

THIS PAGE:-
Aster
OPPOSITE:-
Ludwig



JESSICA JOSLIN

**A VISIT TO THE WORLD THAT JESSICA JOSLIN'S
ELEGANT CURIOSITIES INHABIT IS LIKELY TO SUBVERT
YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF ANIMALS YOU MAY HAVE
ENCOUNTERED, IMAGINED OR DREAMT ABOUT.**

WORDS BY JARED JOSLIN



Jessica's menagerie is comprised of creatures that seem to be straight out of the subconscious. Each piece begins as an eclectic array of discovered objects, which in her hands, awakes to a new life, as exotic beasts. This alchemy happens atop a turn of the century watchmaker's desk; from among its many drawers, and from the mahogany shelves along the studio walls, she pulls from a vast assortment of collected objects: lamp fixtures and umbrella tips, ruffled silk edgings and kidskin opera gloves, fish spines and teapots. To each material, she breathes a new life and function.

She embarked upon this body of work in 1992, shortly before we met at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Through the years, she has devoted countless hours to her menagerie. She has also worked steadily to hone her technical skills, through the various trades of model making, prototyping, casting and carpentry. Through this type of professional training, she has developed an incredibly diverse set of skills and a precision in construction that makes her creatures appear effortless, even though they are often highly complex feats of engineering.

Her work is meticulously crafted, with strict attention paid to every minuscule detail. The anatomy of each creature is anchored together by nuts and bolts, couplings and connectors, joints and screws. The metal limbs are formed from antique metal parts. Soldering or welding would destroy the patina; so all joints are mechanically fastened.

Hidden in plain sight, within the work, are recognizable bits and pieces of found materials. These are objects that you may have stumbled across in an antique shop, perhaps been drawn to aesthetically, but probably wouldn't know what to do with; tarnished teaspoons, bits of antique brass, broken drawer pulls, or even an old silver teapot with no spout. Jessica sees the forms of familiar objects in ways that most of us are blind to; she has a brilliant knack for transforming unexpected objects into the forms of animal physicality. Bullet casings become the toes of a

parrot, a silver toast warmer transforms into rib cages and plumes, musical instrument parts take on a new tune as they form the curve of a spine or the arc of a wing. Each detail beckons the viewer to look closer; and the closer you get, the more there is to see.

What is your first memory of seeing art?

When I was a small girl, the curtains in my room were ones that my father had made for my room. They were cerulean blue, with a repeating silk-screened pattern depicting the face of Venus, from Botticelli's Birth of Venus. I was fascinated by that image of serene beauty, made even more magical by the light shining through the fabric. At the time, I was not yet aware of Botticelli's work, so I assumed that it was a portrait of my mother; it looks very much like her. To this day, I always think of her when I see that particular painting.

When we first met, you had just begun work on the beasts. Would you describe what was your earlier artwork like and how that transitioned into your current work?

I had been making mixed media assemblage pieces, which incorporated natural objects, like bones and seedpods, combined with parts scavenged from antique mechanical components. They were minuscule constructions, often housed in boxes, somewhat reminiscent of Cornell. At the time, I spent many of my days dissecting old adding machines and antiquated scientific apparatus and haunting flea markets on the wrong side of the tracks. I had also begun to teach myself taxidermy, using instructional manuals from the school library.

I found the bird specimens that I practiced on in a fountain outside the school. There was a mirrored glass building and birds would unsuspectingly crash into it, seeing the reflected sky, and fall broken, into the water. I often saw the maintenance crew fishing them out with a long net and dumping them into the trash. It made me sad to think that those beautiful little creatures were being tossed out with the garbage. I have always loved taxidermy displays in natural history museums, so I decided that might be a fitting way to pay tribute. I began to collect the birds out of



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Luca, Helmut,
Gustav

the fountain, before they were taken away and store them for my taxidermy experiments.

Of course, this was how we first met. You introduced yourself to me one day outside the school, and we immediately began to talk about the birds floating in the fountain. We quickly discovered that we both had freezers full of birds collected from the fountain, so I offered taxidermy lessons... and the rest is history!

Anyway, as I grew more skilled at taxidermy, my artwork began to incorporate more of those elements, integrated with antique mechanical parts. In time, it was a natural progression to making an animal shaped sculpture.

Which very large creature would you most enjoy making?

I've always wanted to make a giraffe. In part, it's because I fall in love every time they bat their huge eyelashes! In terms of my work, they seem perfect because their anatomy is already very stylized. The neck is long and elegant, the legs graceful, the head and eyes are proportionately large and of course, there are those wonderful knobby horns! I'm also intrigued by the thought of a larger grouping of the same species- like a pack of wolves or a flock of birds. All in good time...

When you make "twin" sculptures (for example, the fighting emu that you are currently working on) how important is their interaction?

It's key, although the way that they play off each other varies with the piece. At the moment, I'm making an emu with a monkey riding on its back. Soon, there will be a pair of emu, each with a rider, as if they are engaged in a race, or a cockfight. The emu are each fitted with an armored headpiece and a studded red leather saddle, made from an antique pony harness. The riders sit astride, holding the reins. They will be wearing different colors, as in a sporting event, and the emu will be posed as if they are snapping at each other. I picture these creatures engaging in a mysterious competition and frozen in the heat of the action. →



JESSICA HAS A BRILLIANT KNACK FOR TRANSFORMING UNEXPECTED OBJECTS INTO THE FORMS OF ANIMAL PHYSICALITY. BULLET CASINGS BECOME THE TOES OF A PARROT, A SILVER TOAST WARMER TRANSFORMS INTO RIB CAGES AND PLUMES, MUSICAL INSTRUMENT PARTS TAKE ON A NEW TUNE AS THEY FORM THE CURVE OF A SPINE OR THE ARC OF A WING.



WITH MY WORK, THE EXTERNAL FORM IS INTEGRATED WITH THE INTERNAL STRUCTURES, SO IT BECOMES A HYBRID OF THE LIVING ANIMAL AND THE SKELETAL STRUCTURE.

In other pairs, the interactions are far more serene. My flamingos, 'Candido and Caprice', have a similar stance, mirroring each other. Their necks entwine, they can be posed to complement each other. There is something about twins that I find deeply appealing visually. There is also an inherent advantage in documentation, since two different angles or poses can be shown simultaneously. The pairing also helps to put the creatures into a narrative context, an environment. It feels one step closer to life.

16 years ago, you gave me a taxidermy lesson at the kitchen table. In recent years, there has been resurgence of interest in taxidermy and "taxidermy art." Do you consider your work to be in that category?

No, it's not taxidermy. It is very closely related however. I work with animal forms and using animal parts, but since I'm using bones rather than skins, it's not strictly taxidermy, it's closer to osteology. Taxidermy is concerned with the exterior form of an animal; its structure is based on a living creature. With my work, the external form is integrated with the internal structures, so it becomes a hybrid of the living animal and the skeletal structure. That said, I do think that there is some wonderful work being done by taxidermy artists nowadays and I agree that my work shares a similar sensibility in some regards. Some of my favorites are Les Deux Garcons, the Idiots collective and Sarina Brewer.

Which sideshow performer(s) do you most identify with?

Well, I must fess up to having a bit of a crush on Johnny Eck, but I think I'd have to say Frances O'Connor. I'd be flattered to think that I have even a tiny fraction of her poise and grace. How can you not love a woman who can hold a spoon with her foot, yet do it with such consummate elegance that you might not even notice, at first, that it isn't being held in her hand. What I relate to the most is that she was able to accomplish very difficult feats, yet make it look effortless. That is something that I always strive to achieve in my work.

Of these three Leonardo da Vinci quotes, which do you agree with most and why?

TOP: Lautrec
BOTTOM: Marcel

"He who possesses most must be most afraid of loss"
"Where the spirit does not work with the hand there is no art"

"One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself"
I'd choose the second, although they are all wonderful! I've always had a deep respect for artists and artisans whose craftsmanship is tight. It is a beautiful example of mind and hand working together. In some ways, that is why I often look to the past for inspiration. I'm enraptured by the amount of attention paid to detail. The thought that someone devoted so many hours to perfecting the smallest nuance is wonderfully romantic. You can tell that the maker put their whole heart and soul into it. For me, art isn't only about the concept; it's also about the physical object. I love it when artwork incorporates a demonstration of skill or dexterity in its execution. Sometimes it seems almost as if the spirit of the person who made is inscribed in the object itself...by the hands building it, or painting it. Obviously minimalism never clicked with me!

If you could be your own hybrid or chimera, which animal sections would you be composed of?
I'd have the legs of a secretary bird, the quick eyes and the silent wings of an owl, the softly spotted fur and velvety ears of a fawn, the tail of a lemur and the voice of a lyrebird.

When was the last time one of your sculptures appeared to you in a dream and what was the situation?
One of my little birds began to move and sing for me, watching me quizzically from where it was perched atop its tiny blue circus ball. Its motions were clockwork, yet incredibly lifelike and it sang in a series of strange clicks and chirps. As I reached to pet its head, it flew out the window and away. I'd like to think that it eventually came back home to nest. ■

See more of Jessica's work at www.jessicajoslin.com



THERE IS OFTEN A HAUNTED QUALITY ABOUT OLD PHOTOGRAPHS. ONE SEES FACES FROM THE PAST, GLIMPSES INTO ANOTHER ERA, AND WONDERS WHAT THOUGHTS AND DREAMS WERE FLICKERING BEHIND THEIR EYES, WHAT INTRIGUES CONSUMED THEIR DAYS.

TEXT BY JESSICA JOSLIN

JARED JOSLIN



OPPOSITE:-
Shore Leave
TOP-LEFT:
Circus 'Self-Portrait'
TOP-RIGHT:
Fan-Dancer

In Jared's portraits, there is a sense of layered glamour and pathos, reminiscent of Weimar Berlin, artists such as Christian Schad, Otto Dix and August Sander, as well as the glittering deco-era elegance of nightclubs in Hollywood's golden age. Jared uses images of glamour as a foil for the strong emotional undercurrents contained in his works. One sees the influence of early pin-up illustrators like Enoch Bolles and Gil Elvgren, yet the demeanor of his subjects is self-reflective, even challenging, rather than lighthearted. The subjects have a self-possessed quality, regardless of whether they appear to be aware of the viewer's gaze or not. In some instances, their penetrating eyes meet the viewer directly; in some, they seem lost in a reverie. As Jared once said regarding his fascination with the past, "It's the feeling that you don't necessarily fit within your own time. You're drawn to the past in ways you can't quite understand but feel the pull of it and want to take on their dreams."

In your recent series, Shadow of the Silver Moon, you imagine a decadent nightclub in the 1930's. What does the air smell like and what music is playing?
The air is filled with Chesterfields and champagne, freshly varnished veneer and beeswaxed bar tops. The ladies hair is perfumed in lavender, accompanied by the unmistakable scent of their powdered bodies. The sweet aroma of carnations swirl off gentlemen's lapels into the air.

The music is jazz, with emphasis on trumpet and the rhythm section; good excitable beats to dance to. Think Louis Armstrong and his Hot Seven jazz band, playing songs like the 'Alligator Crawl' or 'Heebie Jeebies'. For slower tempos, cabaret singers like Marlene Dietrich or Greta Keller sing songs about beauty, romance and sadness.

If you painted me as a clown, what would I look like?
I would take the inspiration from Edward J. Kelly's photographs of when clowns had an otherworldly quality

to them and that specific kind of integrity. I see you in a tight fitting body suit with a low sheen and olive green and cream vertical stripes that button delicately up the center. Worn over that, a top with gathered, puffy black sleeves and shorts with silk slash inserts in burgundy red. Your face would be simply powdered with thin crimson lips and charcoal accented eyes, your hair is a pale orange worn in a fashion to mimic flames, and a velvet bow tied around your neck would be in olive green.

Above your work desk you've hung images by Irving Claw and Enoch Bolles. Do you feel that the influence of such pinup artists was particularly relevant to this recent show?
I believe they were relevant, as I was looking for ways to create my own version of pinups. I like to surround myself

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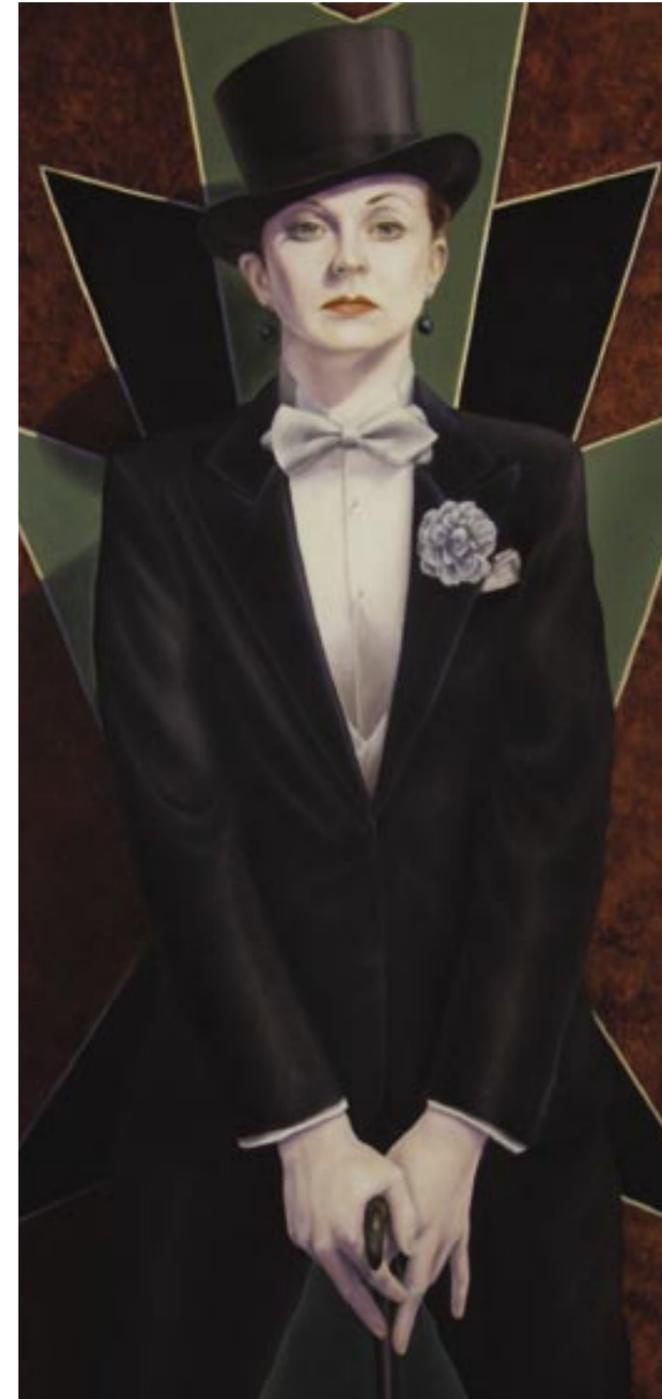
with imagery that will influence my work and stimulate my retinas. A direct influence is sometimes made, but more often than not, the images I enclose myself with sneak their way into my work subconsciously.

The nightlife of Weimar Berlin was famously decadent. If you could visit any of those clubs or cabarets in its heyday, which one would it be? Would you describe a few tidbits about the atmosphere?

It's hard to pick just one, but the first one that came to mind was the Eldorado. It welcomes guests with a huge banner that proclaims "Hier ist's Richtig!" (Here it is right!). The clientele was an eclectic mix of artists and writers, Berlin high society, beautiful ladies in evening finery, Dodos (tuxedoed, sophisticated power women, wearing monocles, with immaculately coiffed hair and powdered →



I LOVE THE IDEA OF RESURRECTING AN IMAGE, A FORGOTTEN PERSON, AND BREATHING A NEW LIFE INTO THAT IMAGE... I WANT TO TAKE ON THEIR DREAMS; IN RETURN I PUT THEM BACK IN THE SPOTLIGHT.



faces), uncommonly attractive prostitutes and cross dressers. The atmosphere is low lit, in tones of blue. The décor has frescos depicting lust filled Greek themes and garlands hang everywhere. Atop the circular tables, are strings of balloons that float from the tops of champagne bottles. There is a large ballroom for dancing and a cabaret stage for various lavish entertainments. The orchestra plays provocative and haunting songs from French and Argentinean repertoires.

Which are your favorite images by August Sander and Christian Schad?

Of August Sander's photographs, the portrait of Otto Dix and his wife, Martha and the secretary at West German Radio, wearing a luscious silk dress and holding a cigarette in her incredibly beautiful, long fingered hands. Also, the two circus ushers, standing in front of traveling circus wagon, holding programs. Of Christian Schad, there are three, his enigmatic Self-Portrait in Vienna, painted in 1927, wearing a transparent green shirt. His sensuous half nude portrait of his mistress Maika from 1929. His portrait of Count St. Genois d'Anneaucourt, 1927 with the fantastic hawk nosed transvestite in the background.

What is the lure of images of faces from the past?

The images of these faces are a portal to another time. This discovery captivates my imagination in a strange and unique way. For me, there is an aura of mystery surrounding the image. Their eyes, expressions and gestures speak of different times and what they have experienced; a time that I wish I could perhaps be a part of. It's a way for me to connect to the people who existed then. I also love the idea of resurrecting an image, a forgotten person, and breathing a new life into that image. When the connection happens, a face speaks to me in a significant way, and it's a kind of beckoning. I want to take on their dreams; in return I put them back in the spotlight.

What is your favorite circus memory?

Since I mainly view the circus through vintage photographs and books, I feel as though I've stolen ghost memories of the past and have made them my own. My memories of the circus seem to mostly appear in sepia tones.

From my own experience, I love the memory of our first circus together, when we celebrated my 22nd Birthday. The sight of towering stilt-walkers dressed in lavish costumes really fueled my imagination, as did the contortionist with her performing doves. Seeing Cirque du Soleil's Alegria, with Elena Lev perform her contortionist/silver hoops act is also a favorite memory; I was hypnotized by her serpentine movements and by the way her polished hoops shone in the spotlights.

What is next for you in terms of upcoming series?

I want to produce a dramatic, yet dark and quiet environment for my subjects to live in. I will be focusing on isolating the figures within a darker space, with certain areas surfacing out of the darkness more than others. I want to explore more evocative imagery, including visually seductive textures such as furs and kid leather, velvets and satins, which will compliment the creamy skin and silkiness of hair. Think of it as Caravaggio meets Enoch Bolles by way of Tamara de Lempicka. ■

Find out more about Jared's work at www.jaredjoslin.com

OPPOSITE: Strongman
THIS PAGE: Emcee