

Jamie Levine in Discussion with Jay Roth

Jason Roth: Your work makes a very strong first impression on people when they first walk into a space and see it – myself included. That said, I'd rate the massive eight-and-a-half foot giraffe you created for a show in Index Gallery in Newark as the most striking of all. Can you tell me more about it, and, specifically what it means to you?

Jamie Levine: Actually, she's a hybrid creature – half human female, half giraffe. I was inspired by the fact that, to many cultures, the giraffe itself was thought to be a hybrid – a composite created from a leopard and a camel. Even today, its scientific name reflects that, so I used the title of the piece “Hominidae Giraffa Camelopardalis.” To me, the sculpture crosses what I perceive to be the thin between animal and human. She shows the things we have in common, and illustrates the possibility of what could become our future.

JR: What kind of future?

JL: The disturbing possibilities of contemporary genetic manipulation. My art envisions some kind of altered future, a future, a future that's coming all too fast.

JR: So, did this hybrid mutation happen for a reason we can't yet ascertain? I think it's important to mention that the giraffe/female has a human vagina; and what's more, that you can only see her vagina when you approach her, up close, and look into the mirrored plinth she's standing on. For me, it's like you're speculating on a strange, fetishistic world where our most extreme desires can turn into actual animals; like, could we make miniature giraffe sex-slave objects to fulfill people's fantasies...?

JL: That suggests a whole lot of ethical questions: how do we treat this new being we've created? What's does it mean when one says “someone was treated like an animal?” I think it suggests debasement, exploitation, and cruelty towards a perceived lower form of existence...Does the hybrid giraffe have the same rights as regular humans? Who decides? How do we live with what we have done? I want my viewers take to task a Society that is already making bio-engineered creatures a reality.

JR: So where does your vision and this possible future merge? For me, it's just plain formal, as in: you find a way to bring it all together via your craft.

JL: Yes. That's why scale is such an important factor for me, for instance. I really want the forms I create to interact seamlessly with the physical space that the viewer inhabits. I go to a lot of trouble in the manner in which I craft my objects because I want people to feel an immediate connection with this new reality, this new being. I don't want them to even pause to think. So I add lots of realistic details, I take the time to layer the silicone of her form so that it mimics human skin – and sense that there's blood flowing, a heart beating, underneath. Ultimately, there are all sorts of questions that arise because this new being from the “future” inhabits our present space, but I think that the fantasy being open ended is okay. Kafka wrote his “Metamorphosis” and just came out and said here he is, Gregor Samsa: an insect!!

JR: Getting back to that mirrored plinth, and the way we encounter her... I think that's important in all your work, namely, the way you display it: so dramatically, and yet intimately. So is it safe to say you're luring the viewer in making them discover her sex, as it were, so they can have a more intimate experience with themselves?

JL: Yes! And the reflection of the mirror is there so that the viewer can imagine themselves as this animal—because ultimately, these fantasies are a part of all genetic practices.

JR: I want to talk to about another piece I find really striking: “Come Play with Me”: it's a sculpture of a small child on a wooden plank swing, only its limbs are mutated into store-bought chicken wings and thighs. What made it even more chilling and ominous to me was the fact that it was displayed alone, spot lit – the only thing in the room.

JL: The head was cast from a doll: I altered it in a number of ways so that it would seem like a seamless, total being: I used a flex-shaft jewelry drill to make its eyes deeper and more expressive; I expanded the raw chicken parts to fuse better with the

newborn-doll limbs. I liked the drama that the spotlight and swing and the emptiness of the space created. That made this new creature so believable. Verisimilitude, truth, and honesty play a major role in genetics, the world of chimeras, and in my work.

JR: The treatment of the skin, while life-like in appearance, had certain deathliness to it –almost as if the entire child came from the plastic wrapping the chicken did. Was this on purpose?

JL: Wow, I like that image. Absolutely! It's a fantastical being, but it also seems totally plausible at the same time. I worked hard to get that weird balance.

JR: You placed the chicken-child hybrid on a swing entirely too high for a child to be trusted, especially when at that age, a child can barely hold their head up. To my mind, this gave it a great sense of macabre tension.

JL: Tension is key. To make the viewer uncomfortable with the possibility of a child falling to its demise...or: will it fly?

JR: Obviously it could not fly.

JL: It seems as though it might attempt to, as though it is in peril but it was not given the proper tools to survive. This all stems from the featherless chicken.

JR: Featherless chicken?

JL: An actual genetically altered domestic fowl, bred by Israeli scientists in May 2002. It was created to cut down on air conditioning costs in warmer countries where chickens are bred to increase egg production: only the scientists didn't take into account that, without feathers, a chicken is subject to sunburn, sores, infections and, mosquito bites: it even gets mauled while it's mating...

JR: I enjoy how your work is mirroring our darkest feelings: it shocks us, and confronts us with awkward realizations. But the macabre has a beauty to it. Does it come from your training in other mediums? Could you talk for a minute about your training in jewelry?

JL: For thousands of years people have been adorning themselves with jewelry, for a variety of reasons, such as: identity/social status, religious reasons, and self-expression...the list goes on and on. It symbolizes something. I make adornments for the same reasons animals do: mating rites. That's something we share with animals. We advertise ourselves; we try to attract a mate. Only, the female giraffe doesn't show off like a female human. So, I didn't adorn her per se—but I did embellish her, so to speak. Categories of ornamentation are getting more blurred these days. For instance: plastic surgery, and permanent augmentations to the body of all kind are voluntary, and, in this way, are also a kind of 'ornament.' I added to my giraffe -- an animal -- the sorts of permanent alterations that human women are choosing today to keep themselves attractive.

JR: What are your plans for the work after you leave the program? What sorts of forms, hybrid or otherwise, do you think it will take?

JL: My next body of work will continue to use genetic modification as a springboard for my figurative hybridized creatures. I'm thinking about creating environments/worlds --- larger installations that engage with the space. Gathering information from specialists in the field of science prior to doing studio work seems like my next clear step.