

Artist Insights: *Riva Lehrer*

Artist Riva Lehrer is known for her striking, detailed portraits of what may lie beyond first impressions. She has held many solo exhibitions, overseen a variety of curatorial projects, been the subject of countless articles and documentary films, been a Chicago Artists Month featured artist, and received numerous awards, including a 5Arts Foundation Award and a Regional Visual Arts Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is currently an Assistant Adjunct Professor, Department of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Lehrer's latest solo exhibition, *Mirror Shards* opened at Printworks this past December. CGN spoke with Lehrer about empathy, animals, and the beauty of failure. - GV



COLORING BOOK (self-portrait)

CGN: Tell us about your work that's part of *Mirror Shards*. What are your current inspirations and influences? What's different from, or built upon, previous shows?

RL: Though most of my work has been concerned with disability issues, the work here is still different from previous exhibitions. I'm interested in how the mirror relates to transformation, but I also wanted to explore how people survive a difficult life. What is their sense of self? There's a lot to explore regarding empathy as opposed to sympathy or pity. I am really interested in the lives of others. Lately that's led to a focus on empathy, and how it is built and maintained.

How is empathy presented to children? In kids' books, many stories are depicted through animals. When children are little, they have a slowness of relating to other/unfamiliar genders – animals make an impossible place easier than a real relationship. When everything is thrown in and made weird on purpose, empathy can help you step into transitional space – the unfamiliar stops being 'the other'.

On a technical level, all of the recent works combine drawing with dimensional and intricate collage. *TIM/OWL* incorporates charcoal drawing with Japanese, Mexican, and Indian papers, wire, glass, metal, twigs, Bible pages.

Can you share some of the personal significance of disability as a muse in your art?

There's always a thru-line in my work – I consider how the influence of the body we are born into affects how we go through life.

Disability can be like a great big billboard – It magnifies the human condition so that we can see how we are affected by the nature of our bodies. Everyone is. But in disability, it's just very visible. My next project will be about the imaginary body – the portraits will have to be life size. I'll ask others – with and without a disability – about their own 'If' body.

Women in particular are bombarded with messages that their body is unacceptable. Our culture keeps changing its standards, and we can't keep up. In the hyena piece in *Mirror Shards*, the animal represents the fact that gender can be a sort of state you put on and take off. Hyenas are often associated with trickster figures - seen as sort of immoral and unreliable. They're notoriously hard to identify as male or female because their sex is visually identical, so male and female genitalia can't be told apart on the surface. They look very masculine, and canine but are closer to feline and have a matrilineal pack structure. Hyenas are also seen as scavengers, but it's not true – they're hunters. They stand in well for entities who seem to be one thing but are really another.

How do you determine which animals pair well with your subjects?

I look for animals that have a strong presence in language, then I think about animals as costumes – sort of in a shamanistic way. Metaphors are a source of inspiration. In language, metaphors are the first step outside of stability, and animal metaphors are some of the oldest.

A lot of the time it turns out to be eerie when pairing a subject with an animal. For instance when I was first talking to Tim about his animal, he blurted out "owl," which did not make sense to me at the time. Then I realized that his daughter Temma, who is severely disabled, was his owl. He thinks about the nature of wisdom through their relationship. *TIM/OWL* became a double portrait. Tim, who is a painter, has thought deeply about what it means to be human through his own extensive portraiture of Temma. He is partly clad in the costume, a wing strapped to one arm. As metaphors, owls are avatars of wisdom - wisdom that's often cryptic and delivered in obscure terms. Temma allows Tim to think outside the boundaries of his own body and consider what humanity means in abstract, spiritual, wordless realms of being.

I want people to think about how animals help us understand ourselves, how we relate to them, especially now that we are killing off the animals – think about when these animals are gone. Like broken mirror shards, once they're broken they never reflect the same way again.



TIM/OWL

How do you find Chicago as a place to work as an artist?

It's mixed. Generally, I love it. My career has been reasonable. I have friends who do wonderful work, but there's not quite a large enough collector base to sustain a career. It's a challenge. The change in the art world status here awhile back hurt Chicago. We used to do well when people came specifically to see what we did. Now is the scariest economic time to have a show. It's a challenge to do work about disability, and there are only so many serious figurative art collectors. I try to stay positive, and I am trying to raise my game. Sid and Bob [at Printworks] are wonderful. I have loyal followers, for whom I'm eternally grateful.

How much of your work is self-portraiture?

All of my subjects are real, and my process is really collaborative. I have very strong ethics about representing people, especially people with a disability since many have been totally misrepresented. I'm committed to making sure my subjects have control over what happens in the art. All of the work in the show is interview based, so each piece can take weeks or months. It makes me so happy that people will go through that process with me.

When I do self-portraits I can take more liberties representing myself. I don't have to worry so much about hurting someone inadvertently through my decisions or lack of skill. We are surrounded by figure portraits that are ideal and acceptable. The history of portraiture is about making the subject as attractive as possible. People used to see more real, naked bodies in their daily lives. It's hard to know, these days, what aging looks like. Now we try to eradicate all signs of history. Human variation is the absolute core of beauty – not yanking bodies into bland erasure.

Lately I've been talking to people about failure, and how beautiful I think it is. It's really how we are unique.

Mirror Shards: thru Feb. 4 at Printworks
Rivalehrer.com • Printworkschicago.com