



ALESSANDRO GALLO

"Metamorphoses"

EVELYNE
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Recently I took an extended trip on the London underground. You know the kind of thing, strap hanging, covertly watching the other passengers, reading the same adverts on the walls for the umpteenth time. Then a placard advertising London Zoo with the slogan, "It takes super skill to stay super still!" caught my eye.

London underground – Northern Line – fellow passengers – animal heads, "skill" and "super still" merged to form a single image. Suddenly I had that déjà-vu feeling. Where had I seen this before? All at once, I remembered: Alessandro Gallo – Metro (2011). The woman with her legs crossed, rummaging in her bag, beside her the young man spreading his legs, arms crossed, shoulders hunched. Further to the right the man taking notes; a woman reading a book, and so

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Alessandro Gallo



top-
"Metro", 2011, Stoneware and mixed
 media
 120 x 12 x 18 in

right -
"Beginning of a great adventure", 2014
 Stoneware and Mixed Media
 33 x 17 x 13 in





"Follow", 2016, Stoneware, mixed media, 16 in. h x 8 in. w x 12 in. length

"The Elevator" (7 figures in glass elevator), 2016, Stoneware, glass, steel, mixed media, 28 in. h x 20 in. w x 20 in. depth



on. They are all sitting close together, waiting to escape the confinement of the compartment when they reach their stop. So everything is as per usual? Far from it! In the bag of the rummaging woman, there are hazel nuts, she has a squirrel's head. The man taking notes has a horse's head. You can also see lizards' heads, birds' heads, a highly elegant lady with a flamingo's head. Five places left of her, another lady is stuffing earplugs in her gazelle's ears. Of his Metro figures, Gallo himself says, "The subway accurately reflects the city and the theatre of everyday life, it is a microcosm of life above ground. Everyone uses it and every day fate has fun by bringing totally different people into close proximity."

My fascination with Alessandro Gallo's hybrids goes back a long way. The human/animal creatures are so well made and so expressive that you almost begin to anticipate how they start to move, wink at you, hop from their pedestal or simply jump up from their seat on the underground and rush for the exit. The way your own imagination is stimulated is uncommonly fascinating. Every figure has its own body language, traits of character, and seems to have its own mood as well as its own ideas on clothing. The figures irresistibly evoke the feeling that you can sense how each of them lives. They have animals' heads because they are a kind of mask or a caricature and accurately reveal inner traits of character and hidden characteristics.

Gallo, born in Genoa in 1974, was not a ceramist from the beginning. In fact, he studied law at the university on his home town. However, painting and drawing had fascinated him for as long as he can think, which was why he was driven by the idea of working artistically not just as a hobby. So when he was 24, he moved to London to train as an artist at St. Martin's College of Art and Chelsea College of Art, graduating with a B.A. in fine art. As a student, he worked as a painter and decorator and began to become interested in digital photography. He experimented with manipulating digital images. With the appropriate software, he created photos of sealions or walruses, for instance, which he placed as ironic messages in urban environments such as tube platforms or tourist sights.

Alessandro Gallo is an excellent people watcher and he can translate what he learns brilliantly into clay. He takes guidance from a reference image which he has prepared on his indispensable computer. On the screen, he can turn it to observe it from all sides, thus changing the angle of view. One reason why the figures look so real is that the reference photos are based on photos of real people whom he photographs from all sides, from which he makes detail and character studies. He also likes to group his characters together like in the groups *The Metro* or *The Elevator*, thus illustrating their inner isolation. In these scenarios the environments of the figures collide in the smallest of spaces.

right
"Jesse - the Veteran"
2016, Stoneware, mixed media
30 in. h x 12 in. w x 12 in. depth





"Sitting duck", 2017, Stoneware and Mixed Media
12 in tall x 6,5 in deep and 7 in wide

The hybrid figures are all handbuilt from lightly grogged stoneware clay. In the initial stages he uses armatures to support and stabilise them, made from plumbing material, to maintain the desired posture for each figure. Once the figure has been roughly formed, he cuts it up, hollows it out and reassembles it. At this stage, he refines the figure further, always comparing his progress with the reference image on the computer so that he can come as close as possible to the "original". At a certain point, which Alessandro compares with a "mathematical solution", his reference on the computer matches the clay original. This is the point at which his figures get a personality, a "soul", a story. With his instrument of choice, he now works seemingly for ever on definition, detail and precision, to eradicate any imprecision. After firing once to 1150°C, he paints the figures with acrylics. Where necessary or where desired, Gallo adds mixed media materials, such as the body of the metro train or the glass box of the lift. He says of painting the figures, "I very much enjoy how painting puts meaning and life into my figures and



"Whatever", 2016, Stoneware and Mixed Media
22 in. h x 10 in. w x 8 in

makes them look natural and close to reality." The titles of his figures, by the way, are an important final detail in his dialogue with the viewer. Sometimes they are plays on words that he uses, sometimes sayings or perhaps the title of a song.

Take a closer look at the figure of *Jesse - The Veteran*. You could study his tattoos for hours. The turkey vulture, illustrated on the cover, caught red-handed rummaging in the bin bag for food, is nightmarish, but the duck lady in *Follow*, on the other hand, is hilarious, standing in front of the mirror, taking a selfie for her social media account, all the while gathering her T-shirt behind her back, so that her figure can appear to her best advantage. You must discover *Monkey Business* for yourself ...

Every one of these unmistakable figures is so life-like and so lovingly made. Humour, wit, irony, seriousness, mythology, it is all there in Gallo's figures. He draws inspiration from various sources. For instance he loves books, stories and music. He watches the people who cross his path and are particularly conspicuous or make a special impression, actually only doing what

we are all doing all the time. Except he translates it into clay ...

The video "I don't want to grow up - unmaking of" (<https://vimeo.com/246787520>), which Gallo made and edited in November 2017, is particularly enjoyable. In it, you can watch how he "unmakes" one of his finished figures. Yes, that's right, unmakes, accompanied by music by the Ramones, written by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan, which he plays nonstop, while he is working, on his ubiquitous headset. Incidentally, this figure is based on New York gallerist Jonathan LeVine. Of course, the film runs backwards, but the process is so fascinating that how it is made is practically irrelevant. An enthralling film! And in addition, we get some idea of how much work, patience and material go into such a figure.

Today, Alessandro lives with his wife, ceramist Beth Cavener, and their son in Montana near the famous Archie Bray Foundation. His Studio 740 is shared with ceramist friends, not least for the process of cross fertilisation. Besides all this, he writes, edits videos and, last summer, he greatly enjoyed studying taxidermy. The fact that the humorous, witty Alessandro Gallo has a serious side is fittingly illustrated in his figure group *The Road - Rooster and Chick*. It illustrates Alessandro and his son. Alessandro lost his father the year his son was born. In this group, the rooster (gallo means rooster in Italian) tenderly holds his sleeping son in his arms. The image speaks of love, pride and gratitude, or responsibility, fatherhood and protective instincts.

Alessandro Gallo is all of this.

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Artist's statement

Animals carry strong associations that make them ideal in portraying, sometimes humorously, our basic disposition or nature. Some animals have a long cultural history while others display biological features that can be extended metaphorically to humans, which is why they've been used to embody intangible values and vices across all ages and cultures in numberless stories and myths. Donkeys are stubborn, eagles are noble, pigs are greedy. Every language has numberless connections between animals and abstract states expressed in popular idioms like "monkey business", "elephant's memory", "culture culture", "rat race" and so on. The chameleon can change skin colour and has eyes that move independently allowing it to see in all directions. Those are perfect qualities for an opportunist. Some animals are carnivores, other vegetarian. Some chase, others run away. Some thrive in swamps and some crawl in the desert. I combine the animal head and the meanings they evoke with the silent language of our body and the cultural codes of what we wear in order to portray some individuals, the larger subcultures they belong to and ultimately the habitat we all share.



"The Road - Rooster and Chick", 2016, Stoneware, mixed media
18 in. h x 7 in. w x 7 in. depth

ALESSANDRO GALLO was born in 1974 in Genoa, Italy and is now based in Helena, Montana. After studying law at the University of Genoa, Gallo moved to London where he studied at Saint Martin's College of Art and at Chelsea School of Art and Design. Gallo has shown internationally and his work was featured in the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and in the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. In 2012, he was awarded a first place grant from the Virginia A. Groot Foundation. In 2014 and 2016 he had solo shows at the Jonathan Levine Gallery in New York.

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