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# Gillian Jagger, Sculptor Whose Medium Was Nature, Dies at 88

## Her sculptures, which often incorporated tree trunks and animal carcasses, emphasized commonality and connection between humans, animals and the earth.

by Jillian Steinhauer
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The sculptor Gillian Jagger in an undated photo. A fiercely independent creator, she adhered to her own instincts and vision. Photo: Russell Panczenko

Gillian Jagger, an artist guided by a deep-seated connection to nature and best known for imposing sculptures and installations that often incorporated tree trunks and animal carcasses, died on Oct. 21 in Ellenville, in upstate New York. She was 88.

Her death was confirmed by her wife and only survivor, Connie Mander. Ms. Mander did not specify a cause, but said Ms. Jagger had had difficulty breathing at their home and was taken to a nearby hospital, where she died.

Ms. Jagger was a fiercely independent creator who adhered to her own instincts and vision; though her work has affinities with feminist art, Land Art and Post-Minimalism, she never aligned with any prevailing styles or movements.

She hit upon one of her signature methods while living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the 1960s. She began capturing direct impressions of the world around her by casting unlikely forms in plaster, like a cat that had been stoned to death by children and, most famously, manhole covers.

“I was casting facts, because I couldn’t believe in arty metaphors,” she once said.

Those works brought on a flurry of media attention that deemed her a Pop artist. She rejected the label and fled from the city and the mainstream art world.

In her early work, like "Yellow Line & Time" (1963), Ms. Jagger cast unlikely forms, like manhole covers, in plaster. Photo: Estate of Gillian Jagger and David Lewis, New York

Ms. Jagger converted barns into studios for her increasingly large and ambitious work, like "Reveal" (2011).Photo: John Davis Gallery

"I felt that nature held the truth I wanted," she said in a 2016 interview with the magazine of Britain's Public Monuments and Sculpture Association. "If I put nature in the lead when I made an artwork, then the truth that showed up I could believe in."

In 1978, Ms. Jagger and Ms. Mander bought a farm in Kerhonkson, in Ulster County, that became their home. They lived there with cats, dogs, horses and other animals, while Ms. Jagger converted barns into studios for her increasingly large and ambitious work.

She made sculptures by hanging sheets of lead and letting them crumple and ripple. She cast animal tracks and bodies, including that of Faith, one of her beloved horses, outside in the bitter cold right after the horse was in an accident and died. The resulting piece, "Absence of Faith (Faith I and Faith II)," from 2001, is among her most personal.

She also began hauling home fallen or dead trees and, later, roadkill; when she stumbled upon the bones and carcasses of various animals in a pit, she turned them into a sculpture, "Rift" (1999).

Ms. Jagger arranged these elements in flowing and fractured formations. She hung them with chains or stanchions — even when it might have seemed impossible, as with a 15-foot-tall trunk piece turned upside down, in "Reveal" (2011) — and lit them dramatically. Emotionally raw, yet with a demanding physical presence, her works are meditations on humans' relationship to the natural world as well as a kind of hovering between life and death.

"To appropriate objects from the real world and put them into her sculptures was not a postmodernist gesture," the critic and curator Edward M. Gómez, who has written about Ms. Jagger's work many times, including for The New York Times, said in an interview. "She was not being ironic.

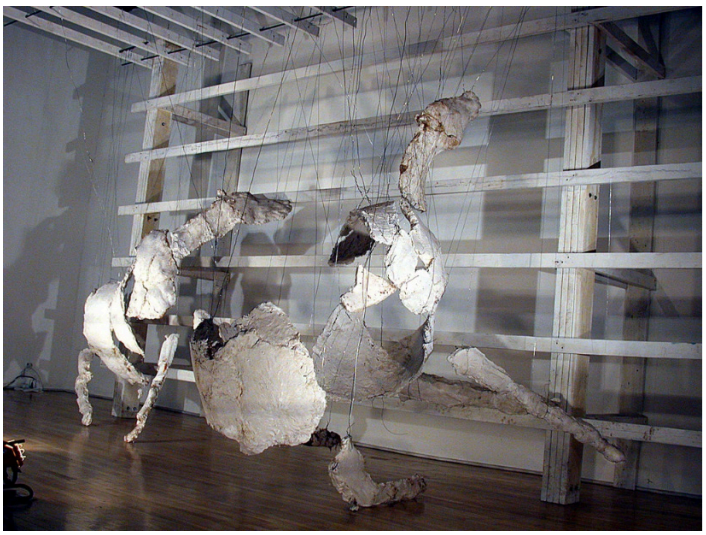
"That's what made the encounter with her artwork so shocking for some people, and bracing and fascinating," he continued. "It's like breaking the fourth wall. She brought nature into art but let it remain what it was."

The sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard, who had a long friendship with Ms. Jagger and attended annual gatherings at her farm where she would showcase her art to friends and supporters, said: "Sometimes it felt like it was shattering. It's not work that lies and sleeps. It's work that kind of shakes one."

Gillian Gwendolyn Jagger was born on Oct. 27, 1930, in London to Evelyn Isabel Wade, the daughter of the sculptor Lillian Maud Wade, and Charles Sargeant Jagger, a British realist sculptor known for his war memorials. She was close to her father, who cared for animals and introduced her to drawing and sculpture at a young age, but he died when she was 4. Ms. Jagger's mother remarried an American man who ran a coal company, and the family moved to Buffalo just before World War II.

Soon after, Gillian and her older sister, Mary Evelyn, were sent to boarding school in Toronto, where Mary Evelyn died of spinal meningitis. In response, Ms. Jagger, who was only 10, didn't speak for a year.

"I think I always wondered if I did exist, 'cause everything that made me kind of rich died away, dropped away early in my life," she said in a short documentary, "Following Gillian," made by the Whirlwind Creative studio. "The work became how I knew I was a whole human being."



"Absence of Faith (Faith I and Faith II)" (2001), for which Ms. Jagger cast the body of one of her horses, is among her most personal works. Photo: Barbara Gordon and Richard Schlesinger/Phyllis Kind Gallery

Ms. Jagger made her way to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh (now Carnegie Mellon University), where she studied writing, then switched her focus to art, studying with the painter Balcomb Greene. She received a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1953, after which she moved to New York City, trailing an unlikely friend and fellow Carnegie Tech graduate, Andy Warhol, who helped get her into her first show, a group exhibition at Loft Gallery in Midtown Manhattan in 1956.

She received a master's degree from New York University in 1960 and the next year had a solo show of paintings at Ruth White Gallery.

Early in the 1970s she met Ms. Mander, with whom she would spend the rest of her life. They married in 2008.

Despite her escape to the country, Ms. Jagger retained a connection to New York City and its art scene. She showed there regularly in the 1970s and '80s and had a midcareer survey at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island in 1987. She taught at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn for almost 40 years, becoming a professor emeritus in 2009. She also taught at Post College of Long Island University and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

"If I put nature in the lead when I made an artwork," Ms. Jagger once said, "then the truth that showed up I could believe in." Photo: Russell Panczenko

In 1998 she began showing with Phyllis Kind, a dealer widely celebrated for championing both outsider and contemporary artists – two identities that, when combined, seem to encapsulate Ms. Jagger's position.

It was Ms. Kind who urged her to use the intact, mummified body of a deer she had found on the side of the road. Drawn to its beauty, Ms. Jagger had brought it home with the intention of casting it, but changed her mind. Around the same time, she saw an exhibition by the British artist Damien Hirst in which he displayed dead animals in formaldehyde, and was horrified. She had devoted her life to making art that emphasized commonality and connection between humans, animals and the earth – the opposite of Mr. Hirst's alienated approach.

With Ms. Kind's encouragement, she made "Matrice" (1997-98), which features the deer with its neck pulled back sharply, surrounded by a jagged array of chains and stanchions, all hanging over flat, broken pieces of stone. It was a breakthrough.

"I smashed those glass walls that my darling father built," Ms. Jagger reflected in a 2016 interview with The Brooklyn Rail. In contrast with the likenesses her father had sculpted in bronze and stone, she explained, she had found her own kind of realism, guided by the principle of letting nature speak through her.

"That animal speaks for itself, and I think it's noble," she said. "I think it's heroic."