

*You could say it's my instinct. Yes I still have one.*

—Neko Case

## Roxanne Jackson: We Believe in *Something*

By Christopher Atkins

The *scala naturae* is a medieval diagram that organizes all living creatures into an ascending hierarchical scale that is topped by the most perfect and everlasting being, God. From the bottom to the top, there is a separation of species into broad taxonomies such as plants, wild beasts, domestic animals, and docile creatures. Human beings, with our advanced capacities but natural fallibility, are located near the top of this chain.

Roxanne Jackson's ambitious Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) exhibition "We Believe in Some *thing*" critiques the complex presumptions that mark the differences between animals and humankind. Working with a variety of concepts and mediums, she looks at many examples throughout the range of contemporary cultures, which are based on the idea of human/animal hybridity. Jackson says, "An investigation of the unconscious mind and our inextricable link to the animal world may reveal certain truths about the human condition. This body of work is informed by both evolutionary theories and horror films. The former teaches us survival-oriented traits, while the latter allows us to express our fears."

While the *scala naturae* is now a scientific anachronism, it's worth pointing out just a few of its presumptions. First, it simplifies the natural world into an ascending chain that ignores the overlapping networks of predator, prey, and decomposition that entwine all animals in a larger ecological system. Second, there is no acknowledgment of the hybridity, cross-pollination, and mutations that occur naturally among species. Third, there is a presumption that as you ascend the ladder, there is an increasing superiority. Humans aren't just *different* from what's below us on the scale, *we're better*. The lingering effects of this kind of diagram on our relationships with animals, and even with other humans, are evident; we have only to look at evolutionary diagrams and family trees to see how organizational charts try to clarify information by oversimplifying complex relationships.

Before Jackson begins making her carefully molded sculptures, she has already researched Native American folklore, gleaned images from newspaper articles and nature magazines, and watched hours of film. Within all of this material, she is particularly

attentive to specific instances of transformation where humans take on animal traits and vice-versa. Jackson's *White Diamond* (2009) is a buffalo head rendered in ceramic, white glaze, and flock, based on an important Native American symbol. Drawing on a Lakota story of a woman who first appeared to two hunters as a white buffalo, many people often greet naturally born albino buffaloes as good luck and as omens that mark an era of salvation and increased awareness of Native American culture. In contrast, some sub-Saharan cultures in Africa profess a superstition against albino animals and humans, believing albinos are bad luck and are a threat to social conventions.

While these perceptions of natural mutations are seemingly contradictory, they show us that human-animal interaction "is not about given animal forms but about animal capacities and powers. To become animal is to be drawn into a zone of action or passion that one can have in common with an animal."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to folklore and superstitions, Jackson is equally interested in the horror film genre as another realm where the tensions between humans and animals are visualized. While many of these films are based on hunter-prey, kill-or-be-killed plot trajectories, the horror narratives don't make direct appearances in her work. Jackson is more interested in the individual monsters from these films, and again, specific instances of aberrant hybridity. Werewolves, vampires, and zombies are just a few of the most familiar movie monsters that combine human traits with animal senses of smell and sight, as well as their predatory instincts. For her, "These images provoke a psychological simile between animal and human, instinct and reason, the subconscious and the conscious."

In *Devouring Mother* (2009), a wolf's bared teeth and snarled muzzle emerge from the mouth of a human head. Jackson's precisely molded and glistening glazed forms are both beautiful and grotesque, and ask us to consider how animal instincts can live *within* human nature. And in doing so, she presents an interesting paradox, such as that noted by Simon Critchley: "There is something charming about an animal becoming human [but] when the human becomes animal, then the effect is disgusting."<sup>2</sup>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

*Hoody*, 2009, hoody, ceramic, platinum gold luster, flock, 7 x 10 x 18 inches

*White Diamond*, 2009, ceramic, glaze, flock, 27 x 18 x 16 inches

*Pachyderm*, 2009, pink foam, plaster, expandable foam, gold bricks, primer, flock, 51 x 34 x 65 inches

FRONT:

*We Believe in Something*, 2009, wigs, ceramic, glaze, flock, variable dimensions

FLAP:

*Lyuba Twins* (detail), 2009, ceramic, glaze, flock, 9 x 108 x 45 inches



*A gentle and reasonable being can be transformed into a maniac or a savage beast. One is always inclined to lay the blame on external circumstances, but nothing could explode in us if it had not been there.*

—Carl Jung

Jackson's work unpacks the familiar formal conventions of monsters from books and movies, but asks us to consider the "monster" as a person struggling to withdraw from the desires they'd rather keep private and unseen. Recognizing how these monsters from literature and cinema are pushed to the fringes of society, Jackson makes her ceramic and resin heads emphasize the monstrous body as the boundary between instinctual nature and culture; it's a warning against giving over to one's animal instincts and crossing a line from which there is no return. These fears stem from the proximity of animal instinct to human behavior and the threat of relations with "the other."

Otherness has always been a convenient device for projecting the differences between what is normal and what is abnormal, "a scapegoat mechanism whereby traits causing anxiety in humans are gathered up, expelled, and projected..."<sup>3</sup> Marking people as "other" has been used throughout history to justify cultural superiority and alienation in order to make claims that a person or an entire race is uncivilized. Jackson's *Hoody* (2009) is a ceramic vampire head covered by a cotton, hooded sweat-shirt. The vampire has always been a villainous figure, but it has also become a crude metaphor for an invasive and bloodthirsty parasite. In other words, while monsters are representations of an internal struggle between conflicting desires, the term "monster" can also be imposed from the outside so that a person is forced to see oneself through the eyes of another.<sup>4</sup>

There is a long tradition of zoos, menageries, and other spaces where animals are contained and put on display to entertain and educate audiences. Originating in sixteenth-century colonial expeditions and the Enlightenment-era pursuit of knowledge, cabinets of curiosities sprouted from the desire to understand, among other things, animals and the natural environment by collecting specimens. Removing animals from their natural environment, independent of migration patterns and away from their social units, made it easier to study them under controlled circumstances.

Jackson's *Lyuba* (2009) is an intentionally unspecific pair of stillborn calves molded in ceramic, covered with flock, then laid

on the gallery floor so their bodies mirror each other. Named (but not modeled) after a baby mammoth corpse that was recently uncovered in Siberia, *Lyuba* illustrates how exhibitions can create spectacles out of death. And in this case, these calves are meant to show how rare artifacts create a "museal" effect as examples of the creative forces of nature, and also how "museums accord objects particular significances"<sup>5</sup> when they are put on display.

As people make lifestyle adjustments to minimize human impact on the environment, and do what they can to conserve natural resources, many can't help acknowledging how much the effects of global climate change, pollution, and species extinction will affect humankind. After all, as Jackson reminds us, people are animals, too. Yet theological and scientific arguments for the physiological cleavages between humans and animals have made it more difficult to appreciate our connection to the natural world. The cultural fantasy of monsters is a warning against the defects that threaten what is essentially human. As we look forward, and our dependence on technology increases, and human-electronic interfaces become more common, perhaps it will become easier to reconsider and explore the possibilities for creative, constructive, and alternative forms of hybridity.

*Christopher Atkins is the MAEP coordinator.*

Notes

1. Christopher Cox, "Of Humans, Animals, & Monsters," *Becoming Animal* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 23.
2. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 34.
3. Dominick LaCapra, *History & Its Limits* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 155.
4. Jennifer A. Gonzalez, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 23.
5. Daniel J. Sherman & Irit Rogoff, *Museum Culture: Histories, Discoveries, Spectacles* (London: Routledge, 1994), ix.

This exhibition is presented by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, an artist-run curatorial department of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which is made possible by generous support from the Jerome Foundation.



**We Believe in Something**  
Roxanne Jackson

August 28 to November 1, 2009  
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Galleries

**Opening**  
Thursday, August 27, at 7 p.m.

**Artist Talk**  
Thursday, September 17, at 7 p.m.

**Critics' Triologue**  
Thursday, October 15, at 7 p.m.,  
*With Dr. John Troyer, Centre for Death and Society,  
University of Bath, England*

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC,  
AND TAKE PLACE IN THE MAEP GALLERIES.

For more information about the artist, this exhibition,  
and MAEP, visit:

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