

SPLENDIDLY DISTURBING

Eva Frosch

Grand, amazing, marvelous, inimitable? Horrifying, shocking, cruel, disturbing? The reactions to Iris Schieferstein's chimeric-like sculptures vary from great enthusiasm to sheer disgust.

The Berlin-based artist, trained as a sculptor, works with dead animals. Schieferstein fabricates new creatures out of existing ones, preferring the invention of something unnatural and artificial to the mimesis of the real world. Her approach is to fragment an entity and assemble the parts to a fanciful abnormality. Thus, Iris Schieferstein's fantastic re-creations are a statement for differentness and versatility, asking, and simultaneously negating, the bold question whether there is such a thing as "normality".

In her *Fleischplastiken* (flesh sculptures), different animal parts conserved in formalin and neatly showcased in glass tanks, Schieferstein rearranges the beastly remains to a new image. There are simulated scenes, like the bobsled riding chicken in *Bobsled Riders* (1993), or the elegantly posing *Lovers* (1994), or the Arcimboldo-like bust *Kopf* (Head) (2002). Famous are her letterings, whole sentences are written with chicken wings, snakes, dog ears, mouse heads, craws, and whatnot. They often consist of several glasses, as in *Life can be so nice* (2001), one word per tank.

The beautifully shocking sculpture of a snakeskin-covered gun in *Snakepistol* (2007) shows a typical example of the "wow effect" inherent in the artist's work. The combination of materials that are usually not meant for each other, clash and produce a vexing statement.

Looking at Iris Schieferstein's widely blogged animal shoes is another odd experience. The accurately hand-crafted sculpture is made of cow or horse hooves and converted into an elegant fashion object by adding heels and zipper. In *Vegas Girl* (2009), two golden

toy guns replace the heel. Similar, just simpler and therefore maybe even more astonishing, are the *Horse Shoes* (2007).

Iris Schieferstein is mostly known for her three-dimensional work, but she also produces unique photographs, the so-called *Fotoplastiken* (Photo Sculptures). They mostly communicate rather brutal, or at least disturbing messages, but, at the same time, they are witty and humorous remarks on human conflicts. The half-human, half-horse is desperately bending over the washer in *She thought...* (2005). We've seen the composite race of creatures in the minotaurs (half-human, half-bull), fauns (half-human, half-goat) or centaurs (half-human, half-horse) of ancient times. The concept of part-animal, part-human hybrids dates way back, and the allusion this mythology is apparent in Schieferstein's oeuvre.

Iris Schieferstein challenges the viewer; she always provokes a reaction. Her work is the catalyst for many in-depth and vivid conversations about art, life, death, love, sex, humanity... □

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Iris Schieferstein, *Vegas Girl*, 2009. Toy pistol, cow hooves, zipper, 13 x 13 x 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Frosch & Portmann.