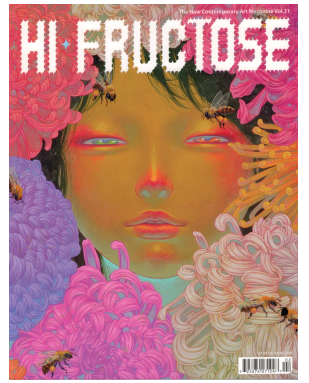


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High Fructose Magazine
April 2014



CAPTURING
THE MINOTAUR
THE ART OF
LAURA
BALL





by Kirsten Anderson

Painter Laura Ball's hypnotically engaging paintings give the viewer a multi-planned insight to the roiling energy of the subconscious, as well as the dynamics of the equally vital and tempestuous physical world. Her latest and most powerful series of works are comprised of creatures built of masses of other animals and plants, washed in bright swathes of color and set upon white backgrounds with the suggestions of worlds vaguely sketched around them. The spot-on composition and Ball's ability to render fine detail while still retaining loosely sinewy line work allow the images to pulse with an organic vitality. While the subject and medium (watercolor) could easily allow itself to descend into twee sentimentality, Ball's work gives the fantasy of the "peaceable kingdom" a knock on the head and pulls it away from greeting card sentimentality by the palpable stress infused within each scene. Animals are piled uncomfortably, writhing and jostling for space, sustenance, and dominance. These fantastically elaborate scenes are meant to mirror both environmental concerns, but more predominately, echo the buried yet turbulent workings of the human psyche.

Hi-Fructose recently caught up with Ball to find out more...

KA: How did you come to start creating animals out of other animals? What was it that especially attracted you to create dynamic images of wildlife in such a context?

LB: The "creature", the "animal made up of animals", evolved unexpectedly, as a product of a long term theme in my work. For a few years I concentrated on the stages of the mythical "Hero's Journey". Myths have woven through all cultures, since the beginning of language. Even though we don't reference them in their original form, the symbols and story lines reoccur. I was interested in the path of the hero, and the transitional moments—trials, rituals, battles, that have to be passed to emerge successfully from the mythic journey. These "events" all take place in the subconscious—the hero actually moves from the external to the internal world, the subconscious, the underworld, into tunnels, forests, labyrinths, underwater—to fight his own dragons. Eventually a creature appeared in my dream—it was an elephant, made up of other animals bound together by some kind of magnetic gravitational force. I woke up and started making drawings of the creature.

The subconscious is the repository for all of the things that the human animal still thinks, feels, even desires, things we are socialized not to act on. The fact that the creature lives in the collective subconscious has allowed me to push the

ABOVE: "Growing Pains"
RIGHT: "Hope and Faith Mandels"







“IT WAS AN ELEPHANT, MADE UP OF OTHER ANIMALS BOUND TOGETHER BY SOME KIND OF MAGNETIC GRAVITATIONAL FORCE.”

limits of what I would have represented in the past. Using animals instead of humans allows me to represent whatever I want to or need to, and to remove the label of good vs bad or black vs white, since subconscious is a judgment-free zone.

KA: Do you have a plan when you start a piece or is it something that happens organically as you are working?

LB: When I first made the creatures they were very complicated for me to visualize. Starting with creating form out of animals, and trying to keep the representations faithful. So, at first, I had to make a "map" of the animal—a drawing—labeled and loosely sketched out. When I started to build a different animal (e.g., rhino, giraffe, zebra, octopus) I would make a new map. Now that I have a couple of years practice under my belt, I don't need to make detailed plans or sketches, I can pretty much visualize the creature in 3-D and work from my head.

I definitely have a plan when I start a new piece, and I make a quick sketch. It is usually based on a specific encounter or a word that I am interested in. For example, I was thinking a lot about

how the creature was built, what's inside... how is it held together. I was almost obsessed with the idea that the creature is in constant motion, boiling, with animals churning and resurfacing, while they are fighting and writhing and killing and fucking. So I made pieces that fleshed out that idea for a while. I made creatures crash into each other, causing the birds on the surface to fly away, like in the piece titled "Battle Royale" of two zebra creatures fighting. I think the creatures are like the mythical God Pan, they instill panic or fear or lunacy in whatever is around them.

All that said, the final image never looks like the initial sketch. I am not rigid in the development, I let go of my intentions when I start the piece and I just react to the work as I make it.

KA: After you decide on the main animal image how do you choose each animal you are going to use as a component?

LB: Choosing which animals I use is dictated, in my new work, by endangered or extinct animals and plants. Then, it usually depends on color, pattern, or size for what kind of animal I will use. I have a huge database

of images, many that I shot at the San Diego Zoo. I comb through the folders for the next body part. Some animals are "regulars," such as parrot wings for rib cages, or rams for front legs. So far, the animals are not categorized by theme. The one exception to that was a piece in the *Minotaur* show at David B. Smith Gallery. I made a mandala of the animals killed in Zanesville, when Terry Thompson released the animals in his preserve and then killed himself.

KA: There seems to be a huge explosion of eco-surrealism, especially among younger contemporary artists. Would you agree? If so, do you feel part of that movement?

LB: When I started using the animals to make the creature, it was to animate a "human" psyche, so I still felt like it was acting out human repressed impulses. Even though I use animals, the human is still present. Now that I am motivated to bring attention to the shocking number of endangered species, I think I need to reconsider the "eco-didacticism" of the work.

The prevalence of imagery using animals/nature as a primary subject matter could just be a popular visual trend, but I think it might reflect larger

ABOVE: "Battle Royale"
OPPOSITE: "Minotaur"





“PEOPLE CAN VIEW ANIMALS AS OUTSIDERS, AS NONPARTICIPANTS AND AS INNOCENTS.”

social impulses, both to simplify our lives and to connect with things that feel natural and real. People can view animals as outsiders, as non-participants and as innocents. They can be anthropomorphized to express any situation or emotion. I would like to think that it is a reflection of the growing awareness of the importance of retaining the biodiversity of the planet, and how vulnerable that is. Also, people are waking up the indisputable fact that animals are sentient beings that cannot be treated inhumanely. It would be wonderful if the rise of nature in art could lead to a greater respect for the natural world through carefully made choices in the consumer environment.

KA: Jungian thought is referenced often in relation to your artwork. Can you speak to that at all?

LB: The connections I make with his ideas and my working process, and the resulting images, are innumerable. He describes the psyche as a constantly moving, dynamic system, which is what I have been working on with the creature—maybe literally using the creature as a symbol for the subconscious.

In *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, written by Frieda Fordham, there is a quote that I have underlined so heavily it is rippled in the book, "The most direct expression of the collective unconscious is to be found when the archetypes, as primordial images, appear in dreams, unusual states of mind, or psychotic fantasies. These images seem then to possess a power and energy of their own—they move and

speak, they perceive and have purposes—they fascinate us and drive us to action which is entirely against our conscious intention. They inspire both creation and destruction, a work of art or an outburst of mob frenzy, for they are 'the hidden treasure upon which mankind ever and anon has drawn, and from which it has raised up its gods and demons, and all those potent and mighty thoughts without which man ceases to be man'" (page 27).

KA: What is it about the watercolor medium that attracts you? Can you talk a little bit about your working process on a piece from beginning to end?

LB: Watercolor is (no pun intended) a fluid medium for me. I don't have to think about it, or fight it. It isn't work. It is sort of like penmanship. I can just use it to put down on paper whatever I want to.

As for working process, I start with a loose outline. Beyond that, I have two palettes with my watercolors grouped into analogous colors. I know which colors have certain characteristics, such as granulating... making full use of the properties of the pigments, I make the wet in wet passages first. I can create the environment this way, or make a pool of exploded body parts. I usually make the creature or creatures next and decide how they will be interacting with the surrounding animals and landscape. Last thing I do is refine the image with graphite, iridescent watercolor, neon gouache, and white watercolor for highlights. †

ABOVE: "Bull"

OPPOSITE: "Progression"