

# Jennifer Murphy and Valerie Blass: Deluxe redux

A pair of artists use castoffs as building blocks for their engaging practices.

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

Mon., April 20, 2015

Jennifer Murphy's work is too many things at once to fix with any particular label, so let's try a few: collage, sure, given the array of cut-out images she knits together bit by bit to build fantastically unnatural mash-ups of flora and fauna alike; sculpture, yup, as these delicately sinister hybrids have a tendency to strain away from the walls to which they're stuck, quivering with the slightest of breeze; and spectacularly, captivatingly, unnervingly gorgeous, which you shouldn't need me to tell you so much as you need eyes in your head.

That being the case, let's go a little deeper. Murphy, who is from Toronto, has been practising her brand of menagerie-fusion, Moreau-like for a decade or so, and each step takes her closer to a fully realized world.

Her pieces have dynamic fragility that knits tightly together to her source material. Images culled from old nature magazines and textbooks have a naive, anachronistic idealism about a natural world quickly being despoiled at the same time as it was being preserved by the mechanics of a publishing industry playing no small part in its ruin (trees equal paper, which in turn equals vanishing habitat).

Murphy's hybrids, maybe, are survivors — adapted beyond reason to a possible world where only their effigies can endure. She tells me that she thinks of them as Yokai — ancient Japanese animal spirits that embody everything from benevolence to mischief to outright evil — but, I'd add, with a thoroughly modern flourish.

Collage was ushered into the world of serious art, so to speak, by the Surrealists, who took to the form as an expression of the primitive unconscious, or so they said.

More recently, [the world, and this city in particular, is lousy with collagists, many of them excellent](#). But none quite like this. Murphy takes on board the Surrealist impulse in simple poetic combinations — a kit fox morphing at the midriff into a swarm of leaves, or a yellow cobra emerging from a string of flowers — but rejuvenating an old form is one thing and underpinning it with an urgent contemporaneity is another.

Murphy does both as well as anyone, and maybe better; at the gallery, her hybrid beasts and ladies (creatures are interspersed with more subtle, oblique composites of images of women obscured by flowers) link one-to-next from wall to wall in a dazzling, ominous swarm.

Next door, at Daniel Faria, you'll find [Valerie Blass](#), a mash-up artist of a completely different kind. Blass's combinations are bawdy, wry, gutsy and hilarious. "Sois Gentile" is one that Blass, a Montrealer, has titled almost as a tease (translation: "be nice"), because she has no intention of doing the same.

A famous forager of thrift stores and junk shops, Blass combines and recombines familiar junk with a mind to confound. *La Meprise* is one of those: A pair of kitschy porcelain figurines cased in velvety flocking — one is a preening kitty; the other remains a mystery to me and I prefer it that way — are fused together in an unnatural pose.

It's cheeky, but gleefully subversive. Transforming decorative banality into something provocative and strange is one thing, but Blass is a sculptor and, like any sculptor, she's left to wrestle with modernism and its legacies of ascetic purity, where form and material ruled all.

In *La Meprise*, Blass casts her junk-shop kitsch in basic black, reducing it to pure form — almost. Something's squirming just under that silky skin. In case you missed it, she's helpfully placed it face-on to a distorted mirror, with the tacit hint: Look again.

Underpinning all this is a deliciously wicked wit. A roughly made piece of splintery, angular grey plywood and bright yellow foam, looking like something modern primitivist Constantin Brancusi might have made if he'd been given the keys to a 3M factory, and this is part of the point: If modern sculpture was about purity, she's here to muddy things up with the undeniable presence of a decidedly impure, throwaway world.

Even better, she calls it *Surtout ne pas consulter les ingenieurs!* which goes something like “whatever you do, don't tell the engineers!” Blass doesn't make work so much to explore materials or solve problems as to satisfy an unbridled, unresolvable inquisitiveness about what we value and what we don't. The rest of it is up to you.

Jennifer Murphy in *Caravansary of Joy*, with Eli Langer, continues at [Clint Roenisch Gallery](#), 190 St. Helen's Ave., to April 25. Valerie Blass, *My life*, continues at [Daniel Faria Gallery](#), 188 St. Helen's Ave., to April 25.