



“They are magical creatures born of the imagination, in which the human and animal are mixed in any number of sentient, corporeal combinations.”



Bestiary of Inquiry

A reflective essay on the exhibition, *Between Worlds*

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Across millennia and around the globe, folklore, fairy tales, mythology and religious iconography are replete with the invention of human-animal hybrids. From ancient Egypt’s falcon-headed Horus to the Centaur and Pegasus of classical Greece; Christianity’s Devil, Hinduism’s Ganesh, Judaism’s Malachim and West Africa’s Anansi; sirens and mermaids, spirits and selkies: The world’s bestiary is large and diverse.

They are magical creatures born of the imagination, in which the human and animal are mixed in any number of sentient, corporeal combinations. Their commonality lies in the power invested in them as gods, demons, divine messengers and shamans. Much of that power is implicitly about transformation. In their fantastical hybridity, they’re embodiments (if only as visual representations) of transformation. As aspects of their power come directly from their animal attributes, they demonstrate the ways in which humans have sought to transcend their earth-bound mortality.

That human-animal hybridity can be traced back to petroglyphs and cave paintings of the Paleolithic era is no surprise. These creatures are art, generated by the artistic imagination, and depicted via artistic media. They are also characters in a timeless story about human fascination with the spiritual, mental and physical powers of animals. Moreover, they are characters with their own stories to tell. The hybrids in the work of artists Karen Brown, Jennifer Davis and DC Ice are no different.

Brown’s ceramic sculptures are theriocephaly, meaning humans with animal heads (from the Greek therion or beast and kefal or head). More specifically, they are girls with the long ears and sloped eyes of rabbits, or the tufted foreheads and sharp teeth of a fox, or the shiny black eyes and ridged ears of a bat. They’re clothed in the tights, skirts, t-shirts and footwear (boots, sneakers, Crocs) of adolescents. Or they may appear to be in costume, as if preparing for Halloween. Their hands might arch, fingers ending dramatically in curved, dangerous-looking gold-plated claws.

The figures might be holding hands. She might be in a power stance, hands on hips and legs wide. She might be gazing heavenward, beak open to the sky, with wings spread wide. They almost always have their own long hair. They are expressing themselves and their potential. They’ve been transfigured and stand on the brink of yet another transformation.

In Davis’s paintings, her hybrids are avatar-like; colorful and cartoonish. They are animals, often with the physical attributes of humans, such as hands and feet with painted nails, mouths expressing dismay or anger or curiosity, eyes wide to the possibilities their perspectives allow. They wear sweaters and pants, wave to the viewer, grasp potted plants and each other’s hands, and lounge on the floor playing guitar.

They are truly anthropomorphic, in that they not only sport human physical features but also express human traits, emotions and activities. Often painted to appear one-dimensional, on a flat background on which their faces are skewed, or juxtaposed with pattern of brightly rendered flower-like shapes, they’re animated creatures distinctive in appearance and original in form.

Conversely, the animals in Ice’s paintings keep their recognizable forms while engaging in human pursuits. A rabbit is entangled in the music they’re playing, a fingernail serving as a needle on a record, flowers and vines curling up from the grooves to encircle the rabbit’s shoulders with visual sound. Or that visual sound emanates from an open mouth, curling up into the sky just as smoke does from nearby chimneys.

Or smoke feathers out from a fox’s pipe and scrolls down his chest, capturing birds and sailing ships among the waves. The animals’ energy shoots out from a camera in bright, jagged shapes. Or they fling themselves out of a movie projector, in an effort to escape a crouching coyote. They band together, determined to find their way. They’re thinkers, doers. They create and make. Ribbons often encircle these creatures’ necks. They’re entangled and released. They’re as richly detailed as the objects they hold.

Puzzling and playful, mythical and spiritual, inhabiting a liminal state between the real and surreal, the human-animal hybrids in these works by Brown, Davis and Ice are truly something to behold. Here are stories underway and stories waiting to be told. New additions to humankind’s bestiary of creativity, they await your inquiry and adoration.

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Camille LeFevre is a long-time Twin Cities arts journalist who writes for a variety of print and online publications, and arts organizations. She wrote the introduction for artist Rebecca Krinke’s upcoming monograph, and is writing on Vesna Kittleston’s self portraits for that artist’s catalogue raisonné.