

Daniel Lee

The fascinating and evocative cast of creatures that appears in the work of New York artist Daniel Lee might at first seem jarring to the uninitiated viewer, but it can't be denied that his blended human and animal compositions, spun from his imagination and digital expertise, never fail to excite while teasing to the surface our innermost fears and desires.

Originally trained in the fine art of painting in Taiwan, Lee moved to the United States and acquired a Masters Degree in Audio-Visual arts in the early 1970's. A professional career as a photographer followed after rewarding careers as both designer and art director. By the mid 1990's, Lee realized that digital technology was the future, as it allowed him to combine his drawing, photographic and fine art skills into one medium.

Technically, Lee views himself as a photographer, but conceptually, he strives for artistic expression. He attributes his development as an artist to his early grounding in photographic techniques, as it gave him the necessary discipline and skills required for studio work such as composition, lighting methods and the ability to work with models. His commercial background has also influenced his rigorous approach, with every image accurately planned, perfectly controlled and executed with great attention to detail. Lee's creativity is allowed free expression through his highly original ideas and artistic themes.

In his live-in loft space in Soho, of which sixty per cent is dedicated studio space, Lee gives birth to his many hybrid creations. Preferring to use ordinary people as models, Lee's friends and colleagues starred in his early work. His first digital series of portraits, *Manimals* (1993), is a merging of human and animal facial features, based on the twelve animals of the Chinese Zodiac. These images reflect the Eastern belief that a person may acquire the behavioural or physical traits of their animal sign. This series heralded the auspicious development for Lee, of a highly recognizable and specialized "manimals" style.

Lee takes photographs in his studio under strobe lighting using a seamless grey paper background, with a PhaseOne Light Phase digital camera attached to a Hasselblad for portrait shots, a Nikon D100 for general shots and a Canon PowerShot Pro1 for convenience on location. The resulting photographs are saved into Adobe Photoshop on his Apple Mac G5 and modified using a variety of brush styles and transformation tools, using selected images of specific animals or mythological creatures as reference material only.

With the photographs of his human subjects open in Photoshop, Lee chooses an area of flesh with a soft edge, which he then reshapes using tools such as Scale, Distort and Rotate. He also uses the Rubber Stamp, Burn and Dodge tools in the retouching phase. These processes are then repeated over other facial and bodily features, often creating up to fifteen different versions of the same image. It usually takes Lee from eight months to a year to complete a series and as a result, he has become a master of pre-press and digital retouching. Lee admits that he often discards the light meter in the studio, so confident is he of his digital methodology and ability to easily digitally repair any studio errors.

The *Judgement* series (1994–2002) is based on the Buddhist concept of the underworld court where future reincarnational destinies are decided. This series is comprised of eleven black & white portraits that have blended human and animal features, each representing mythological judges and jurors who review the past performance of departed souls. Similarly, his series *108 Windows* (1996) is based on the six levels of the Chinese Circle of reincarnation: Fairies, Humans, Guardians, Demons, Hell Prisoners and Animals. These 108 images symbolise the many cyclical stages of rebirth from which humans may inherit mannerisms from all or some of these levels, thereby absorbing these qualities into their nature. These static





images were later converted to Digital Video, created using a Sony Handycam DCR-VX2000 and edited using Adobe After Effects for presentation in an installation.

Keen to espouse his true Darwinian views, his next series *Origin* (1998–99) explored the theme of man's evolution from and connection with the other kingdoms of creatures on earth. In this work, Lee mastered a technical challenge: the successful transformation of not just a portrait, but an entire human body. Inspired by the impending new millennium, Lee suggests that a close, genetic relationship may exist between man and mammals, reptiles and fish. The first of eleven digital images in the series is a Coelacanth, a species of prehistoric fish that is deftly transfigured through reptilian, simian and human stages of evolution using Photoshop techniques. Lee also used the morphing software, Elastic Reality, to create an animated sequence of this series, which he also edited using After Effects.

Nightlife (2001), a series of eleven digital C-prints, was Lee's first foray into colour, which he says was a way of bringing "the texture of life closer to the work". Central to the *Nightlife* series is a large mural, an inkjet print on vinyl, reminiscent of the composition of Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*. This mural is composed of thirteen models individually photographed in his studio, combined with a background shot of the exterior of a Soho restaurant. Lee attributes the success of this grand image to the digital process which allowed a large number of images to be seamlessly arranged in Photoshop to give the illusion of it being a single photograph, taken at one location.

For large format print jobs, Lee outputs to professional labs, however for smaller prints he utilizes his archival quality Epson Stylus Photo 2000P. As each printer has its own idiosyncrasies, Lee keeps all his PSD files with the original layers intact, so he can correct colour, brightness and contrast separately. All adjustments are also kept on layers, as he explains "the quality of the original work won't be damaged from corrections. It usually takes a few tests to get everything right."

His latest work *Harvest*, (2004) continues to present interesting challenges to Lee who refuses to repeat himself. Using his Nikon D100 and utilizing only existing light, he photographed livestock on location in a small village in Southern China, to create a series of images that comment on DNA, stem cell research and the possible harvesting of animal organs in the future for human transplant. Lee continues to stretch the boundaries of his subject matter and measures his progress not by his successes, but by building on and overcoming any weaknesses that may manifest in his most recent work. This attitude ensures that his future works will remain fresh and vital.

To view Lee's full menagerie of "manimals", visit www.daniellee.com
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