



When Species Mate

Jamie Levine



“Though her sculptures are carefully crafted by hand, Jamie Levine also explores scientific frontiers. Her remarkably lifelike hybrids of human and animal anatomies, which are typically placed in efficiently narrative environments, embody the possibilities and fears of genetic engineering.”

Matthew Nichols
Critic, Artist

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Welcoming the First Chimera	6
Figures	8
When Species Mate	42
Jamie Levine in Discussion with Jay Roth	52
Kiki Smith Interviewed by Jamie Levine	56

Acknowledgments

Starbucks, Robert Browning—for believing in me, Shannon Bellum,
Rick Marshall, Walt Swales, Andrew Atkinson, Iain Kerr, Eleanor Heartney,
Matthew Nichols, Kiki Smith, Catherine Bebout, Louis Davies,
James Siena, Saya Woolfalk, Vicki DaSilva, Bill Carroll, Steve DiBenedetto,
Nancy Goldring, Sue Ewing, Matthew Culver, Sarah Schmerler,
The Dantus Family, Ann Hamilton, Jesse Bransford, Anne Betty Weinschenker,
Hilda Werschkul, Nick Perry, My MFA Family, My Patient, Thoughtful,
Loving Family and Friends, and my pets, Sadie and Abe.

To my Mom, Norma Lehrhoff Altman,
who taught by example.

*Welcoming the
First Chimera*

The classical greek image of the mythological chimera was that of a monstrous, female, fire-breathing creature: an incongruous mixture of the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon. Humankind has imagined and portrayed fantastical creatures since the beginning of time. But today this ancient myth exists in biotechnologically engineered forms. The current scientific definition of ‘chimera’ is any organism composed of cells derived from at least two genetically different zygotes. Translation: featherless chickens (bred for ease of production); mice with human brain cells; hybridized creatures like the geep (sheep+goat), liger (lion+tiger), beefalo (buffalo+cow), and donkra (donkey+zebra). Most recently, the world’s first primate chimeras have emerged, created from several different species of monkey embryos. Human/animal chimeras are next.

My current body of work is inspired by these modern-day chimeras, however I pick up where science leaves off, fusing the animal with the human. Details and craftsmanship are key elements in my work, as I seek to create seamless, lifelike forms. I have cast, for example, the bodies of a raw chicken and a human doll baby in resin, taking pains to unify the seemingly ‘separate’ elements into plausible whole. Often, my creatures sport weird, disturbing, or unexpectedly sexy body parts. I have mixed the body of a giraffe with the cast head of a female mannequin, her face “made up” with false eyelashes and her mouth filled with acrylic casts of my own teeth. If viewers look into the mirrored tiles that cover the plinth on which she stands, they will see a reflection of the human vagina I placed on her underbelly. Overall, my hybrid creatures are vulnerable, whimsical, and can act as lighting rods for the viewer’s catharsis. Although grotesque, they appear utterly real. Questions seem to issue from their parted lips: “if I could talk, what would I say?” “Are you, as humans, ready to listen?”

Working for so many years with hybrid forms has helped me see myself as a mixture: mother/professional artist; instinctive animal/wise woman; healer/sufferer. I’ve learned a great deal about humanity in adopting the part-beast as my own. This work has taught me that to be fully human is to be fully chimera, a verb, a goal towards which we must all aspire rather than a static state of entitlement. Animals, driven by instinct, teach us to trust our inner natures.

Figures























Fig. 1: *Hominidae Giraffa Camelopardalis*
Mixed Media, Papier-Mache, Oil Paint, Silicone, Acrylic Nails,
Nail Polish, Human Hair; Base: Wood, Mirror;
8.5' x 2.5' (Base: 2' x 2.5'); 2012.



Fig. 2: *Unknown Composer*
Goat's Hair, Cast Resin, Oil Paint, Chicken Toes,
Black Ribbon, Fiberglass;
18" × 13" × 8"; 2012.





Fig. 8: *Chimera*
Mixed Media, Resin, Oil Paint, Ram's Horns;
19" × 12" × 10.5"; 2012.

















Fig. 4: *Come Play With Me*
Mixed Media, Resin, Papier-Mache, Oil Paint; Swing: Wood, Rope;
13" x 14" (swing: 19" x 5.25"); 2012.













Fig. 5: *Primate Babies*
Painted Metal Cages, Fabric, Foam Pads, Silicone, Silicone
Pigment, Faux Eyelashes, Human Hair, Plastic Breathing
Mechanism, Batteries;
57" × 24" × 17"; 2013.









Fig. 6: *Funny Farm*
Bronze, Acrylic Teeth, Semi Precious Stones;
9" x 7"; 2012



When Species Mate

He lay on his hard, armor like back, and when lifting his head slightly, he could view his brown, vaulted belly partitioned by arching ridges, while on top of it, the blanket, about to slide off altogether, could barely hold. His many legs, wretchedly thin compared with his overall girth, danced helplessly before his eyes. 'What's happened to me?' he wondered. It was no dream.

–Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka

a fancy, a chimaera in my brain, troubles me in my prayer.

–John Donne

All real living is meeting.

–Martin Buber

dog is my co-pilot

–bumper sticker

In his classic novella *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka presents readers with a strange composite being named Gregor Samsa, an insect with the mind of a man who narrates his plight. Never does Kafka feel the need to explain his protagonist's transition into a cockroach. We, the readers, take it as a given, a fixed variable in Kafka's literary equation. As the story continues and the Samsa family adapts to their new (and utterly absurd) situation, each family member questions how much humanity remains in Gregor now that he is a bug. What happens, however, is that we learn how little humanity this nuclear family truly possesses, now that Gregor's otherness has thrown it into sharp relief. Might not other art forms posit the monstrous as a given? And might not that art also place society in the position of seeing itself as more absurd and anxious than it might, ideally, like to admit? In many ways, my own work seeks to do this.

There have been tremendous scientific advances since Kafka's day. The result is that inter-species breeding in laboratories is, indeed, a reality, and fantastical beings that resemble Gregor Samsa are no longer the stuff of fiction. Two millennia ago, the ancient Greeks created a mythic Chimera: a she-monster that was part lion (head), goat (body) and serpent (tail). The term has stuck with contemporary scientists, who technically define as chimera "an organism, organ, or part consisting of two or more tissues of different genetic composition, produced as a result of organ transplant, grafting, or genetic engineering."¹ No fire-breathing monster, but something frightening to be sure. Modern-day chimera are all around us: they go in our mouths for food, they lay down their bodies for scientific research, and soon enough we will have to live with other implications of these creations.

Reasons for chimeric creation abound, including stem cell research, the growth of human body parts for transplants, disease research, or simply ventures into the unknown. The 'liger,' a real-life creature that is tiger female and lion male, was first bred in the early 20th century in India. The biggest cat in the

¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co. 2000, updated 2009.

world, and considered quite beautiful, it is subject to diseases it can't fight and is unable to reproduce. In 2002, Israeli scientists created a breed of featherless chicken that, with its higher egg production, benefits farmers in warm climates. Without feathers, however, the chicken easily sunburns, gets mosquito bites, and suffers skin infections.² By 2003 scientists had crossed the unthinkable boundary of fusions and began mixing the animal and the human. These first animal-human chimeras, rabbit eggs fused with human cells, were successfully created in a laboratory of the Shanghai Medical Centre. The embryos developed in a lab dish for several days but were later destroyed so that the scientists could harvest the stem cells. In 2005, Stanford University scientists infused mice brains with working human cells. ("Chimeric brains" was the term used by Britain's *Daily Mail*.) The mice are now being watched by scientists: if they develop the brain architecture of a mouse, then they will be used for research; if they develop the brain architecture of a human, then they will be killed in a last-ditch defense against a horde of "Stuart Littles" running around the lab.³

In addition to the numerous animal rights issues that attend these experiments, questions of identity and legislative protections have arisen. If chimera are, indeed, half human, do they deserve to be protected by laws pertaining to humans or animals? Laws that would protect chimeric life have not kept pace with the relatively swift progress of engineering it. The National Science Institute makes enforcement of whatever laws do exist 'voluntary.' Individual states vary in their decisions to adopt rights and regulations. Hence, it's open season on creating new beings, while our responsibility to live with the results of such efforts goes unexamined.

Donna Haraway, a radical philosopher and biogenetic expert has taken on such difficult ethical issues. She explores what she calls the "significant otherness" of species in her 2008 book *When Species Meet*, asking on its first page: "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?" She coins the term "companion species," and applies it to those beings who depend on us but cannot speak for themselves. Invoking Marx, Foucault, and her own experiences at the vet's office as proof, Haraway informs us that there are numerous levels on which we are connected: medical research (dogs are "valuable workers in technoculture"), economics (dogs enjoy plenty and suffer privation along with us as "co-consumers"), and personal. Overall, she asks us to consider, as equals, all those beings who live among us, beings as wild as coyotes or as impossible to identify as individuals as fish. Our lives are intertwined, and for Haraway, this impels us to find new and better ways to react to these new creatures or our own existence will be lost.

² *BBC News*, "Bald Chicken 'Needs No Plucking,' May 21, 2002.

³ *The Guardian*, "Chimera' Monkeys Created in Lab by Combining Several Embryos Into One," Jan 5, 2012

Species, like all the old and important words, is equally promiscuous, but in the visual register rather than the gustatory. The Latin *specere* is at the root of things here, with its tones of “to look” and “to behold.” In logic, species refers to a mental impression or idea, strengthening the notion that thinking and seeing are clones. ...Looking back in this way takes us to seeing again, to *respecere*, to the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem.⁴

Haraway has a creative way of exploring the implications of cross-species breeding, picking up, in effect, where Kafka left off. For her, we already live as ‘family’ with our non-human companions. She champions dog rescuers and activists as prime examples of this inter-species harmony. “The dog-activist scene, or canine cosmopolitics, is also a good place to look for examples of the major themes in contemporary science and technology studies, such as the fashioning, care, and feeding of ‘epistemic objects’ like the dog genome or genetic diversity.”⁵ Unlike Gregor Samsa’s parents, we need to find ways of getting along. Kafka uses literary narrative to suggest that the ‘other’ is among us; Haraway uses radical theory and cutting edge science to show us a dystopian present and an unusual fix.

If a sense of relatedness is necessary to effectively live in a future of hybrid and ‘other’ society, then communication across human and non-human boundaries must be attempted. But how? In his book, *I and Thou*, mystical and religious philosopher Martin Buber defines what he views as the two primary relationships in the world that exist between people, calling them *I-It* and *I-Thou*.⁶ In an *I-It* relationship, says Buber, we objectify the Other. An *It* is someone we bend to our needs and desires; we use this person outright, or simply don’t care enough about them to get involved. (This type of relationship, though it precludes true communication, is rampant and actually quite productive. If scientists didn’t use the *I-It*, they couldn’t practice much of their craft.) A *Thou*, however, is another to whom we open our minds, in order to experience them. (A far more difficult proposition, which takes time and patience. But which yields meaningful results.) As Buber explains:

The development of the function of experiencing and using comes about mostly through decrease of man’s power to enter into relation. How does this same man, who made spirit into a means of enjoyment for himself, behave towards the beings that live around about him? Taking his stand in the shelter of the primary word of separation, which holds off the I and It from one another, he has divided his life

⁴ Haraway, Donna, *When Species Meet*, 2008. Posthumanities, Vol. 3; University of Minnesota Press. p. 17

⁵ *Ibid* p. 62

⁶ The title of Buber’s book is predicated on the fact that, in its original German, there are two forms of second-person address – the formal and the familiar.

with his fellow-men into two tidily circled-off provinces, one of institutions and the other of feelings—the province of It and the province of I.⁷

Buber takes things a step further by saying that we have a responsibility to this other being, this *Thou*. What's more, he claims that we are defined by our kindness and relatedness to them. This *Thou*, notes Buber, is an event of some difficulty and soul searching. Such encounters will “[tear] us away to dangerous extremes, loosing the well-trying context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security – in short, uncanny moments we can well dispense with.”⁸ *Thou* opens up a host of feelings, some of them uneasy. Yet art, and the world of query and open-ended narrative that it allows, is the perfect forum for the other to make itself felt without outright confrontation. In the realm of the gallery, questions without easy answers are common, and resolution often comes through catharsis, through the inner response of the viewer with heart rather than mind.

The contemporary artistic landscape has already changed as a result of scientific chimera. Internationally exhibited artist Patricia Piccinini has created families of previously unthinkable beings. *The Young Family* (2006), for example, presents a group of human/pig hybrids, in which a tired, hairless mother with floppy porcine ears and sagging teats nurses her young human/pig whelps. In *Big Mother* (2005), a near-heroic (if tragically sleep-deprived) baboon-mom suckles a happy human infant. (This sculpture is based on a true story of a baboon mother whose newborn baby died, and who took a human infant to nurse in surrogate. The human baby was unharmed.) So engaging and approachable are Piccinini's sculptures that the Art Gallery of South Australia, where her most recent retrospective was sited, created educational packets for children, inviting them to better understand these startling hybrids, with the added benefit of educating a new generation of adults. “Piccinini invites us to think about our place within a time when biotechnology and digital technologies are challenging the boundaries of humanity,” the packet relates. “Confronting us with her seemingly grotesque hybrid beings and anthropomorphic machines, she invites us to find beauty in a world that can never be perfect.”⁹ Of *The Young Family*, it goes on to state:

This work was inspired by scientists' plans to begin breeding genetically modified pigs to provide replacement organs and insulin-producing cells for humans, thus alleviating shortages of human organs for transplant, and treating diabetes. The work is not about whether such practices are right or wrong, but rather whether society will

⁷ Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*. Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. Edinburgh, T & T Clark. p. 51

⁸ *Ibid* p. 43

⁹ Art Gallery of South Australia, “Patricia Piccinini Education Resource” 2010 p.2

accept the outcomes of these developments. The artist has commented: “For me, the young family is about the ethical implications of creating new life to serve humans, and also about the interaction between emotion and rationality when thinking about these “creation” issues.”...What animals are you reminded of when you look closely?... Is the artist perhaps suggesting that there is not a great distance between animals and humans?¹⁰



¹⁰ Ibid p. 5

Patricia Piccinini
The Young Family,
2005



Patricia Piccinini
Big Mother, 2005

If a new generation of young viewers, raised to see chimeric and transgenic research as normal, can be educated and taught to relate to otherness with sensitivity and moral stewardship, than there is hope.

My own work follows a line of empathy laid down in literature by Kafka and in science by Haraway. (We all see hybrid beings as teachers, affording us new and better ways to relate to each other.) But unlike these precedents, I find humor to be an essential element of the encounter with hybridized forms. Absurdity is rampant in most every instance of this new frontier of science, whether it's related by Haraway's theories or newspaper headlines reporting on genomic research. I try to posit such weirdness as a given, and allow the viewer to slowly contemplate how they might accept these new beings. *Hominidae Giraffa Camelopardalis* (2012) is my fusion of giraffe and human female. With her press-on nails and thick eyelashes, this sculpture comes on as funny and silly. But once viewers get closer, they will see a human vagina beneath the giraffe torso, reflected in the mirrored plinth on which she stands. Humor leads to wonder, and wonder softens the blow of the dystopian. *Domesticated Primate Children (Singleton and Twins)*, from 2013, is equally sardonic. The wall label describing these caged primate/human babies states that they are "awaiting the assignment of parents in a nursery that, clearly, has been left unattended." All the babies' chests (activated by an unseen motor) rise and fall, imitating the steady breath of deep slumber. Their skin is mottled with tiny scratches, small sores, and even individual birthmarks. One baby has tears in its eyes, as though it just cried itself to sleep. It seems absurd to feel afraid of such vulnerable beings. And yet, one baby boy has a tail curling out from under a swaddling blanket. Animal babies of all species are far more agile than human infants, and tails are also used for balance. Indeed, another infant has escaped from his cage, which sits empty below. But where did he venture? No farther than to cuddle closer to his sister, and show her the sort of affection that's innate in animals, and from which we humans can learn.

Relation is a difficult thing, whether it transpires between humans, or humans and creatures. As Kafka showed us, laughter and an appreciation for the diversity of life in all its forms were sorely lacking from the society that awaited poor Gregor's emergence from behind his bedroom door. I wonder sometimes: what if Gregor were replaced with a current-day chimera—a fearsome liger, perhaps, or a cute primate? These creatures aren't works of fiction.

What might happen if *Camelopardis* strutted out that door. What would you say?

Jamie Levine
*Hominidae Giraffa
 Camelopardalis*, 2012



*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” inhibits 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.

Kiki Smith
Interviewed by
Jamie Levine

Jamie Levine: I'd like to start with your artistic roots. Namely: you're the daughter of a famous sculptor, Tony Smith; and your mom was a famous opera singer; it sounds like a great lineage, but I wonder if you could talk about what's been most nurturing or affirmative in your practice? Who or what gave you a sense of permission to be an artist, and, in turn, to engage with so many personal and social issues as you do?

Kiki Smith: I can say that it was my parents who gave myself and my sister Seton a sense of permission to be to become who we needed to be. They didn't have any expectations for us to be anything other than ourselves; they just let us find our own way. We also saw them at work, their commitment to it, and that was sort of daunting, too. [Making art] was something I had a lot of ambivalence about, because it was all-consuming. At the same time I saw that art was something that was there for the taking; you just had to want it enough.

JL: So your father was encouraging?

KS: Yeah, my father encouraged my sister, Seton. She wanted to be a painter when she was 13; he got her paint and canvas. I was more attracted to craft. I didn't think about being an artist until I was 24, and he died when I was 26. He was supportive of me during that time. As a famous teacher at Bennington, he was used to looking at people's work. There was a lot of pottery there, and he had students that were potters—I thought that was wonderful.

JL: I read somewhere that you said that if you stick to your work, that it will take care of you somehow. That you have to trust it.

KS: That's what I got from my father: you don't have to know what the work "is," and it doesn't have to be anything. You could just have the experience of it and it would reveal itself to you over time. I believe that in earnest: if you go into it just with your curiosity, [the work] will be generous to you.

JL: I have read that you had a learning disorder. How has that affected your work, your process?

KS: I couldn't read at all; I had zero reading comprehension. But people just develop in other ways, and in some ways they're more sensitive. They figure out what works, ways to get around their hinderances. For myself, I liked looking at things and making things. [The visual] was a language I could express myself through more than spoken or written language. I think it's important to say that it wasn't like I was 'good' at anything! I just liked doing it. I liked the struggle. I don't mind being bad at something. I use the struggle to get someplace.

JL: Working, with your hands in particular, is kind of redeeming, isn't it?

KS: It helps your brain to work by moving, to engage in some activity that might seem like a distraction. I have friends who write when they're listening to music because it helps their brain to focus. For my mind, doing housekeeping while I was talking to people would give me a kind of mental space where I could focus. It sort of works the opposite for me: what may be distracting for other people gets my brain to work.

JL: Your work is so direct. How did you start to forge your forms, your formal language?

KS: Generationally speaking, I came to New York in the 70's. It was during a time when the second or third wave of post-conceptual work, and then shape painting, was coming in. A lot of people my age felt they wanted to make something that had a direct accessibility to people. By using representation they were able to address the commonplace or ordinary and be more populist. I guess I'm known for a lot of work that engaged body stuff, but I did that first in my 20s and early 30s. Now I'm 59. Your life just changes, and so does your work. I don't want to be a burning flame...

JL: What do you want to be?

KS: Nothing in particular! I just don't want to be exhausted. I'm much happier being older.

JL: Me too, at 55 I'm much more centered and relaxed. But that said, you have so much courage to continually challenge people with what you do, confront them, make them see themselves. Do you think that given your experience and confidence, that you can access some kinds of deep fears in people?

KS: I don't know; I don't think about what other people are afraid of. It's not really my business. I'm not trying to control other people's thoughts or manipulate them I'm simply doing what occurs to me, and it's not about trying to evoke anything from anyone else. I think [a form] works when there is a space created for it to resonate for somebody else. But I don't set out to elicit reaction. What may seem disturbing or disruptive can have very different versions: like right now my work is so sweet, but before it had more abjectness to it. These things change over time because you change as a person.

JL: I do a lot of resin casting, and people say it's rather disturbing to look at—so real and yet kind of deathly. I've read that in your earlier works you made casts of both the living and dead and tried to be respectful. Can you talk about the death masks of your family and the castings of yourself?

KS: I made death masks of my family, but they're not my artwork. My father had his mother's face cast when she died. He was born 1912, and his parents were Victorian people. So when my father died my sister and I made a mask of his head and his hands, and then my sister died, and I cast my sister's head and hands, and then a friend, and then someone else asked if I could make a mask...and I said aww forget it! I don't need to be doing this, the funeral parlor will go out of business. Now they're up in the attic on shelves, and I'm sick of looking at them. My sister and my grandmother never met. My grandmother died 30 years before she was born and their profiles are the exactly the same. You see genes and life bind through time, so it's interesting to look at them for that.

JL: I deal a lot with fusions of human and animal elements. How do you see animals figuring in your work?

KS: I see our identity being intrinsically connected to animals, through our cohabitation with animals. That's sort of the most important thing happening in the world at the

moment: changes in Nature, the way we are impacting living beings that are the same kind of beings as we are. One's own survival, and one's fantasy about Nature's survival.

In terms of hybrids, I like a Sirens a lot as an image, and small birds. Some were Sirens, some were Harpies, women-as-birds. [Such forms] have a mobility that they wouldn't normally have, and there are all different sorts of historical and cultural meanings that abound. There are a lot of birds in my work. I like birds.

JL: In your installation *Jersey Crows* you spread bronze carcasses of crows on the gallery floor. What was your influence in that piece?

KS: There were a lot of crows that fell out of the sky in New Jersey, [and there was a particular incident] when birds died en masse, probably from noise shock and this was the first time that people really observed it, so I made a commemorative piece.

JL: Do you have any thoughts about animal experiments conducted in laboratories in the name of science?

KS: I don't think about it so much, but it's certainly dreadful—to put any being through suffering.

JL: If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?

KS: I'd just be myself. [laughs] I'm fine being myself.



Kiki Smith
Jersey Birds, 1997

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First Edition

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Artist's Website: <http://www.jamielevine.net>

Cover Design: "Giroodle" by Jamie Levine, 2013

Design: Stephanie Montemurro

Photography: Taylor Galloway

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-615-81896-2