

Ashley Johnson: Zoomorphic Gestalt

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ASHLEY JOHNSON

Zoomorphic Gestalt

By Julie Oakes

MODERNITY IS OVERLAID WITH
PROCESSES THAT DISGUISE OUR
RELATIONSHIP TO THE NATURAL
WORLD.

The mysterious roots of animism, “otherly” and unusual to contemporary western understanding, expresses symbiotic relationships with animals that must be fulfilled – practically and symbolically. The masks of the native west coast aboriginals for instance, were used as a visual channel to the spirit of the animal.

The connection between animal and human has long been acknowledged in religion – Holy Spirit as dove with winged angels and horned devils; the elephant headed Ganesha; Hanuman with his monkey parts; Shiva as snake; the Egyptian Nekhbet as vulture, Horus as hawk or Wadjet as cobra; and the Norse Fenrisulfr as wolf. Greek mythology is especially fecund; Leda, raped by Zeus as swan begat Helen of Troy and then Zeus as a bull coupled with Europa. Demeter transformed herself into a mare to escape Poseidon but Poseidon counter-transformed himself into a stallion and succeeded in the rape.

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Latch, 2008
Acrylic on paper
40 x 37 inches
Courtesy of Headbones Gallery, Toronto

Contemporary language utilises zoomorphism metaphorically. An ill-kempt woman is a dog; an informer, a rat or a mole; a pretty girl, a chick; a sly person, a fox; police as pig or hipster as cat. And the stories – a white rabbit leads a psychedelic chase, frogs became princes, Marvel Comics created Beastboy and Wolfsbane, and Harry Potter converses with owls. Even modern manufacturing has appropriated animals naming such products as Mustang, Pinto, and Greyhound or the new BMW, simply called Shapeshifter.

We are accustomed to the transfiguration of human to animal (therianthropy) and yet

Ashley Johnson’s work contains a shock. A gestalt. A jolt. In a culture grown used to visual trauma through the wide range of imagery made available through the Internet, global media and cinematic expertise, the power of a painting on paper can still hit a nerve. That the response felt might be one of repulsion rather than attraction, is not a negative reaction. It is simply, an intelligent awakening.

The *Primal* series might be compared to Hieronymus Bosch’s work for Johnson and Bosch each present a nether land of phantasms that impact the human psyche. Bosch used literal descriptions from the bible drawing on a common narrative of the time. Today the story is more complex. To bring about such a gestalt within our

mechanised, technological, environment by using exotic and strange animals to which we may not have even been actually exposed, brings about a *realised* gestalt – something that has not happened before and for which there is no preparation other than the personal potential to assimilate. Africa, to one who is not African, may be incomprehensible and the depiction of beasts strike chords that provoke a kind of fear – a horror, can be cause of psychosis. Freud recognised that the unknown lurking beyond the periphery that we have been socialized to ignore, can provoke fear unless the “mysterious other” becomes an identifiable quotient. To use hyenas, nocturnal carnivores that feed upon carrion, as the image of the predator upon a female human infant, in a description of the abhorrent practice of the rape of infants to cure AIDS, effectively depicts the desperation the disease leads to. This confused and inadequate shamanic prescription is counteracted by telling in order to stop it.

Is it monstrous to inflict such visions upon a world already saturated in disturbing ideas and images? Johnson takes pains to describe his concepts in a form that is as accessible as he is able to make it, by manipulating the elements that appeal to the higher aspects of the consciousness through a fine aesthetic. Within his adept painting, the subject matter becomes realisable, not so foreign, a seed of enlightenment on the nature of man.

Ashley Johnson is a mature artist who immigrated to Canada from South Africa just four years ago and despite his seniority in Africa, his work is just beginning to emerge on the Canadian cultural front. □