate Clark, *Choosing Her Words*, 2015, antelope hide, horns, foam, clay, pins, thread, and rubber eyes

Choosing Her Words (2015) and the three gemsbok in *Ceremony* (2013) are all large male antelopes, but I worked with female models. In the transformation of body into head, the proportions do change and I sometimes end up making the woman's face slightly fuller to accommodate a huge neck—or a man's face less sharp to accommodate a small neck. I'm comfortable with the pieces reading as androgynous.

My work is discussed in the context of environmentalism, mythology, spiritualism, futuristic biology, etc. What I love about the range is that it enables the work to be considered in a current and contemporary way that leads to the discussion of cultural evolution. The fact that we haven't physically evolved as humans from the time before Greek mythology until now, and probably won't evolve physically as we move into the future, is an amazing fact—considering the leaps and bounds that we have evolved culturally. Even though we are the same physical people, we are masters at adapting to these cultural changes. But there is a tipping point—people may want to reevaluate if they feel comfortable/natural adapting to the constant cultural advances, and instead choose to rekindle a relationship with nature.

WM

Your hybridized figures evoke a multitude of reactions among viewers. They can be unsettling and yet familiar. They can confront us in their exoticism and difference or in the case of *She Gets What She Wants* (2013), the figure can be alluring and endearing. How

do you see the viewer implicated in the intention of the work?

KC

Through the years of working with animals, I've come to the conclusion that I want each piece to look dignified. Many viewers have suggested that I take them in a monster-y direction, but I think that would make them easier to dismiss. Instead, I make sure the animal stands or sits in a powerful position, while their faces appear comfortable and casual in their transformation. This adds complexity within the viewer/sculpture relationship—the character in the sculpture is comfortable while the viewer is uncomfortable—until he or she spends the time to find beauty or meaning in the work. ■

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Brooklyn-based Kate Clark (1972-) holds a BFA from Cornell University and an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art. She has been included in solo and group exhibitions at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, The Islip Art Museum, the Mobile Museum of Art, Cranbrook Art Museum, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the Musée de la Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, and the Nevada Museum of Art, among other spaces. Her work is collected internationally and is in public collections such as the JP Morgan Chase Art Collection, the 21c Collection, the David Roberts Art Foundation in London, and the C-Collection in Switzerland.

She has been awarded fellowships from the Jentel Artists Residency in Wyoming,

The Fine Arts Work Center Residency in Provincetown, MA, and the Marie Walsh Sharpe Studio Program in New York. Kate was awarded a grant from The Virginia Groot Foundation in 2013 and a New York Foundation For the Arts (NYFA) Fellowship Award in 2014.

Kate's sculptures have been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *Art21:Blog*, *The Village Voice*, *PAPERmag*, *The Atlantic*, *Wallpaper*, *VICE*, and many other publications. Her work appears on the cover of the Nov/Dec 2014 issue of *art ltd.*, a Los Angeles-based bi-monthly contemporary art magazine. In 2015, she was filmed by National Geographic in her studio over a two-month period for a short documentary, *Human-Looking Faces on Animal Bodies: Taxidermy as Art*.



ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University builds on the Newcomb College legacy of education, social enterprise, and artistic experience. Presenting inspiring exhibitions and programs that engage communities both on and off campus, the museum fosters the creative exchange of ideas and cross-disciplinary collaborations around innovative art and design. The museum preserves and advances scholarship on the Newcomb and Tulane art collections.

The academic institution for which the museum is named was founded in 1886 as the first degree-granting coordinate college for women in America. The H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College was distinguished for educating women in the sciences, physical education, and, most importantly, art education. Out of its famed arts program, the Newcomb Pottery was born. In operation from 1895 until 1940, the Newcomb enterprise produced metalwork, fiber arts, and the now internationally renowned Newcomb pottery.

In 1996, the Newcomb Art Department completed an expansion and renovation of its facilities that included the addition of the Newcomb Art Museum (previously the Newcomb Art Gallery), an exhibition space dedicated to presenting contemporary and historic exhibits. Housed in the Woldenberg Art Center, the museum today presents original exhibitions and programs that

explore socially engaged art, civic dialogue, and community transformation. The museum also pays tribute to its heritage through shows that recognize the contributions of women to the fields of art and design.

As an entity of an academic institution, the Newcomb Art Museum creates exhibitions that utilize the critical frameworks of diverse disciplines in conceptualizing and interpreting art and design. By presenting issues relevant to Tulane and the greater New Orleans region, the museum also serves as a gateway between on and off campus constituencies.

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ART MUSEUM *of Tulane*

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Free and open to public, the museum is open
Tuesday through Friday, 10 to 5; Saturday and
Sunday 11 to 4; and by appointment.

