

## REVIEWS

### "JESSICA JOSLIN: THE BRASS MENAGERIE"

LISA SETTE GALLERY  
SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA  
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by D WOOD



A key dynamic within contemporary art is the interplay of attraction and repulsion. A viewer is drawn to a work's composition or surface, only to be repelled by morbid content. But while Jessica Joslin, like Damien Hirst, has a penchant for expired animals, one's reaction to her "Brass Menagerie" is an emotional ricochet from attraction to repulsion and back again. Like the mutts that peer out from cages at pet shelters, these charming, endearing creatures beg to be adopted, although their ancestry remains questionable.

Joslin works as a commercial model maker, building prototypes for toys. She embarked on the creation of curiosities for cabinets in 1992, when she found a bag of taxidermied bird parts, originally intended for early twentieth-century

millinery. She primarily uses mechanical fastenings—miniature bolts, springs, hinges, universal joints—and some of the creatures are adjustable and can be disassembled for shipping. All of her parts have been legally and ethically obtained or cast and molded by Joslin herself.

From across the gallery one is attracted to the animal's familiar stances: a cat licking its paw, a fawn with ears pricked for sound, a fowl whose eye is searching for grubs, an albatross with its wings spread to dry. Joslin has a gift for capturing the physiognomy of fauna, adding realism to these fantastic beings. But while the forms are recognizable, these animals and birds exist as lines in space; their heads are mere skulls.

The skeletons are constructed of antique brass hardware and lamp fittings, cast pewter, wood finials, umbrella tips, buttons, beads, bone, and various other materials. One admires the perceptive eyes that have sorted through boxes at flea markets, and the pack-rat zeal that has housed the bits and pieces until needed. One also appreciates Joslin's ability to combine disparate parts, not only with creativity, but with technical prowess. The positive components are seamlessly melded, but the negative space, the imagined organs, muscles and blood, is also palpable.

All of the creatures have glass eyes, a factor that helps to encourage human bonding. Remember how lifelike antique dolls with glass eyes can seem? The same illusion of life is incorporated here. In addition, Joslin frequently uses glove leather for the ears, adding a visual softness that invites petting, albeit in a tiny portion of the body, as in the cuddly ears of the otherwise off-putting sculpture *Helmut*.

Joslin has given a name to each critter in her menagerie. Traditional pet names such as Spot or Ginger have been set aside for more formal or archaic ones—names like *Lambert*, *Serafina*, *Ludwig*, and *Perrin* signify that they, and their owners, are extraordinary. Some of them are set



on fringed leather bases or perched on balls, perhaps to represent the precariousness of the reality/dream balance? Joslin continuously plays with our sensibilities, raising questions that are never clearly answered.

*Cornelius* is a hare standing on its hind legs with antique hardware and chandelier arms that elegantly define the curves of his spine and limbs. The shifting tones of the found objects and the varied joints provide interest for the viewer's roving eye, and one is continuously reminded of the former life of the found media.

*Marco* is an inanimate organ grinder's monkey, the cheeky assistant that works the crowd for coins. He sits, balanced by a curling tail, and proffers a ball. His jaunty hat holds down unruly fur hair and a grimace reveals tiny sharp teeth. Cute yet threatening, *Marco*, like all of Joslin's sculpture, is a compelling composition of opposites.

**D Wood** is a freelance writer who specializes in fine craft.

#### clockwise from top left

*Cornelius*, 2006  
antique hardware and findings, chandelier arms, brass, bone, glove leather, fur and glass eyes  
24 1/2 x 6 x 11"

*Marco*, 2006  
antique hardware and findings, bone, beads, fur, painted wood, satin and velvet collar, glove leather and glass eyes  
9 x 5 x 9"

*Helmut*, 2005  
bone, brass, ball finials, leather, brass horn, velvet, glass eyes  
36 x 12 x 40"

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