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Christopher Reiger on Kate Clark



Kate Clark, *Antics*, 2007; mounted ibex, bobcat, and jack rabbit, clay, thread, pins, rubber eyes.

Kate Clark's taxidermic sculptures are disarming. With patience and skill, she marries sympathetic, sculpted human faces to animal forms, creating hybrid creatures that awaken in the viewer a sense of wonder while also encouraging somber rumination.

Not long ago similar creations—mummified mermaids, mounted werewolves—filled circus side shows and toured natural history museums, providing audiences with thrilling "proof" of the unknown and serving as reminders of our beastly inheritance. But the hybrid human-animal, or therianthrope, is almost as old as human consciousness. In the Cave of the Trois-Freres, in the French Pyrenees, a 15,000-year-old painting of a human-deer hybrid adorns the wall; ten thousand years later, the ancient Egyptians paid tribute to their animal-headed Gods in stone; some Native American mythologies speak of shape shifters, and their rites often require participants to don animal masks or hides.

Indeed, for most of human history animal avatars were employed to connect body to spirit. The animal core, if you will, is our base psychology and biology, our evolutionary antecedence. Most 21st-century humans, however, are tragically divorced from our spirit and in denial of our biology. We have lost touch with our(animal)selves, and the results—endemic boredom, depression, addiction—are disturbing. As anthropologist and philosopher David Abram puts it, "We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human."

Clark's sculptures force us to confront this concept through our rejection of it. The transformed animal-human may appear to us monstrous, but it is the manifestation of an ideal state, the "naked," or truly conscious human. Were our culture not so dissociated from that ideal, Clark's creations would not set so many viewers on edge. I sent images of her sculptures to a number of friends and acquaintances; with few exceptions, those that replied told me they were unsettled by Clark's therianthropes. They used words such as "creepy," "wrong," and "freaky."

But perhaps this response is due, in part, to Clark's class of theriomorph. Most therianthrope figures—as in those examples from history—depict a human that has become "other" by having her head (i.e., the conscious, acculturated brain) replaced by that of the animal. Clark's stripe—human head, animal body—is rarely seen in the anthropological record, and is most often employed in contemporary times with intent to pillory or demean the person portrayed.

Yet Clark's therianthropes are undeniably captivating, even seductive. The sensitively sculpted faces inspire empathy. We recognize those eyes and lips—indeed, we are attracted to them—and so acknowledge the "humanness" of the hybrid creature. In doing so we implicitly identify with their (and our) "animalness."

Carl Jung, champion of unconscious or "primitive" wisdom, argued that when animals are no longer prominent in a religion's symbology, "then there is no mana in it." More literally, the "anima," or breath—soul—has been lost. Clark's sculptures inject a little of that magic breath back into the equation.