Deborah Brown
PooL Art Fair New York

By Jennie E. Park

Dubbed "a meeting ground for outstanding unrepresented artists," PooL Art Fair New York, one of the better satellite fairs which took place during The Armory Show last month, manages to stay true to its credo. In this interview with featured artist, Deborah Brown, we have an unvarnished look at one such unrepresented artist.

At the fair you mentioned that you have a fascination with science and juxtaposing naturally incompatible objects or substances, like human hair and a beetle. Do you choose what to mesh together based on similarities in their chemical compositions? I am interested in the similarities in the composition, but that doesn't actually inform where the work comes from originally—it usually derives from a place of wanting to connect or show the several layers. On one level there's the sheer vanity of it—a beetle can't just go out looking like a beetle, it has to decorate itself, it has to become beautiful, in terms of what we deem as beautiful, and so there's a kind of exploration of vanity. And then there's another layer, a spiritual side, the oneness of all things. There really isn't a difference between the shell of a beetle and human hair; they're very similar genetically—I mock the idea of [human's] superiority over nature in a kind of heavy-handed way. There's sexuality to it as well, which I can't seem to get away from. There's an underlying sexual energy, and I find that when you put certain materials together, it just kind of creates [that] energy.

To flesh out the vanity layer of your work, did you choose insects because we as humans tend to consider them repulsive, or was there something else about insects? I think insects represent a natural order that is not controlled by thought or ego—they have a duty, they have a job, they're part of a group, the individual is not as important as the whole. And I found I'm drawn to that idea, a disappearance of the individual. So I'm sort of mocking our ego-based culture and individuality because there's such an absence of that within the insect world.

"There's an underlying sexual energy, and I find that when you put certain materials together, it just kind of creates [that] energy"

Deborah Brownr *Beetle*, 2009. Fiberglass, human hair. 18 H x 26 W x 72 L inches.
Courtesy: The artist and PooL Art Fair, New York.

If you left the hybrids [the art pieces] intact in a landfill, or if they inhabited some other environment that you imagined them in, what would be their lifespan? I make sure that they're as long-lived as possible. I'm very conscious of lifespan; they're made of toxic materials, so I don't see them decomposing. It's sort of like, after the nuclear bomb, the cock roach shall be the only creature left [laughs].

Why do you insist that they persist? I don't know if it's just art world commodity-driven, or something else. Right now, I'm actually working on extremely life-like human forms, being done by special effects firms, made out of silicone—silicone only has a shelf life of about twenty-five years before it starts crumbling a bit. I'm like, "No, we can't do that—it has to be 100 years!" So yes, I'm confronting exactly that right now.

It's another kind of mocking or juxtaposition, where you're saying: this vain thing is utterly discardable, but refuses to be. Precisely.

The tower with legs, and the mushrooms with legs [pieces in the show]—is the human brain being replaced by something, or is it just trapped there? It is trapped there but it's also—I guess when you feel something, you feel you're it. So for example, with the [Rapunzel's] tower, she's trapped in her tower—it's a golden tower, about materialism and being sort of contained in this ivory tower. If I put arms or a head on it, it wouldn't feel as contained. The phallic nature of it really was not my intention, but it turned out that way, which is actually kind of relevant, so that's okay.

Now that you describe it that way, I see it as an expression of desire—the person desired to be in that mushroom or tower so much that she's become that thing, and it has ironically trapped her. Desiring and wanting and clinging and grasping—that's very much about not being present and not being with what is, and so that whole idea of our culture grasping and wanting is kind of where I think we lose our way.

Are your hybrids actually moving around in their environments, with their wings and their legs, or are they trapped there? They look trapped in what they've become, but there's something about them that isn't—it's that dichotomy that I think infuses a certain energy in the work.

Are they evolving into something else? It's interesting you should ask that. I don't know if you know Ron Mueck's work—it's very life-like; you can't tell in a gallery whether it's real or not. The piece I'm working on next, which is one of my most ambitious, is this woman lying on a glass slide, as though she's going under a microscope. Her arms and legs are pinned down, and one of her legs is a frog leg—you can't quite tell who's morphing into whom and yet, in that sort of pinned-down, transformative moment, the look and expression on her face will be that she's completely detached from what's happening—she's just beyond it all. So yeah, I think the earlier pieces were more alike forms, intermingling, whereas this, because it's more life-like, is merging [of distinct forms], but they're very much what they were before they merged, as opposed to two similar things coming together—I guess it feels more unreal, and yet more real at the same time.

If there were something exasperating or ridiculous about the world, I'd expect the hybrids to sympathize with or reflect that somehow, because they themselves seem so ludicrous—I was wondering if you had any of that level of even a political commentary…

Deborah Brown *Tower with Legs*, 2010. Resin. 19.5 x 16 inches.
Courtesy: The artist and Pool Art Fair, New York.

Actually, through their ridiculousness they're quite wizened—there's something almost higher-spirit about them. That's the odd thing; they're so ridiculous that they transcend what they are. And as far as political, I mean, I think they just look at the whole world as ridiculous—I guess I just see them as wizened spirits, energy. Through their trappings, they've transcended their trappings.

Do you distinguish the headless things with legs from the ladybugs or butterflies with heads, in that the legged things are more stuck and haven't yet reached that transcendent state? Yes, funny enough, I guess they each describe a particular trapping. I guess some pieces are more about the actual feeling of being stuck, versus the possibilities. I suppose it's where I am at that moment when it comes out, whether I'm feeling optimistic or not. [Laughs.]

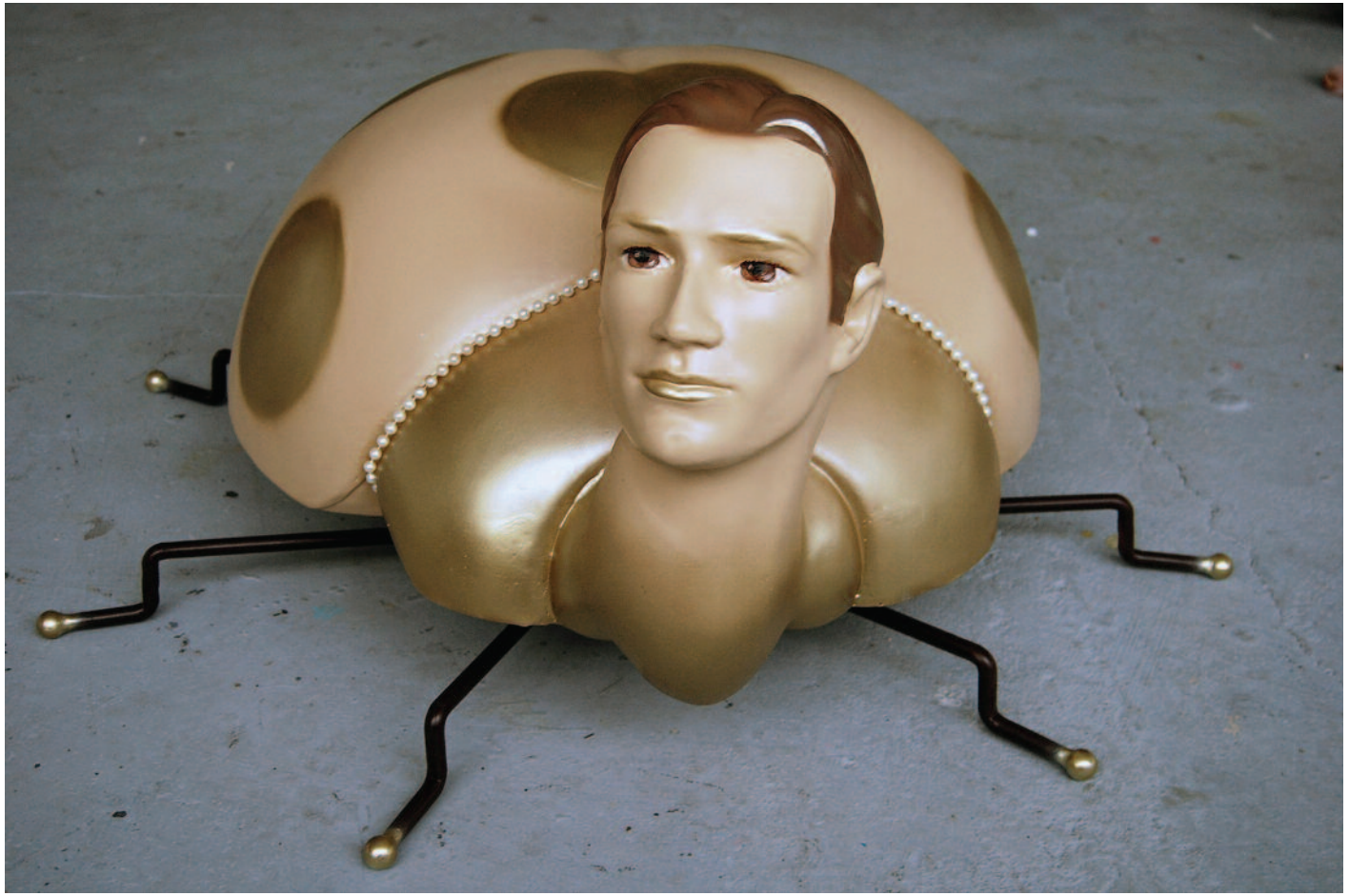
You've said that, for the most part, any movement is internal to the hybrids; but have you considered creating things involving moving parts? Yes. My other ambitious project which I need funding for [laughs] is a Venus fly trap-headed woman sitting at a vanity table. Her head is opening and closing, and she's turning, and there's the sound of buzzing in the room, a Zoop! And I think it's going to be viewer-generated, so when they step in a certain place in the room, it'll be as though they've been caught [laughs]. So again, it'll be extremely life-like, and the woman is going to be sitting at a powder pink vanity table made of very shiny fiberglass, looking at her reflection.

What element would the movement introduce that isn't currently in the work? I think it's just another layer of something to get pulled into and engaged in.

As far as how you personally relate to these sculptures, do you consider them to be sentient or alive? Do you ever find yourself talking to them? Yes, I do talk to them. They're self-portraits. Each one is sort of a facet of me, captured at whatever time I was feeling that way. So yes, in a way I talk to them as parts of me, when I'm feeling in a certain mood, or if they're sitting around, I just sort of connect to that part of me when I'm looking at them.

There was a reference in one of your earlier interviews to mirroring; do your pieces mirror something either of your dreams, or very fundamental to you that you can't articulate? I have to say, most of the

"I have to say, most of the work doesn't come from my dreams—it's not like I wake up and go: Oh my God, I just had that.... It's completely from just processing life in a very conscious way"



Deborah Brown *Ladybug 3*, 2009. Fiberglass, steel. 26 H x 36 D inches.
Courtesy: The artist and PooL Art Fair, New York.

work doesn't come from my dreams—it's not like I wake up and go: Oh my God, I just had that.... It's completely from just processing life in a very conscious way.

So if it is a conscious exploration, do you feel that it's almost like your iterations of random amalgamations are an empirical study, where you're trying to prove the same hypothesis, over and over, using slightly different... Yes, I do think that, but I think there's been an evolution in the work—my initial investigation was surface and veneer and vanity and preening oddities, and now it's morphed into connections to nature and, on top of that, spiritual dimensions. As I evolve, [my work] comes along with me. And funny enough, as I evolve, I look back at the old work and I see in it things I didn't see before.

And that would also speak to the movement you described as being internal to them—it's kind of reflecting that. Yes, exactly.

Do any of these hybrids remind you of other people, or are they, after you've created them, their own beings or identities? They're kind of regurgitating iconoclastic pop culture references that we all tend to have, so I think they're very identifiable in that way to many people. At the same time, [they're] no one else but me. I mean, when I'm coming up with them, I'm not thinking about other people. Once it's out there, I can see many different people in it. My mother has been a part of my work, directly.

Are there any particular pieces you feel reflect your mother? Probably my earlier work. My mother always had to be beautiful and admired; she was the goddess, and I grew up sort of in the shadow of that. So I definitely think there's some of that informing a lot of the work.

As far as the specific expressions on the faces of the ladybugs and butterflies, are they just mechanical copies of a mannequin's stare? Maybe they're bored because they've achieved such status, so they just have that smug look? [Laughs.] They're 1940s, '50s vintage mannequin heads, and so they all have a certain kind of, "ugh!" [i.e., haughtiness]—yes, definitely there's that expression. But, when I painted their eyes, something else came out—when you see how they were originally painted as mannequins, [they were] not like that. I'm not a painter, and I don't pretend to know what I'm doing, but for some reason I really connected to whatever was going on in them.

The expressions on the faces in Gallery 2 [online] are more expressive and garish, even suspicious—and the Buffalo Witch is really scary? Yes, well, I started that work when I finished grad school, so that was really coming from a much more raw angst. It was an indictment, more than offering some sort of transcendence.

Were you unsettled about something deeply personal, or was it an indictment of the way society was going, or... I think it was both—in my work, it's very hard for me to separate the two.

The Gallery 2 pieces reminded me of circus creatures, and when I imagined walking among them I felt a kind of fear. I didn't know if it was a fear of turning into them, because they resemble me closely enough that I could imagine one day I'd wake up and find myself like them and not know who I was. Or, possibly I'm afraid of them because there's something broken about them, and it's like encountering severe disability where you might feel compassion, but fear as well... You're very good, amazing actually [laughs]—yes, that's exactly what it is, it's that space in between those two things where I like to work, where you don't know what happened, and it's very unsettling, but you can't really dismiss it either. I mean, that's how I feel about it—it's kind of this "uhr, uhr, uhr" internal grinding, so yes, it's both.

And the third possibility with fear could be that there's the threat of simply appearing ridiculous and non-mainstream, and being ostracized and encased forever in this little spotlighted space as a freak—and maybe that's the scariest possibility. Yes, absolutely, I mean, those were self-portraits, and I feel like it was an important place to come from because I almost had to start from that very frightening place myself, and then work through it to shed what it was about it that was so scary. I still feel my work

Deborah Brown *Mushroom with Legs II*, 2010. Resin, granite. 21 x 13 inches.
Courtesy: The artist and PooL Art Fair, New York.

Deborah Brown *Scallops (detail)*, 2010. Scallop shells, human hair. Grouping of 75 scallops, 96 x 48 inches.
Courtesy: The artist and Pool Art Fair, New York.

now has some element of "disturbed" about it, but it's on a different level, I think, than that original work.

Do you want people to just stare at your work, or do you want people to talk to or engage the creatures? I do want people to engage and talk to them. You know, this woman came in after you left [the show at Pool Art Fair], and she was going crazy over the scallops with the hair—she had just had a dream about it and was really freaked out, it was really great. [Laughs.] I do think they sneak up on you, you do find yourself connecting and not even knowing—I have seen that happen before.

As for the environment you ideally imagine them to be in—whether it be a gallery setting or a fanciful universe—what would it be? That's a good question. In a way, I think juxtaposition is always a powerful thing, so I think putting them in an environment where they're not supposed to be is quite powerful. If they were in an idealistic environment, like in a forest, rummaging on a completely organic forest floor—that could also be quite powerful. In a sterile museum, or a collector's home, again, they're still playing on wherever they are, and that's another level that completes the whole message or impact of the work.

So I guess there's some persisting integrity to the hybrids, even though they're hollow and ridiculous, because wherever they are, they're mocking or resisting in a similar way. Yes, exactly.

I think we'd mentioned briefly that you could see these as lamps or having a utilitarian function; this question may or may not be insulting, but, if they were to become utilitarian objects, would something be lost in that translation, or, would the meaning actually be enhanced? It's a good question. I probably would shy away from it at this point, but I think one day it would be great to do some work that was utilitarian. I actually thought the beetle with hair could become a coffee table—put it in a Plexiglass box and have people put their drinks on it. It's sort of a perfect juxtaposition again. That could work—it isn't something I'd set out doing, but would be open to thinking about.

So you grew up in the OC [Orange County, California], is that right? Actually no; I grew up in Florida till I was fourteen, then [my family] moved to San Diego, and I lived there till I went to Otis Parsons in LA. I left after a year, did some traveling, then came back and finished up at UCSD. Then I went to UC Irvine, and moved to LA after that.

As a child, did you play with a lot of dolls or toys that resemble your work? Yeah, I think I did, I loved toys and I loved dolls. Florida, even more so than California, is a really vacuous place, and because of the heat you just get into this weird, numb state, and I feel like I was in that place until I was 14—it was just this foggy, "everything mixed together" [state of mind], and it's almost like being on some kind of medication. When I go back now because my sister is back there I go, "Oh my god, it's happening again!" [Laughs.]

So it's the heat in conjunction with what, specifically, about Florida?

It's also very flat—I mean, we lived in a beautiful place across the beach, it was lovely, but nothing happened. There was no energy, it was kind of like a fantasy land; there was very little intellectual, original thought that happened [or] happens there. I hate to say that—it's generalizing of course. When I moved to California, everything was like, boom, boom, boom, and clicked, and I woke up. But I feel that sort of hazy quality never left me, and I've kind of embraced [it], and I think that is where a lot of that sort of surreal, you-can-close-your-eyes-and-float, place comes from.

So I guess it makes sense that it wasn't a dream—it was your actual experience. Exactly [laughs]!

What part of Florida was this? Boca Raton. It was just sort of landscapes of emptiness, nothing happening. It was lovely, but not real.

You couldn't engage with it. It wasn't real.

Your experience living in LA, with the entertainment industry and where everything is kind of a mockery of itself—at what point did this intersect with the haziness? It dramatically collided with it, and all the work from when I started making the little hybrids came from the whole Hollywood, media-driven, advertising, "what is beauty," "what is of value"—all of these things were very much informed by Los Angeles. When I was at Otis Parsons in MacArthur Park, there was such an incredible dichotomy between the wealthy and the poor—it was just an extraordinary place, very difficult imagery, seeing certain people live in certain ways. It was kind of a wake-up call, a wake-up for me.

The dichotomy in terms of the economic or social strata that people lived in—how would you say that's reflected in a particular piece? I do sort of mock materialism, so I'm critiquing the fixation on the idea of happiness and fulfillment through that. I don't directly address it, but it's certainly implied.

As far as your formal art education, was there an instructor who really clarified the direction that you would take and the questions that you would ask and even the materials you would use? I think they all did. Kim MacConnel is an artist from San Diego, and he was all about found objects when I was an undergrad—I would go to thrift stores and that would be where I'd get everything, you know, gilded frames and strange old toys. In grad school, I didn't really have one mentor, because it was so feminist oriented and I was interested in that, but it wasn't my passion. Italo Scanga, he was an Italian painter—he was also into found objects, so I would say those two were the most influential.

You mentioned you have siblings, and that they do things completely different from what you're doing now? Yes. One is a school teacher, one is a mom, a housewife, and my brother is a waiter and a musician.

And how do they react to your work? I think they get it and they don't—I don't think they fully understand it, but that's OK. My mother loved to come to my studio last year when she was visiting, and it was an incredible for me because she really got it and saw her connection to it. That was incredibly powerful for me because she'd never really seen my work before.

Do you have children now? I do, I have a daughter—she absolutely loves the work, and refuses to let me sell certain pieces.

Does she name them, and really interact with them? She interacts with them, and she's just fierce about the ones she loves, and she's fascinated with all the strange things that come in the mail for me, you know, strange sourcing of objects.

I'm really interested in how children interact with these things—I don't know if they would seem more or less scary to a six-year-old? I was watching some kids who came into the show and they were quite put off, but they wanted to interact with them in a physical way, and of course I let them—they really wanted to sort of know [them]. I do think they connect in a more pure way. I think [my daughter] does get it; she gets it subliminally without really being able to articulate it.

Is there anything about your work that people always miss? I don't have a set idea as to exactly what I want them to walk away with. Hopefully [the work] will resonate, and possibly suggest a new reality, or a new investigation into what they deem reality. I just want to get them to think. Or feel. I don't even know if it's think—that's when we get into trouble [laughs]. I get them to feel. M

Deborah Brown (left) at Pool Art Fair New York, shown with Jennie E. Park (right) and Vivi Ying He (center) of the M magazine. Photo: Macinnis, 2011