



Jessica Joslin's Wunderkammer Creatures

Joslin seeks out and puts to use those bright odds and ends that might catch one's eye in a box full of orphaned fixtures, or glinting up from the sidewalk. While each piece she employs in her eerie animal reliquary is delicately beautiful, it is also the detritus of human engineering and design: old brass buttons and gold braid, glass beads, clockwork cogs and velvet ribbon. Such items are reminiscent of the whimsical technology of a century past, one's grandparents' house, the dark interiors of old fashioned movie theatres - and as such they have an intriguing, wistful quality. In other words, Joslin collects the things that all of us secretly want to, the shiny pieces that we might comb through, handle and admire, but ultimately force ourselves to put down; what would we do with such things?

From the Lisa Sette Gallery Newsletter

A glossy new book featuring Joslin's work, Strange Nature, has just been released. It can be purchased at www.psstudios.com, or through the Lisa Sette Gallery.

IN AN ERA OF PLASTICITY, stale repetition and mass production, we crave character and distinction in art. We're longing for fresh eyes to show us the way out of this maze of static minimalism, creators who respect the value of good, old-fashioned craftsmanship. Perhaps that's why cultivated skill sets and traditional techniques have finally regained relevance in the art world after decades of abstraction. No one's work exemplifies this sea change better than that of Jessica Joslin, a sculptor living in Chicago with her commensurately brilliant husband, the painter Jared Joslin. She's as decisive as she is dreamy, and her exquisite one-of-a-kind creatures — ranging in height from 1 inch to nearly 6 feet tall — are the perfect talismans to ward off modern doldrums.

First off, where are you right now? Your home? Your workshop? Given yours and Jared's aesthetic, the Joslin environs must be marvelous. Will you please describe your wunderkammer world?

JESSICA JOSLIN Both are one and the same. From where I'm sitting, I can see some of our flash art collection (c. 1900-1940). Many of them are very early, attributed to George Burchett. Jared found those, bound together in a small leather book, in a tiny town South of Chicago. They have incredible line work — very fine. They remind me of the natural history illustrations of Albertus Seba in the density of detail. I can also see two Bellmer etchings from Madame Edwarda series, a Ray Caesar print and a Camille Rose Garcia painting. There is a carnival-prize monkey in a red top hat hanging from a tack edged shelf. On the shelf is a mummified toad (found by Jared's dad) climbing up the shoulder of a ceramic lady. Above that is the tin noisemaker collection. There's a tramp-art Popsicle stick lamp on the table and an anatomical model of an ear and a tooth.

In the next room is an Irina Ionesco photograph with a deer skull above it. At the moment, there's a huge candy cane hanging off its antlers. That room also has several pieces of Victorian bird taxidermy and a self-portrait painting of Jared as a *fin de siècle* clown holding a small hairless dog. There is also another of Jared's paintings, a woman reclining on velvet pillows with a monkey peering over her shoulder and a cabinet photograph/drawing by Rick Hards. Opposite the deer skull is a needlepoint sampler-esque piece by Tim Howe, made of children's blocks that spell out *Eat Your Young*.

Jared's and I share a studio, as we have for the past 15 years or so. His easel is right behind me, which makes him a very brave man, since little bits of metal are always flying over into his area. At the moment, he's working on a painting of the two of us, me in a gown, he with a falcon on his arm. There are several new oil paintings leaning around the room including a 20's chanteuse and a portrait of Anita Berber. He has a row of Irving Klaw photos above his desk, several of Bettie Page. His paintbrushes are in a clown-faced teapot.

My corner of the studio is lined with rows and rows of tiny drawers, labeled with things like: mouse bones, fish scales, universal joints, miniature brass bolts, watch chains, brass couplings... Larger objects are in wooden boxes on a shelf. Bones are sorted by type (leg bones, skulls, etc.). Metal parts are sorted by shape and/or type (rods, balls, musical instrument parts, drawer pulls, etc.) I also have boxes of things like antique vestment trims, opera gloves and fur collars. At the moment, I'm working towards a show at Lisa Sette Gallery, so my creatures are everywhere! *Canto & Silva* are above my work desk. *Otto*, a monkey that I made for Jared for our 10TH anniversary, is on a shelf nearby. *Helmut* is peering out of the window at the snowy Chicago day. There are a handful of newly-made creatures clustered in an ornate wood shelf. At the moment, I'm working on a small brass bat with kid leather wings and a monkey swinging from a tree branch.

Where oh where did the idea to create this ever-expanding bestiary come from? Can you trace the concept's origins back to a specific point in time?

There was a specific piece, *Marco*, 1992. He was the first of the beasts. There was a steady progression up until that point though. I started off as a photographer. By the time I hit art school, I was making photos of mixed media constructions, which integrated natural and man-made elements. In part, what started me off on that path was a package that my Dad sent. It was filled with objects that we'd collected when I was little, seedpods and shells and bones. I used those, combined with objects that I'd collected on my own, while wandering around the alleyways of the lower east side of New York. By the time I transferred to Chicago Art Institute, the sculptures that I was making for my photos had become increasingly complex and photographing them had started to seem secondary. Right around then, my apartment got robbed two nights in a row. Photo equipment — all gone. I took this as a signpost and changed majors, using the insurance money to buy some hand tools and a drill press. That's when I got started in earnest.

I was also collecting old typewriters, adding machines and such from the flea markets and dismantling them. The precision of those bolts is just amazing — they are so tightly machined. One day, I found a bag of Victorian millinery supplies — gorgeous black bird wings, head and tail, mounted on delicate thread wrapped wires. When I brought it back to my studio, I knew that I had to make a body for those parts!

You're a self-described "intrigued autodidact" with a solid background in biology and anatomy. How did you go about attaining your knowledge of the inner workings of vertebrate life? Zoos? Museums? Particular books? Home dissections?



A bit of all of the above! When I was little, I planned to become a biologist. When the non-nerds were going to summer camp, I spent my summers at the Acadia Institute of Oceanography, grooming myself my planned career path: going to MIT and then working at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. I was about 9 or 10. The average age for the other kids was about 18 or so (it was considered something impressive to put on a college application). Anyway, it was amazing. I went there for several summers. We collected specimens, did core samples and dredged the bottom of the Atlantic, pulling up strange and beautiful fish with seaweed-like protrusions. We went deep-sea fishing and I caught a shark. We later realized that it was pregnant, and gave it an impromptu C-section. We kept the baby sharks (complete with dangling yolk sac placentas) in a tank in the lab until they could be released. This was in Maine, and I loved that there were more rocky cliffs than beaches (I've never been fond of the beach, except in wintertime). I'd walk along the mist cocooned craggy cliffs, which looked like something from Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, daydreaming about the past and the future.

From a very young age, I was unusually obsessed with the Natural History Museums at Harvard. I was always begging my Dad to bring us there ... again and again. I was utterly enraptured by the taxidermied animals and the incredible collection of Victorian articulated skeletons. It's odd, but somehow I only recently realized that, in part, my fascination had to do with being very near-sighted. I didn't realize that I needed glasses until I was almost 16. I could only see clearly a few feet away. When people said that they saw a bird in flight, I just saw a blurry smudge. To me, it was an intellectual connection ... I knew of them from books and museums. I got very good at recognizing shapes and movements. It didn't occur to me that other people could see the bird *clearly*. The relevant part, in context of my work, is that the only wild animals that I saw ... for *years* really, were either taxidermied or in pictures ... that is the way that I fell in love with the animal kingdom. I've spent many years living in books and museums.

One of the art schools that I went to is the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. One of the main buildings is made of mirrored glass and there is a large fountain in front of it. All species of birds would end up in the pond, having crashed into the glass windows. I would wade in, collect the dead birds, and use them to practice taxidermy, which I learned from old manuals from the library. (Incidentally, that was how I met Jared. One day he said hello and we started talking about the birds floating in the fountain. We quickly realized that we both had freezers full of dead birds, so I offered to give him taxidermy lessons. The rest is history.) Anyway, I learned a great deal about anatomy from doing those bird dissections and from preparing their skins for mounting. I also spent a bit of time at the Field Museum of Natural History, repairing the dinosaur bones and sculpting replacements for missing parts. They have the most amazing collections, many of them behind the scenes. They had rows upon rows of drawers filled with specimens and huge tanks of dermestid beetles for preparing skeletons. Once, Jared saw a huge pair of swans in the tanks. I always wished that I could have seen that.

You use a variety of complex techniques to mount this detailed and multi-faceted work. When and where did you learn all these skills? What challenges do you regularly face? Any particularly odd or interesting “tricks” you’ve learned over the years?

I've learned a lot of skills through my professional work. I've also developed certain specialist techniques over the years, through trial and error. For example, it took me forever to figure out how to make an eyelid *just so*. I use kid leather from antique opera gloves to construct the surround for the glass taxidermy eyes. As in painting, achieving a particular expression is a very finicky process. Sometimes it takes several tries to get the gaze to be naturalistic. I've also spent many years working in shops: model shops, rapid prototyping shops, carpentry shops, sculpture & exhibit houses ... for each, there is a particular skill set that I've had to master; in each case, I've found elements that translate back to how I make my own work.

I think that building prototypes has probably been the most useful in terms of techniques. It requires a level of discipline and precision that agrees with me. If you are building a working prototype (whether of a toy or a machine) it has a specific function to accomplish, within a set of rigid parameters. If the parts don't fit, it won't work. It's common to be working within .010 of an inch accuracy, the thickness of a sheet of paper. Doing that work taught me how to think in terms of *engineering* with regard to my sculptures. It ultimately made it possible to create pieces, in a wide range of scale, that are freestanding and still hold true to my favored materials and aesthetic. In earlier works, they often have a very rigid pose. That is partly because I enjoy that particular quality of some taxidermy, its unnatural symmetry. It was also because I hadn't yet adapted the methods to make the sculptures balance properly in an unusual pose. My pieces are assembled using mechanical connections, so parts are generally drilled, tapped and threaded. Each angle has to be figured out. If a single hole is off, one of the feet might not touch the ground, or it would be lopsided. There is a lot of engineering (and finesse) that goes into making them seem natural and effortless, as if they were meant to be.

How has working with organic materials like bone, skin and taxidermy affected your relationships with living animals, if at all?

I often think about their structure as I'm looking at them. I'll be sitting, cuddled up with a friend's dog, and I'll find myself thinking about where its bones are, relative to its position ... looking at the angles that the limbs form. Those angles are so critical for my work. If the pose isn't fluid, it doesn't have the feeling of being about to spring to life. Because of the type of work that I make, the animals that I meet are muses to me.

Do you always know the form a creature is going to take when you set to work on a new project? Are they born spontaneously from materials you have lying around, inspired by a specific artifact, or do you sometimes gather parts together with a preordained vision? I have a feeling it depends on the beastie...

Yes, it does depend on the creature. They all seem to follow their own path. Sometimes I know exactly what I'm going to make (but not necessarily the specifics). Sometimes I'll set out to make a bird and it turns into a cat along the way! The ones that are more specific are often things that I've had tucked away in the back of my mind, until I come up with a solution to a certain riddle. That riddle might be solved by a new technique that I've learned or a part that I find. For example, I'm making a bat at the moment. I've thought of making one for a long time. I've even collected various weights of black kid leather to use for the wings. The riddle for that piece was: how do I make the bone structure of the wings? It has to be very delicate, as bat wing bones are very fine, but also structurally sound. Of course, it needs to be more than just functional from an engineering standpoint, it's also decorative and it needs to be fluidly integrated with the leather. The discovery that got the bat off the backburner was a set of brass dollhouse curtain rods with tiny turned brass finials on the ends. The finials are solid brass, so there is enough mass to hold a bolt hole. I build the wings from those and took it from there.

Sometimes, with a new piece, I'll start off with one particular object and a general sense of scale and species. I often begin with the pelvis, since that's the center of gravity, or with the feet, since they often have the most components and set the scale of the piece (for example, a single one of Ludwig's feet is about made up of about 30 different parts) . If I come up with a toe configuration that I love, for an entirely different species than I'd planned on, sometimes I'll just shift direction. I usually work on several pieces simultaneously, that way I can keep things moving along, when I have to set one aside to find a particular part. Sometimes it can take a long time to find the perfect piece of 19th century brass vestment trim, or a vase with just the right size and contour. The bodies of my flamingos, *Candido & Caprice*, were made from an old brass vase and it took me several attempts to find one that, when cut into sections, formed the right shape. As I go along, they tell me what they need...



EMCEE Jared Joslin, 2008, Acrylic on canvas

Your creatures are imbued with so much life and personality. Where do their wonderful names come from? Is it ever difficult to part with them?

Thank you! It's always hard to part with them, but I do realize (or I keep *telling* myself to realize!) that I have to make room for the next ones. They would *completely* take over if I hoarded them. I do have a few that are staying with me. When I get things back from the gallery, I'm secretly thrilled that they didn't sell, since I have an excuse to keep them for myself.

The names I collect, just like I do my other parts. When I find a beautiful name, I write it in a special book. Whenever I finish a piece, I bring out the book and decide what suits it best. My Mom is heavily into genealogy, so sometimes she'll send me lists of names from the family tree. Some of them are from books that I've read or from a big old biographical dictionary.

These pieces more readily inspire comparison to film, natural history, literature, architecture, fashion, or even music than to other mixed media art/sculpture. Perhaps because no one with knowledge of your work could mistake any given piece for something other than a Jessica Joslin original. What are some of the more interesting reactions/comparisons your decidedly singular vision has prompted, and whose work has been especially inspiring to you?

Thank you. That is most lovely of you to say so! Hmmm ... honestly, I get quite a few letters from people who are excited to have found my work and say that it's "*just* like _____" (fill in the blank with anything that has bones in it). Some of the most flattering comparisons are Frederic Ruysch, Jan Švankmajer, The Brothers Quay, Pierre Jaquet-Droz's automata, Lee Bontecou, Guiseppe Arcimbaldo, Jeunet's *City of Lost Children*, Walton Ford...

I think that in a broad sense, I look at art that is very different from mine for inspiration. I take niblets of things from all over the place. I'm just as likely to use a detail from a couture gown as a bondage harness. I often look at the images of Albertus Seba, Jaap Best and Eadweard Muybridge when deciding what to make and my old Funk & Wagnalls' wildlife encyclopedias are always at my fingertips. I have appropriated some bits from works by Helmut Newton (*Helmut*, 2005 was named after the late great man. The missing foot, replaced by a wheel, is a secret nod to one of my favorite series by him, of a woman wearing fetish heels in a wheelchair). I also love the lush, stylized look of photographers like Eugenio Recuenco, Erwin Olaf, and Pierre et Gilles. Images and anecdotes of Barnum's American Museum (1841 to 1865) have always set off many and varied sparks.

Lee Bontecou's work really caught me off guard when I first saw it. I don't know how to explain this without sounding presumptuous, but when I saw her work, it almost felt as if I were seeing something that I had made myself in another life or another dimension. Oh, that sounds so corny. It was very powerful experience, though. I was skulking about the corners, trying to keep people from seeing my tears. Of course, the other Joslin artists, Jared as well as his brother Russell — a brilliant photographer — are a constant inspiration.

You and Jared are both very driven and prolific. How has his vision affected yours, and vice versa?

Having a partner-in-crime while navigating the crazy life of an artist has been invaluable! Since we've known each other since art school, there is a shared frame of reference, both visually and experientially. We can speak in shorthand to each other, whether it's about prior works, circus freaks, contemporary art, exotic animal species, or Wiemar Berlin. We have a constant, ongoing dialogue about what each of us is making and thinking about. I don't think that either of us has made a piece, in all the time that we've known each other, without getting feedback from the other along the way.



The circus has been an important influence for both of us through the years. When we first met, we always went to the circus when it came to town. We still make frequent trips to *The Circus World Museum* in Baraboo, Wisconsin, to look at their incredible archives of historical images and carnary paraphernalia. I might find a delicious detail from a circus wagon or animal costume that I'll incorporate, and he may discover a reference photo of a specific performer. It's an endless source of inspiration. Jared's Dietrich-esque portrait of me, *Trainer*, incorporates details from the museum's collection of beautiful antique circus wagons. In Jared's *Circus Self-Portrait*, the types of trim on his jacket are modeled after the type of antique vestment trims that I use, and the dog's collar is one that I'd love to incorporate into one of my sculptures, if only it existed! From time to time, my antique gloves or clothing will be recruited for reference in a painting. He has also used me as a model/muse for his paintings quite a few times and often flattered me by saying that I am an amazing painter (although I've never painted) because of my sharp eye for proportion and anatomy. He more than returns the favor by being brilliantly knowledgeable about animals, their characteristics and poses. He's suggested quite a few things that I'd love to take all the credit for! Sometimes, he'll wander over to look at what I'm doing and suggest something that I would never have thought of ... for example, *Odetta* started off as a tall shore bird. When Jared saw the body section lying on my desk, he thought that it was meant to be positioned in reverse from what I had planned. When I looked at it upside down, I liked the form even better, and ultimately turned it into a kiwi.

There are those who make art because they find it enjoyable or challenging, but most truly visionary artists seem to *need to create to live a healthy life ... it's as important to them as breathing and sleeping.*

“ THERE IS A LOT OF ENGINEERING AND FINESSE THAT GOES INTO MAKING THEM SEEM NATURAL AND EFFORTLESS, AS IF THEY WERE MEANT TO BE ”

It seems likely that you are in the latter category. If so, was there ever a pivotal moment in your youth (or later, if that's the case) when you realized that you needed to be an artist?

Yes, it was towards the beginning of high school. I took a photography class and it swept me off my feet. Science was my first great love, but art takes no prisoners! I never stood a chance. I think that what appealed to me most about the arts, photography in particular, was that it gave me the opportunity to be involved in scenarios that would never happen otherwise. I was 14, so I did the typical arty types of photo shoots ... a person in a milk bath or covered with powder or in a funhouse mirror. I loved having an excuse to ask people to do these things ... and I loved the magic of making the first contact prints and seeing what I had captured. I spent most of high school in the darkroom, learning techniques and honing my skills. I hardly saw the sun for all the years! I don't know if I could pinpoint exactly what it is that still keeps me coming back for more, but I know that if I don't work on art for awhile, I'm as twitchy and agitated as an addict needing a fix. I like the way that being an artist gives everything a subtext. I feel like I always have a secret agenda. It makes me take risks and put myself into situations that I otherwise wouldn't. It gives me the confidence to throw myself into situations that I might not otherwise tackle. I love the challenge of learning new skills and discovering ways of integrating them into my personal work.

Do you have any interest in branching out into other mediums, for instance stop-motion animation, film, fashion or puppetry? Who would be your “dream collaborators”?

Funny that you ask, I was just thinking about this *yesterday!* Yes, I am curious about dabbling in stop motion animation when the time is right.





EGON 17" x8" x9", 2008 Antique hardware and findings, brass, bone, leather, steel, cast/painted plastic, glass eyes

COILHOUSE

COILHOUSE



HELMUT 36" x12" x40", 2005. Bone, brass, ball finials, leather, brass horn, velvet, glass eyes



For my first experiments, I think that I may go very retro tech and make a zoetrope or a little flip-book. I've always loved the flip-books of Eadweard Muybridge images and I think they would serve as a good model for me. I like the quiet interaction of those formats. Also, the way that I construct my work would make it very well-suited to these media. I would need to design pieces specifically for that purpose. By the time my sculptures are finished, most of the movements are fixed permanently, so that they can be freestanding. It would be interesting to work with someone who has a solid background technically, and of course they would need to have an aesthetic that is compatible. I do get a fair amount of inquiries from animators who would like to use my work, but my feeling is that I would like it to be a true collaboration, and I'm waiting for someone who would really bring something interesting to the table ... not just provide the equipment.

If you were to host a lavish dinner party and could invite any 6 guests (living or dead), who would you invite?

Jared, Hans Bellmer, Lee Bontecou, David Lynch, Tom Waits, Matthew Barney.

This last question is a bit morbid, but quite relevant given the nature of your work. Is there a specific manner in which you would prefer your mortal remains to be preserved? (Preferably after expiring from extreme old age, still with your wits and your family about you and having lived an exceedingly full and magnificent life.)

Well that's a damn good question! Maybe for my last piece, I'll commission someone to install parts that I've designed on my own skeleton. That could be interesting, though a wee bit more sensationalist and egomaniacal than is my tendency, ha. Honestly, I haven't thought about it in much depth ... more in a toss my ashes somewhere pretty kind of way. There's something there though. I wonder what kind of brass I would like to wear *forever*...

INTERVIEW Meredith Yayanos

