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Gillian Jagger

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Of Empathy, Appropriation, and Time

Gillian Jagger

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

Rift, 1999. Calf stanchions, animal bones, farm implements, and barbed wire, 11 x 30 x 20 ft. View of installation at Jagger's studio.

DAVID LACKEY, WHIRLWIND CREATIVE

How do you solve a problem like Gillian Jagger's label-defying work? It does not fit into any familiar art-market niche and confounds many of the art establishment's trend-conscious poobahs. It is not postmodern-ironic, nor does she send her designs out to nameless fabricators to be manufactured—bigger, shinier, more expensive—and then sold to trophy-seeking Russian oligarchs or oil-rich Qataris. Certainly, many of her mixed-media works are large—and complex and unusual, too—sometimes incorporating the dried bodies of dead animals or rusty sections of farm implements. Despite or perhaps because of their strangeness, her sculptures do not traffic in one-trick sensations; instead, they conjure resonant, ambiguous emotions and atmospheres that feel at once primordial and timeless, charged with some kind of unnamable, soulful/psychic energy.

Jagger, who is now in her early 80s and has lived for several decades in the rural Hudson Valley, northwest of Manhattan, says, "As human beings, we're interconnected with each other and with nature. We are or we should be, that is, and I want my works to reflect that idea." Jagger is a professor emerita of Pratt Institute, where she taught for 40 years. She continues to teach, in the role of visiting critic, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

She was born in London in 1930; her father, the sculptor Charles Sergeant Jagger, had studied at the Royal College of Art and won the Prix de Rome. He was awarded a medal for his valorous service in World War I and later created monuments depicting British soldiers heroically, in a realist style. His best-known work is the Royal Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner, in London.

Charles Sargent Jagger died when Gillian was a little girl. After her mother married a coal magnate from upstate New York, the family moved to Buffalo. Jagger remembers, "Within minutes of getting married and then heading with us girls to the States, it was clear that there was no understanding between them." A few years later, she was devastated when her older sister died of spinal meningitis at the age of 12. Jagger recalls, "I went dead for a year. I didn't speak. I refused to go to school." Throughout her childhood, Jagger displayed an interest in art and a natural proficiency as a draftsman. Recently, she recollected, "My sister and I spent hours on end in our father's studio, making pictures or clay figures. I suppose I learned by watching; plus drawing came easily to me. My father was classically trained and made bas-relief and freestanding sculptures, so I acquired an understanding of the relationship between drawing and three-dimensional form, and about how certain materials could be used."

***Rift* (detail), 1999.**

After studying painting at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, Jagger moved to New York to pursue a master's degree in painting at New York University. In Manhattan, Andy Warhol, an older Carnegie Tech graduate, was a supportive pal. In the 1950s and 1960s, Jagger brought sculptural elements into her semi-abstract paintings, including plaster casts of manhole covers that she had made on city streets. "Manhole Covers Make for Holesome Art," quipped an August 1964 headline of a *New York World-Telegram* article about Jagger's working methods.

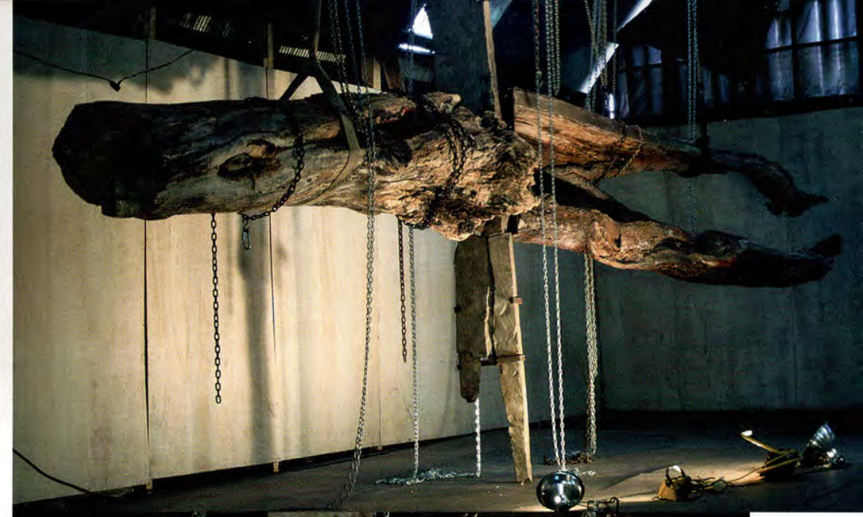
In the fall of that year, Jagger presented a solo exhibition of mixed-media "paintings" at New York's now-defunct Ruth White Gallery. Some incorporated plaster casts of Manhattan manhole covers. "One of them was mounted on a big board, on which I had painted a yellow line," she says. "Several men had to carry it up five flights of stairs, because it didn't fit in the elevator. When I told the dealer, Ruth White, that I had been called a 'sculptor' in the newspaper, she said, 'If it takes five men to carry your piece up the stairs, you cannot call it a painting. It's a sculpture.'"

To Jagger's dismay, the media threw her into the Pop camp, a response that frustrated her: "I wasn't trying to be detached in the Pop Art way. Instead, I wanted my works to feel real; that's why I put 'real' objects in them." For a while, she withdrew from the Manhattan art world; she moved to New Jersey and focused on caring for horses, one of her enduring passions.

Eventually, she resumed making casts, experimenting with plaster, sodium alginate (used to make teeth-impression molds), cement, and lead. After casting the manholes, to make one form, she says, "I stuck my own rear end in plaster." Similarly, in the 1970s, using plaster or malleable polyurethane foam, she made casts of the impressions left by her friends' bodies after they had slid through sand; of horses' hoofprints; of a dead cat; of tire tracks made by heavy vehicles like Jeeps; and, during a trip to Kenya in 1975 with her companion (and now spouse), Consuelo Mander, of a baby buffalo's legs. "I hauled 60 pounds of sodium alginate with me to Africa," Jagger recalls. "I made castings of tomb walls in Egypt, but it was the look, shape, and atmosphere of Kenya's volcanic landscape that really moved me." She started paying attention to the forms and textures of the earth's surface—years later, she would visit western Ireland's rocky Burren coast, too—and to their subtle function as nature's markers of the passage of time.

Jagger's work began to reflect a confluence of interrelated themes that had long interested her. These included the natural cycle of life and death, the fragility or vulnerability of living things, and an insistence on apprehending and depicting reality as it is—sometimes painful, complex, or confounding—without intervening in typical, artistic ways to portray it through illusion-creating or stylizing techniques. Not for Jagger was Pop Art's winking regard for and representation of its subjects, from fast food and soup cans to beach balls and shiny cars. "If I could have ripped real manhole covers out of the pavement and used them in my 'paintings,' I would have done so," she says, "Making rubbings or plaster casts was the only way I could keep this subject matter clean and true, not change it and bring it into my art." Jagger admits that she was reacting against her drawing skills, too: "I could have made accurate pictures of what had captured my interest, but that would have been too arty for me. I was casting facts, because I couldn't believe in arty metaphors."

Her works became larger and more complex. When encountered in person, some of her mixed-media creations are every bit as startling as Damien Hirst's cut-up cows displayed in formaldehyde-filled tanks, but without their calculated shock value. Among Among them: *Rift* (1999), a phantasmagoria of airborne animal bones, barbed wire, and ominous, metal stanchions that once held milk cows in place in their barns, and *Sideways* (2008), two massive tree trunks joined by a stone slab, a construction that resembles a gigantic clothespin hanging horizontally from the ceiling.



Above and detail: *Sideways*, 2008. Wood, steel, and stone, 10 x 12 x 30 ft. View of installation at Jagger's studio. Below: *Absence of Faith*, 2002. Plaster, wire, and mixed media, 12 x 7 x 6 ft. View of installation at Jagger's studio.

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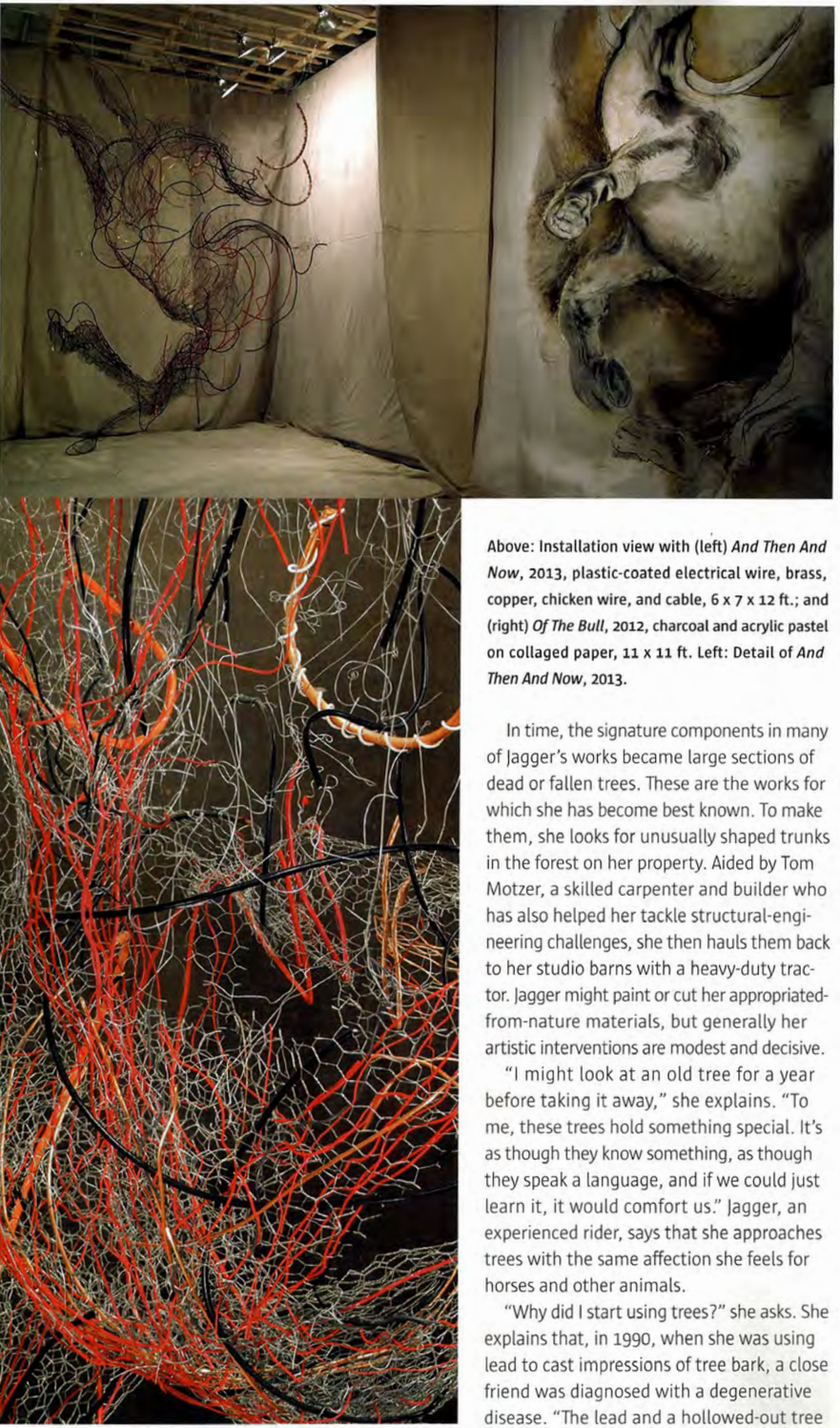

Above: Installation view with (left) *And Then And Now*, 2013, plastic-coated electrical wire, brass, copper, chicken wire, and cable, 6 x 7 x 12 ft.; and (right) *Of The Bull*, 2012, charcoal and acrylic pastel on collaged paper, 11 x 11 ft. Left: Detail of *And Then And Now*, 2013.

In time, the signature components in many of Jagger's works became large sections of dead or fallen trees. These are the works for which she has become best known. To make them, she looks for unusually shaped trunks in the forest on her property. Aided by Tom Motzer, a skilled carpenter and builder who has also helped her tackle structural-engineering challenges, she then hauls them back to her studio barns with a heavy-duty tractor. Jagger might paint or cut her appropriated-from-nature materials, but generally her artistic interventions are modest and decisive.

"I might look at an old tree for a year before taking it away," she explains. "To me, these trees hold something special. It's as though they know something, as though they speak a language, and if we could just learn it, it would comfort us." Jagger, an experienced rider, says that she approaches trees with the same affection she feels for horses and other animals.

"Why did I start using trees?" she asks. She explains that, in 1990, when she was using lead to cast impressions of tree bark, a close friend was diagnosed with a degenerative disease. "The lead and a hollowed-out tree came together in a piece I was working on. When I dragged that big tree into the studio, it was like a scream for life. I opened it up and hung it from chains from the ceiling, and when my sick friend came to see the piece, she rolled right into it in her wheelchair, as though that's where she belonged."

The artist Kiki Smith knows Jagger and is familiar with her work. She told me that she found it "rough and visceral," adding, "It's physically compelling in ways some artists' works are not." Smith noted, too, that the very visible chain hoists that often suspend Jagger's tree sculptures appear as integral parts of the works, giving them an edgy sense of contingency, of "feeling like they're temporary." Jagger agrees. Sometimes, as in *Absence of Faith* (2002), a fragmented, plaster-cast sculpture of a horse, she suspends the components of a multi-part work from the ceiling using more delicate, thin-gauge wires instead. A sense of physical tension, which Jagger associates with the human body's vulnerabilities and sense of gravity, pervades such constructions, as does an implied sense of movement. By contrast, a huge piece like Berlinde De Bruyckere's *Kreupelhout—Cripplewood* (2012–13), which replicates a massive, uprooted elm tree in wax, with thickets of branches wrapped up like bandaged limbs, also alludes to life, death, and decay, but its emphatically static nature is part of its impact, as is its melodramatic air. Jagger says, "Tom and I go to great lengths to figure out how to hang or support these heavy pieces, which make you keenly aware of their mass, weight, and volume. Some of them are big, lumpy things, but they look and feel as light as ballet dancers."

In Jagger's recent solo exhibition at John Davis Gallery in Hudson, New York, engineering prowess came together with her abiding interest in animals, human nature (or expressions of the human spirit), and material experimentation. *And Then, And Now* (2013), a sculpture of a bucking bull made of chicken wire and interwoven, plastic-covered electrical wires of varying thicknesses, is related to *Of the Bull* (2012), a mural-size rendering of the same subject in pastel chalk on paper and acetate sheets. Both works were inspired by prehistoric paintings and sculptures that Jagger saw during a 2012 trip to the Dordogne region of southwestern France. There, she visited L'Abri de Cap Blanc, a rock shelter that lies just to the east of the Eyzies Caves.

4th Configuration of Horses Ran By, 2014. Latex, plaster, and rebar, 40 x 22 x 8 ft.

"What I saw profoundly moved me," she says. "A carved wall relief featured nearly a dozen wild animals. In front of a deep indentation in the wall lay the skeletal remains of a curled-up human figure—presumably the woman who had sculpted these animals some 17,000 years ago. Through this powerful work, this ancient, unknown artist convinced me that she had felt and believed in the power of empathy—with the animals, with nature—to give life meaning."

Back in her studio, Jagger worked on the bull picture, which recalls ancient cave paintings in its size and flatness; her image, though, features some skillful foreshortening, a tour de force of fine draftsmanship. Eager to translate her subject into three-dimensional form, Jagger felt that "it would have been false for me to try to respond to he prehistoric artist's work using my usual materials or the materials of her time. I felt that if I were to reach back so far in time and space, I'd have to use a very light material, so came the wires. As this sculpture developed, I felt I had to rush to keep up with it, because it was evolving with or without me, like something that mattered unto itself."

In his 1925 treatise, *The Dehumanization of Art*, a book with which Jagger is familiar, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset was prescient; considering still-evolving, early 20th-century art forms, he noted that they tended to regard art "as a game and nothing more," to possess "an essential irony," and to lack any sense of "transcendence whatsoever." He also postulated what he called *realidad vivida* ("worldly reality") or *realidad humana* ("human reality"), by which he meant the worldview of any individual based on the sum of his or her life's experiences. Such an outlook can be both objective and subjective; every person has one, and, by extension, it might be said that all humans share a common worldview as members of the same species, an outlook based on uniquely human perceptions, knowledge, and emotions.

Jagger's creations are touching a nerve with viewers who are concerned about the environment. Some of her sculptures have just been shown at David Lewis Gallery in New York, where they attracted a new audience of younger art enthusiasts. Jagger's work implicitly taps into that kind of fundamental human sensibility and, from there, gently reaches for the spiritual. It also seems to ply the depths of what Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious"—a humanity-wide repository of shared, psychic, enduring knowledge and experience. The painter Barbara Gordon, a former student of Jagger's who, with her husband, Richard Schlesinger, made *Casting Faith: A Portrait of Gillian Jagger* (2002), notes in that documentary film: "Gillian's work is not conceptual. It's about connections—to land, animals, natural patterns." It reminds us, she says, "about how art helps us live in the world." In the film, John Perreault observes, "As far as I can tell, there is not an ounce of irony in Gillian's work...She's not sarcastic or ironic. In a sense, she's not iconic either."

With its allusions to natural forces and its inherent spiritual values, Jagger's work, one could argue, claims empathy and time as central themes. She wants us to stop and think about the character of the trees or animals whose traces or remains appear in her works, and how we might relate to them in a grander scheme of life, death, awareness, and enduring soul. That kind of proposition, however, can be a very hard sell.

Edward M. Gómez is a critic and senior editor of Raw Vision.

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