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Daphane Park's The True Originals at Volitant Gallery

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Daphane Park's *The True Originals*, a series of twelve mixed media works now showing at the recently opened Volitant Gallery, presents a cast of fairy tale characters as diverse as the artist's wide range of experiences and influences. As a student at Indiana University and, later, the University of Texas, Park embarked on a series of travels that led her from the suburbs of Indianapolis to the jungles of Central and South America and the Etruscan ruins of Italy. Park's extended immersions within a variety of cultures and natural environments inspired her to explore such topics as Mayan cosmology, shamanism, map-making, natural history, Greek and Roman mythology, and utopian philosophy. Considering Park's adaptive lifestyle and evolving bricolage of interests, it is no surprise that she presents *The True Originals* as a mythological "meditation on transformation."

Park's mythical order consists of an array of fantastic mutant hybrids often adorned in stylish vestments such as flowing robes, corsets and other haute couture items. Formed from various components of human, zoological, and vegetal anatomy, the resulting creatures suggest a bizarre evolutionary amalgamation of biological structures and synthetic embellishments—perhaps not too dissimilar from nature's own eclectic process. Park's written descriptions of each creature (provided for the viewer) assign a level of agency to the character's transmutations, and, overall, she posits her creations as heroic individuals striving to attain communal harmony—or at least communication—within a perpetually fluctuating mythological biosphere. The accessible, quasi-poetic supplements generally help to delineate her imaginary universe, if only by offering insight into the conceptual impetus behind each character.

One interesting creature, *Shape Shiftress* (2005), features a makeshift head of furry petals and anemone feelers set atop a body of eight cylindrical limbs—roughly resembling tube worms—that emerge as legs from a pattern of sleek dresses. Whereas the dynamic forms of *Shape Shiftress* convey an impression of movement, many of the other works capture the creatures in frozen tableaux set amid loosely defined landscapes or the unseen depths of the ocean. As one of the most detailed and "finished" works, *The Good Listener* (2005) depicts a somewhat endearing fur-ball creature endowed with a large human ear and a feather tail as it stands atop a crusted, fissuring surface suggestive of volcanic topography and its brewing transformation. Other characters, such as *Heldra* (2005), a "Bold Beauty" with a mane and breast formed from octopus tentacles, display an adumbrated, unfinished state of becoming. Park's collages of glossy, photographic images detailed with both fine and coarse brushstrokes of paint literalize the assimilative process of her work and offer an array of textures. However, some pieces, such as *Eryxsimona* (2005), fail to achieve an exciting or cohesive fusion and remain unconvincing. Park's most successful works place the figures upon simple, ambiguous backgrounds of mottled or blended color. In *Dragon Blaster* (2005), the flowing red drapes of a bird-headed creature cut a sharp but fluid form across the monochrome parchment paper—like ink poured into water—to create one of the most striking images of the series.

In line with Park's exploration of transformation, the various aquatic life-forms imagined in her visual and poetic schema highlight the metaphorical significance of water as a pervasive substance in constant flux and communication. In discussing her work, Park writes: "We are a part of the constant cycle of water moving through, in and around the planet and through our bodies and back. We too have the power to

transform, evolve, transcend, change our condition and care for the world that provides.” Park’s poetic idealism may fall on deaf ears for cynical viewers, but the artist’s evident affection for her characters suggests a whole-hearted embrace of the transformations that life—especially a life of travel, contact, and exchange—provokes. With such a mixed bag of creatures and effects, one has to conduct his or her own travels to search out the select characters within Park’s universe that possess the resonance and animation to achieve—or even approach—a status of mythical proportions.

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