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The Nature of Things: Daisy Youngblood's Clay, Sticks and Stones

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on April 25, 2015



Daisy Youngblood, "Leaping I" (2010), low-fire clay, 29 x 14 x 9 1/2 inches.

Private Collection (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

In 2003, Daisy Youngblood collected her MacArthur prize and decamped to Costa Rica. The sculptures in her current solo at McKee Gallery, [Daisy Youngblood: Ten Years 2006–2015](#), cover the work she's done since, a ménage of animals and humans, clay and hair, rocks and sticks, where the mythic is extracted from the dregs of the earth.

Youngblood favors smooth, gently modeled clay, which she low-fires to a gray or sepia finish. There are a few bronzes in the show, patinated black, but they don't come off as a bid for monumentality. Although one, "Gorilla" from 1996 (which breaks with the exhibition's stated time frame), approaches life size, the other two, "Tomo's Cheetah" (2001–10) and "Donkey Head" (2006), can fit in your hand. The bronzes are a change in both material and content: they feel emotionally remote, while the clay, with its supple fleshiness, elicits a primal response suspended between sensuousness and horror, the vibrant aura of reanimated mud.



Daisy Youngblood, "Coming to Meet, the Internal Balance of Stillness and Activity" (2014), low-fire clay, wood, and stone, 21 1/2 x 13 x 16 inches, Private Collection

There is a classicizing impulse in Youngblood's work, and an equally strong urge toward contradiction and deconstruction. Some of the work is simply bizarre, such as "Oladio" (2009), in which a bowed length of wood, which could be a tree branch, a root or a vine, extends off the wall with a orangutan head and arm attached to its mid-section, and a leg reaching out from the lowest point of its trajectory, before it curves back to the wall. And then there's "Coming to Meet, the Internal Balance of Stillness and Activity" (2014), comprised of a clay female torso, with sticks for limbs and polished stones for its head and hips, an amalgam that veers uncomfortably close to the queasy Surrealism of Salvador Dalí.

The best work in this show is more familiar, and more disturbing, than much of what is found in vintage Surrealism. For one, it sidesteps obvious dream states and psychological fissures in favor of a spiritual framework elementally connected to the natural world. If there is a pantheistic or animistic thrust to this work, as the exhibition's press release suggests ("Stones are used as heads, eyes, noses, torsos; a long concave piece of oak is a body. They are all equal parts of a living whole for Daisy Youngblood."), it does not intrude on the sculptures' materialist determinism, that the life cycle begins and ends with the construction and dissolution of clay.



Daisy Youngblood, "Chandrika" (2014), low-fire clay, wood, and stone, 9 x 63 x 19 inches

This point is most obvious in "Chandrika" (2014), a reclining figure with red clay legs, an undulating log where its hips and torso should be, and a face, also of red clay, that resembles mummified skin and rests on a large, rounded stone. Creepily extruded pebbles stand in for the nose and teeth; there are no arms, and the comportment of the legs feels simultaneously moribund and post-coital. The face recalls a Mayan terra-cotta head or an Aztec decorated skull.

An evocation of the ancient is felt in a number of works in the exhibition, but it remains an undercurrent; historicism doesn't become an issue even as the artist resists the formal pull of modernism: techniques such as fragmentation and assemblage are employed, but Youngblood's natural materials seek a fractious unity within each piece rather than a discontinuity or rupture. These tendencies take the work out of our time and place, landing it in a contemporaneous but foreign setting, not unlike flying from New York to the Costa Rican rainforest, where the primeval clings to your skin with the saturated humidity.

"Elephant-headed Yogi" (2012) is pieced together from clay, vine-like strips of wood and a smooth stone that makes up the figure's chest and abdomen; the elephant head and human limbs on one side of the body are clay, while the rest are wood, including the elephant's trunk. The fingers on the right hand are spindly twigs. Youngblood has created a wiry, earthy Ganesh that is as much a sci-fi mutant as the Hindu god of wisdom, a composite of fashioned and found objects that derives its discomfiting potency from the clash of its disparate parts.



Daisy Youngblood, "Elephant-headed Yogi" (2012), low-fire clay, wood, and stone, 11 x 14 x 8 inches

The fragmentary works are one aspect of Youngblood's output over the past decade; the other sculptures are more traditionally unitary, which makes them no less compelling. Included in this grouping are the three bronzes mentioned earlier, four clay animal sculptures and two portraits, one of the artist's daughter and the other of the legendary art dealer Richard Bellamy.

These works make the most of Youngblood's classical sensibility as well as her ability to endow clay with a pulse. The animals are uncommonly alive, especially the two orangutans catapulting off the wall in "Leaping I" and "Leaping II" (both 2010); they are hardly anthropomorphized, yet, like the other wildlife in the show, they exude a dignity and intelligence — an animal intelligence defined by their oneness with their surroundings.



Daisy Youngblood, "Portrait of Dick Bellamy" (1982), low-fired clay, 22 x 6 x 6 inches (click to enlarge)

"Portrait of Dick Bellamy" also departs from the exhibition's chronology, dating from 1982, but the sense it conveys of being inside and outside of antiquity fits in with the other work. It also sets off a telling contrast with the portrait of Youngblood's daughter.

A surprisingly small work, just 22 inches tall, most of its height taken up by an armless, pod-like torso that becomes a de facto stele. Bellamy's head sprouts like a mushroom from the top, crested with what looks like real hair, adding a frisson of wax-museum simulation to the piece (hair is also used, to a similarly disconcerting effect, on the shaggy head of "Venus," 2007, a clay rendering of a squatting ape).

But the torso doesn't resemble ancient funerary sculpture as much as it does a cocoon, a transformative state from which Bellamy's soft features and heavily-lidded eyes emerge, chin tipped skyward, as if blinking into the light. Scorch marks blacken most of his torso, neck and lower face, suggesting a trial by fire, but they are even more noticeable on "Budhi" (2006), the portrait of Youngblood's daughter, where they envelope her head, shoulders, chest, right arm, hand and thigh, contrasting starkly with the creamy whiteness of the face and left arm.



Daisy Youngblood, "Budhi" (2006), low-fire clay, 26 x 13 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches

Budhi, whose name would seem to be a variant of Buddhi, the consort of Ganesh embodying intelligence, was born in 1986 with Down's syndrome, making her 19 or 20 years old when the sculpture was made. That she is depicted nude raises troubling questions about consent, like those that are swirling around Sally Mann right now. But the rounded, idealized forms, informed by the complex and deeply personal allusions surrounding the piece and its evident mother-daughter bond, take the portrait to a level where presumptions founder on ambiguity.

Her outstretched arms and hairless, outsized head lend her a doll-like aura, while the blackened swathes impart the sensation that a passage through flames, à la Mozart's *Magic Flute*, was a prerequisite to reaching out to us. Her head also leans back, not to emerge — as

we might interpret with Bellamy — from a volatile state of transformation, but to engage with her environment in a state of centered quietude. (The title of the fragmentary sculpture, “Coming to Meet, the Internal Balance of Stillness and Activity,” can be applied here.)



Daisy Youngblood, “Anubis and the 1st Chakra” (2012), low-fire clay, wood, and stone, 32 x 22 x 17 1/2 inches, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase, by exchange, through an anonymous gift

In his quickie [review](#) of this show in last Friday’s *New York Times*, Holland Cotter notes, “You wait for the work to turn sentimental, but it doesn’t. It’s too strange.” Yes, but what may be making us uncomfortable is not the essential strangeness of the work but our estrangement from the natural order of things, the endless cycle of birth and oblivion, that it represents.

This estrangement is keenly felt in a sculpture like “Anubis and the 1st Chakra” (2012), named for the Egyptian jackal-god of mummification and the afterlife. Composed of a clay jackal’s head, its huge ears standing at attention, atop a gnarled, L-shaped piece of wood, which rests alongside a stone resembling a human leg, the work is a mini-tableau of an interrupted carrion meal.

The invocation of Anubis and the first chakra, which in Buddhism is located at the base of the spine and is vital for survival, generates an unpalatable and, for some, untenable image — death feasting on the life force, a crucifixion without a resurrection. But such a schema, in which our souls are processed through the gut of a wild dog, removes our spiritual life from an imaginary or philosophical plane and drags it back to earth, where we live.

[Daisy Youngblood: Ten Years 2006-2015](#) continues at [McKee Gallery](#) (745 Fifth Ave, Midtown, Manhattan) through May 30.

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