

## RECOGNITIONS: The Human and Animal Within

"Atavistic Beasts" by Aida Laleian  
at the Houston Center for Photography  
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The "Atavistic Beasts" of Aida Laleian, the result of an eight-year investigation of photographic self-portraiture, are riveting images of mythic creatures. Like many successful representations of myth, this series is a well-crafted, insightful story of an individual that hints at truths about life and society in general.

Laleian's works are collaged and re-photographed composites derived from images of herself (usually head and/or torso) and of animals (usually the hind quarters). The gelatin silver photographs are hand-colored with oil paint creating seamless and richly-colored representations of myths of her own invention and significance. Laleian's use of the photographic medium in this context is purposeful. Since the photograph has always been associated with a record of what once existed, it is easy to imagine that these creatures are indeed the ancestors Laleian's titles suggest. In this sense, she explores the notion that the qualities of animals are also the qualities of humans through sheer genetics. A further investigation also reveals questions regarding the traditional conception of human and animal qualities being diametrically opposed, as well as feminine or masculine qualities.

There is no dismissing the fact that each image is Laleian, although she often hides her hair under scarves or turbans that adds to the appearance of timelessness. Each beast is Laleian and embodies aspects of the self — her identity. The images seem to represent a glance into her life history of experiences and revelations. Here Laleian, who teaches photography, drawing and video at Williams College, effectively utilizes her filmmaking background. The images are not posed. They are active and have the quality of a film still thereby implying the passage of time and a narrative vaguely recalling Cindy Sherman's photographic self-portraits. In *A Surgeon Destroyed From Within*, Laleian is the pregnant she-wolf. The setting is ambiguous but somewhat reminiscent of a doctor's office. She stands behind the screen perhaps either before or after an examination. There is a lamp in the upper corner of the image that could be an examination lamp (of "put your legs in the stirrups and slide

forward" fame). Also in the background is a haunting shadow of the raven suggesting something yet to come. The she-wolf touches her swollen belly recognizing, as if for the first time, there is life inside her. She seems startled, perhaps even a bit frightened, to notice her "animalness" as alien. What woman hasn't felt this way in the anti-nature, nature-must-be-controlled environment of the doctor's office or operating room?

The concept of being a mythic beast demonstrating atavistic qualities clearly empowers Laleian. As with myths, the individual learns life lessons and is guided to make wise choices. In the end, the individual often finds that the answers are already within. In *Insistent Destiny* she is the powerful sphinx shown in profile, head tilted upward, looking as though she awaits the answer to the riddle she has posed. She is ready to meet destiny. The goat woman's body in *Inside of Panic* forms a circle by touching her back leg. The gesture seems to be a recognition. It is her tail that she has been chasing. Perhaps she is ending the cycle. Perhaps she is attempting to further unite the animal and human.

The viewer is an important part of the myth's completion. The size of each image is approximately 22 x 30 inches. They are not small, precious objects of desire nor are they unfathomable and overpowering murals. Each work is large enough for one person to view without violating the space of the image or feeling diminished by its size. The image is accessible and supports the content as simultaneously personal and monumental.

The environments within the images suggest a studio setting. The restrained emotion of the classical, mythic beasts, the hand-colored black-and-white images, and the studio photographer's obvious, fabricated environments hint at the tame poses of nude women in Victorian erotic photography. Laleian's images embody potent sexuality and passion by combining her demure nudity with the unashamed display of animal genitalia as in *Separated From His Beloved Lust*. Here she is



Aida Laleian, *A Surgeon Destroyed From Within*, 1993, Hand-colored silver print

not tame(d). She does not limply sit still and behave for the voyeuristic camera's eye. She often moves into the photographer's space to question who is observing whom and who controls whom. In *Chase Upon Memory 2*, the lioness climbs on to a short pedestal outside the intended photographic setting and into the studio itself. The lioness looks at the viewer as if to say "what are you looking at?" There is an implied defiance. The idea of who is observing whom reappears often, sometimes confrontational, sometimes as a dialogue as in *Inspecting a Moral Machine*. At first, the viewer assumes to be looking down upon the owl woman, however with closer inspection, the owl woman seems to be looking down upon the viewer.

As mentioned in her artist's statement, one of Laleian's influences is the sixteenth century Mannerist painter, Bronzino. As Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* notes, Bronzino is known for his incorporation of extremely learned and intricate allegories and their lascivious undertones. In *Memory of a Vessel*, Laleian is the pregnant eland woman. With innocent curiosity, she unveils the tripod of the studio photographer's camera. In the background there is a partial view of a reproduction of Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly, Time* posted on the studio wall. The partial view only reveals the buttocks of a female figure

and another figure metaphorically representing "hate." Is nature as represented by the eland woman unveiling the mask of the camera's falseness? Does she point at society's antagonism between woman/nature vs. man/technology? The ambiguity enriches the possibilities.

"Atavistic Beasts" by Aida Laleian is densely layered allegories. Though it is not necessary for the viewer to know the meaning of every reference within the images, the viewer is indeed rewarded by a further investigation of her symbols and references. Each viewing produces fresh revelations and provides insight into the complex relationship of the human and the animal within.

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Aida Laleian, *Separated From His Beloved Lust*, 1991, Hand-colored silver print

