

**UNTITLED TURKEY XXIII
MEYER VAISMAN**



Courtesy Jablonka Galerie, Köln

POULTRYCULTURALISM / MEYER VAISMAN DRESSES THE BIRD

They are, in a way, fetishes; anyway they have the magic presence of fetishes, these burly turkeys tricked out in skins from other animals and then dressed in native costumes of one sort or another. Like voodoo dolls or icons they are formidable as objects. In short, despite — or perhaps because of — their obvious ludicrousness, they have a strange, even impressive beauty.

But the beauty is borrowed, and bent against itself. If an antipainting is a painting that tries to call into question the very possibility of paintings, these are antitotems. They're there to deny precisely what totems are supposed to support: cultural identity, the self's clear understanding of its own context, and the neat categories into which we like to order the world, whether via the fashion system or animal classification.

Vaisman has always had a certain antiessentialist bias, a desire to promote this disposition and to trace its consequences. In that sense the turkeys are on a continuum with his caricature paintings and his jesting tapestries. But the implicit discipline the artist mines and then undermines has changed: in past works by Vaisman, men were women and fools were kings. Here Venezuelans are Indians are Japanese are Germans, as turkeys are rabbits are turtles are men. So where his earlier work presented a selfportrait as degenerate historian, the turkeys offer up an object lesson in radical anthropology. But the point pressed home is the same: culture does not exist, except as a patchwork of borrowed scraps. We put it on as we do a hat. There is nothing stable behind our decisions; there are no natural kinds.

It is glad news, and long overdue. Because if we are going to act out a debate on multiculturalism, we must first ask what we are multiplying, given a world in which nothing is equal to itself.

Jim Lewis

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