

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## In Conversation: Gillian Jagger with Ben La Rocco

by Ben La Rocco  
September 5, 2011

On the occasion of her installation of *Reveal* at John Davis Gallery (September 15 – October 9), the Brooklyn Rail's Ben La Rocco visited sculptor Gillian Jagger at her horse farm and studio in Kerhonkson, NY to discuss her life and work.

Gillian Jagger: Durer's dying stag changed my life actually. I had no use for drawing at all, and then I thought, "That's the fashion of the day." Durer's dying stag was not the fashion of any time. That's where he and I became the same, and it was in a need for something. I had never understood my need to draw. What do I get from that? How does that relate to my sculpture?

Ben La Rocco (Rail): It's always been a conundrum for you.

Jagger: It's always been as if it was split. And I think for the first time I realized it never was split. It was just split in my head. I don't think it ever was split in its own right. It's a prejudice, in a way, of my own conditioning. I think Durer's fashion conditioned him too. But not the dying stag, which I think nothing conditioned. He was conditioned by his time, and I thought, "Well I'm conditioned by mine," and my conditioning said, "You don't do work like this." And I took a long time to realize—

Rail: That you could.

Jagger: For the same reason he did it.

Rail: Well, does that conditioning have to do with your childhood, being the daughter of a sculptor who was always working from life?

Jagger: Yes, because I think I had to rebuild against my Bauhaus training. Being able to draw what you felt, as you felt, from life, went out the window right along with everything else the Bauhaus training said was unacceptable. Well, it only went out the window because I learned to talk that way long before I learned verbal talk. And drawing was handed to me from the time I could remember. I was given clay when I was one or two in my father's studio so I took it for granted. The way somebody else would say "Da da, ma ma," I was doing clay things. So I didn't have respect for what came so easily. And when it was so admired in high school and so on I thought, "No no, that's not anything. I just was doing that, that's nothing." And then when I got really picked up, at 15, for



"Quantum." 2010. 12' × 14' × 16'. Wood, Metal, Acrylic, Cable, Resin. Photo by Ron Van Beek.

doing people's portraits, I thought, "This is awful! I don't want to do Mrs. so-and-so's, this isn't what I want to do." So I sort of turned on the whole thing. I thought, "This is just what I do," because I was lucky enough I suppose but I never saw myself learning it.

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Rail: You had a very peripatetic upbringing and youth, didn't you? Early on in England, then to Canada if I'm correct. Before coming to America. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Jagger: Early on, of the big things in my lifetime—art and animals—I think that my earliest memory is of the gull that my father picked up and we fixed its leg. He was always healing animals. His patrons in England were Lord and Lady Melchett, and my sister and I would follow along when they went out on hunts. But he came from a coal-mining town and he didn't know anything about riding horses. He couldn't ride so he couldn't go with them, but I was stuck on ponies as a little 2-year-old, so I had this sort of wondrous upbringing.

Rail: What every girl dreams of, before you could even dream of it.

Jagger: I think so. And you know, one of my fondest memories is of standing underneath some 20 horses, feeling good and strong. No one noticed me go under there, but I'm waiting for the fancy red-coated people to come out and I'm looking at the hair and the fur and I just felt wonderful. It felt like having a roof of hair, which I finally did make years later, the roof of tummy, of the hair of the horses, white, gray, brown, chestnut. And I just felt wonderful there, you know the big legs and oversized parts and the tummies and male organs and the beautiful lushness and they're so much bigger than we are. They have parts of our bodies and different parts of their bodies remind us of our body. Maybe it was my form of a furry womb and I was finally belonging to the animals. I loved it under there. And I loved the smell of them and I loved riding them and I loved everything about it. Then my father dies and he's already bought this place in the country. Brick ovens and thatched-roof cottages and much land and pasture so there I go at age four. I wasn't at all attached to my mother. She seemed ridiculous to me. My sister was who I cared about. And I said, "What do we do now?" And she was looking at me very seriously and we were grabbed up by my mother, and my father's patron Lady Melchett came all dressed in black and told me my father's dead. And I knew it was a very serious thing, and there was a 21-gun salute, and all I remember is them killing my father's parrot with ether. I got ethered and knocked out.

Rail: Why did they kill your father's parrot?

Jagger: Because my father had died, and what could they do with the parrot? It lived on his shoulder in the den and it loved him and he loved the parrot. It was like a horror story to me. I tried to save the parrot! I got into the studio, my nanny was forced to participate in this. [In British nanny voice] "No, the parrot went to heaven!" And I came to, "But the parrot went to heaven," and already I knew that they were lying to me. [Laughs.]

Rail: [Laughs.] This connection to animals stayed with you.

Jagger: It kept being interrupted because when we came to the States after my father had died, and my mother married an American businessman, she kills off our dog rather than bring it with us! I went crazy, I was gonna kill her over this. They had to catch me and I said, "She's a killer! Killer!" and they dragged me away. That parrot and that dog were like a part of my life that I had to protect. I probably never got over that, I'm probably protecting every animal as a result. After my father's death, we moved in 1934 to Paradise Farm in Southwold, England. I was 4. I loved it there, and I had a little runt bull and I put him on a cart that we made up. Rode the cart horses through the hay, just belonged. Then my mother married an American when I was 7 and I was yanked out of there, first to Fort Erie, then to Buffalo. That was '38 and there's rumblings of war, I'm brought to America and my war is going on over there. My people are being attacked, I gotta get back! I think that did affect my idea of difference somehow, like the people around me aren't feeling what I'm feeling. "Don't you know there's a war on? What war is that?" And then, my rebelliousness gets my sister and I sent off to boarding school in Canada. My sister's 12 and I'm 10 and she gets spinal meningitis, terrifies everybody. She was in the hospital. They stuck her roommate and me in a tower. I guess they were afraid that we had this thing and they might catch it. My sister seemed to come back to life but then she died over Christmas. I never was told she died. I always felt that she was stolen. So I was separated from everyone I cared about. I was taken back to Buffalo and didn't go to school, I guess I didn't talk, I must have lost the ability to talk. In my early life, I was a very shovey, pushy, pully, go-ey action person and that's all I cared about, boom boom boom, sports and everything. Nothing could stop me, brave and true. And a pain in the neck, probably. When my sister died I was stunned, my life came to an end. Five years later, I'm 15 and I had one of those death experiences, all the white fuzz and you leave your body and see yourself flying over it.

Rail: How did it happen?

Jagger: I was 15 and got very, very sick one night and must have hit a wild blood pressure, sweat everywhere. And finally this kind of white thing came around me and I knew I was out. I actually got out, felt my sister, my father, everything, wonderful. And then suddenly I thought, "I have done nothing with my whole life." And I thought, "I have to do something with my life." It must have given me something singular where I didn't look to anybody else and I started thinking, "What can I do," and I became very, very good at writing. Odd, poetic writing.

Rail: When did you become serious about making art?

Jagger: Carnegie Tech. I wasn't going to go to college at all. And then I saw Carnegie Tech and I visited, and it changed everything. Wide open. I was kind of behind the eight-ball until I think my junior year and then I got into my own way of painting. What the hell was I painting? I'm not sure I remember. A group of us was in a show in Pittsburgh, 8 under 21, and I was already going with that. I knew I was going to be an artist then so it must have sort of flowed in, but that was in my early twenties and then I went into whatever that well-known gallery was downtown, I lived in it, Tanager Gallery, when it was closed for the summer. And then I—

Rail: Did you say you lived there?

Jagger: I lived in the Tanager Gallery because I knew where to go, [fancy voice] "I'm going to New York!" And my pals that had gone ahead of me, one of which was Andy Warhol, who was a real friend to me, was in the Loft Gallery. He brought me into the Loft Gallery and there were about seven or eight of us, Andy and I from Carnegie Tech. It was a co-op and they voted me in. I had a show there.

Rail: When was that?

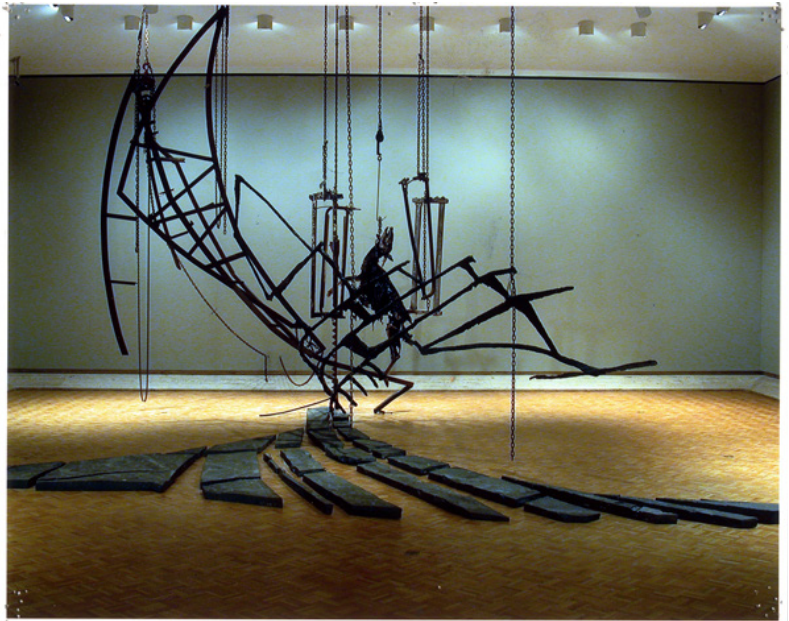
Jagger: That show was, I think in '56. There was a big picture of a cat done from the zoo in spray paint. They called it psychological expressionistic! First time I ever saw myself labeled. First show I ever had.

Rail: So, with the manhole covers and the tracks that you cast—

Jagger: That's '64. I lived on Central Park and 102nd then, in a little slum with all the windows on the park. I think I cast some tracks and some boys' sneakers before I actually cast the manhole covers. I did rubbings of the manholes and my friend the critic Gordon Brown said "What are these?" And I said "Oh, I don't know." And he said, "What is this, a manhole cover?" And I said, "Well I was thinking, coming back from Europe, that there's nothing in America that I can relate to and I suddenly thought if time went on and something survived of time so that you could see what a country really was, not superficial surface jokes but something real, you know it would be the iron on the street here." And he said "Whoa!" And then he said, "You know I've reviewed you before; you're just not interested in success. If you were you'd do this." And I said "I would do what?" And he said "These! You'd show these!"

Rail: In retrospect, that seems to be a watershed moment, the way that those manhole covers had to do with relating to the earth directly, physically. When I look at the sculpture that you've produced since then, it seems like that was a first engagement with your process. Does it seem that way to you? There is something real about that work, and when I look at your sculpture it always seems to be seeking that type of experience.

Jagger: My search became a search for reality. I became conscious that I was desperately seeking reality through my work. Other people's ideas couldn't help me. And painting must have seemed like it could do it, you know. But I couldn't find it there. I couldn't weigh it or hold it. I did find it in casting the real thing: footprints or drawing a shadow, where the substance of reality is like the substance of art. And the things that have stuck with me through the last 30 years are imprints and shadows. With a shadow cast on pavement or a footprint in the mud, the substance of art and of reality are the same, if you cast the print or draw the shadow.



"Matrice." 1997-98. 14' x 25' x 18'. Deer, Stone, Steel, Rebar, Wood, Chain. Photo by Richard Schlesinger.

Rail: At a certain point you started integrating the things themselves with the imprint of the things. As in, you started using stone and steel and even animal carcasses in your work, sometimes alongside imprints. And of course wood; these wooden bodies of trees that you find. I just wanted to know how that came to be, how that evolution took place, from that moment of recognizing the imprint as something real, to then moving on to the objects themselves.

Jagger: Well that, in a way, is what you picked up, that wanting the reality finally became the director for me. I had to go to the country because I felt something was there. At first, I created my own rocks out of plaster because I wanted the flow. I'd had more deaths and really, really struggled. It was loss, loss, loss, loss, loss. So what was it that could be solid enough that you could hold to be true? What matters that would keep you alive? That idea of flow was so important to me. What's the flow that carries you through? I found it in rivers, the west coast of Ireland, I found it in the stone. And one day I decided, what if I could just make a flow? I'm stopping—somebody's death, somebody's life, grabbing. What is the direction and flow of your life? What is the direction and flow of mine? Can we go along together? Are you leaving now? Am I leaving now? I'm getting older, I might be going now. That's okay—that's what you should do. What if I could capture the flow itself of water that goes because it must? That I could believe in.

Rail: What specifically did you pour, and where?



Jagger: First Rockite cement, but switched to quick-set cement which could take water like you could put it in the ground and put a fencepost in. I got a swimming pool liner from the swimming pool man down here who was throwing them out. And I put it down in a sandpit on an incline and I just started pouring. Then it would dry and it would crack naturally.

Rail: Can you tell me how “Matrice” came to be made? I was lucky enough to see it at Phyllis Kind before I ever knew who Gillian Jagger was. It had a very, very deep effect on me. Particularly for its integration of this deer carcass, which was hung in the gallery amid stones and also chains and metal stanchions as I remember it.

Jagger: That’s right.

Rail: And, somehow the whole thing at once came together as a constellation but also seemed on the brink of falling apart, and it seemed very much to have to do with some sort of essential experience of this animal.

Jagger: And not just the animal. It was almost the first time I could let go of the animal apart from everything—oh, the poor animal—and see it as part of the whole. And I think the whole was now kind of a universal whole. That was one of the biggest crashes for me—of understanding something. I had got into that sarcasm I get into sometimes that I hate, but I certainly was angry because they were shooting all my deer and driving down past the house with them on top of the car. So I thought, “That’s what I want to be.” Naked and lying with my fat body on the top of my French car and my friend agreed to drive me down the freeway.

Rail: Is this something you did or—

Jagger: I planned all this, but I didn’t do it. I wanted to, though. That was when I saw, circling on my little road in the dark, I see this body of a deer.

Rail: So it was by chance you stumbled across it?

Jagger: It was by chance that I found the body of the deer. I’d been making casts of a lot of things. Including animals. But this was a whole deer with the bones. It was beautiful—I picked it up. Instead of being this jokester with my fat body on top of the car I felt the deer’s beauty. It is Christlike somehow. I thought, “Oh God, it’s wonderful, how can I do it? I guess I’ll have to try to cast it.” So I brought it in the car and I got it home. And it had been mummified. The birds had taken all the juicy parts out, totally hard. Never letting up and no rain and it had dried. And you had the hair on one side and the bones on the other. I hung it on a meat hook in my studio. I chained it and hooked it around the neck and then I shut the studio. I thought, “Oh God, I don’t know what I’ve got in there. And there were all these stanchions in my barn and they were very beautiful, but they were stanchions. Jay, my neighbor, was a trapper and hunter. He goes in the barn because he’s helping them move something and he just stood there and finally I thought, “Oh, maybe he sees the deer. Oh God, he won’t understand.” And then, with his back to me, he said, “I was thinking how cruel I was to animals.” I knew this boy when he was a kid. It was funny. Made me think. And I just didn’t want to cast it. Then I go to hear Michael Brenson out in Providence, Rhode Island at a sculpture conference. And I’m there and Michael Brenson shows, in sequence, Damien Hirst and Bruce Nauman. And then Giacometti and then David Smith. And normally, I avoid Damien Hirst—oh no, please—but Michael said there was only a day left in the show. So I went to New York to see it and I thought, “How can he do this?” It was awful. And it was in a vat. Dead meat turning gray. I stood there and there were these two young people wearing white T-shirts. And I thought, “How can he take us here? Why is he doing that to these young people? This is horrible. It’s the end. It’s the dead end. It’s the opposite of all—and how dare he take an animal that looks like one of mine at home.” I thought, “I can’t do it, I can’t cast it. I’m going to keep it this way.” And Phyllis Kind came by and she said, “Show it to me.” And I took her out there and we opened the great big double doors at the back of that studio and she said, “Oh my God. Oh my God.” I said, “Listen, I don’t know what to do with this.” And she said, “Oh my God, it’s wonderful just the way it is. What if I showed it?” And I said, “Why would you want it?” She said, “Because I want someone to come into my gallery and say wow.”

Rail: That was me! [Laughs.]

Jagger: But you know if she hadn't come in like that and made that possible, you wonder. If Phyllis hadn't had that whim. Like what I'm saying about Durer. If you're stuck with your time it's got glass walls but you can't get through them. I smashed those glass walls that my darling father built. I'd come to finally admire him, to really believe in him. "Let it speak for itself" became my entire code. And that animal speaks for itself and I think it's noble. I think it's heroic.

Rail: Well I think that's one of the things about your work that makes it so unique but also, in one way, so out of step with its time.

Jagger: Yes!

Rail: That is why I'm drawn to it, which brings me to another point: Since Phyllis Kind closed you haven't had a gallery in New York City.

Jagger: No!

Rail: Which to me seems unbelievable except when I think about it from this perspective: That your work is dealing with something that no one wants to look at right now. And I think it has to do with an inability to recognize even the possibility of heroism in work.

Jagger: I think that's right!

Rail: Or in animals for that matter.

Jagger: Or empathy.

Rail: Or empathy. Any sort of idealism.

Jagger: Care and compassion. Any of those. You see they're gone. And I didn't know if I found them either. I was a pretty miserable character. And I found them in these animals, these trees, this running water. I found the nature of compassion. It goes through the blindness to the cat to the fur. We're in each other. You're telling me that can't exist now because you've got to be clever? And if somebody, if that deer, is heroic then I am a fool to sentimentalize? If you put it down you call it romantic. That's not romantic. That deer's not romantic. But it is heroic.

Rail: Where do you think that that leaves us?

Jagger: Well, it makes me think—I did my master's thesis on Odilon Redon.

Rail: On Redon?

Jagger: I remember one writer saying that he could have been born any time, any place because what he's gone after always exists. And I thought, I'm going after what always exists. He drew it and felt it. From human parts we'll always have. And we put it in the zone of "don't speak of it." If you have a feeling or if you tear up in a movie. You make fun of yourself. But in some way that's in every one of us. We're all touched. Some more than others. Durer, with this dying stag, left all of his style, everything that conditioned him. Nobody cared. It was at the time when they were having lovely pictures about shooting deer and having such fun with the ladies and all their finery. And he felt about that animal, sympathy and caring, when others did not. And he drew it like that. And all of his time was against that—all of the people around him were looking for something else.

Rail: Let's talk a little about your upcoming exhibition at John Davis: Reveal. I want to make sure I've understood the work correctly. It's composed of a section of tree that was probably 20 to 30 feet off the ground.

Jagger: Yeah.

Rail: And then it is hanging upside down, and it must be around a 20-foot length of the tree?

Jagger: Mine is 15. But by the time I separate it a bit it might be 15 feet by 6 inches, or 16 feet.

Rail: Right, and then it's split.

Jagger: Cut in five parts, five parts vertically. That we, my Tom, my darling wonderful assistant and I, he went up there with the 32-inch chain saw and cut all the way down and then stop, he'd stop and he'd put the drill through them and hold them together.

Rail: And that's some pretty heavy hardware you're using to hold them together, too.

Jagger: Very, very heavy hardware to hold them together.

Rail: And then hanging from chains as well, right?

Jagger: Well, the only thing I had going with the chains, I wanted it to stand. I never worked with what I called a live tree. They took that tree down because it was going to hit a house. But I saw it standing there and it didn't grow out from the trunk as you say, for 20 feet or so, and I thought, "Well this is beautiful."

Rail: So you had it right side up then? Is that correct?

Jagger: Well, it was right side up when I saw it next to her house. I just saw it, when they said they were going to take it down, I just, I couldn't believe it. It's like killing it. But when I saw it again, they had chopped a lot of it up for wood, because I had more or less pooh-poohed it. Well, I went over there and they couldn't cut it, they'd worn out cutting it because it was so big, and this was the part where it spread to the three arms. It came from a single trunk, to the three, so it's kind of a wonderful moment and if you had it like that, you know somebody with their arms in the air, but if you turn that upside down then it stands and it has a kind of head and that was sort of how I saw it, upside down.

Rail: And there is something about that that seems to be there in a lot of your sculptures in wood, which is that it becomes slightly anthropomorphized.

Jagger: I suppose they are.

Rail: Do you feel that way about them?

Jagger: I deliberately did it for a little while and then I turned on it and disliked it, so it's hard for me now to say that it has it at all. Because if you start seeing a guy in it I wouldn't like it.



"Reveal." 2011. 15'6" x 5' x 30". Wood, Chain, Steel.  
Photo by David Lackey, Whirlwind Creative.

Rail: I wouldn't say so much seeing a guy or a figure in it as, I think the fact that the relationship of the hardware to the wood, and the way the wood has clearly been articulated if not cut, its been moved a little bit, strikes me as having to do with joints.

Jagger: That's true, I feel that's true.

Rail: The joints of the body or the workings of the body more than a representation.

Jagger: That's exactly right, I feel that completely, and when I first did it, I cut them this way and I put them all back together again.

Rail: So you embrace that allusion?

Jagger: That I totally embrace. I want us to identify with a tree because I have come to realize that it will take maybe 300 years to wear all the same creases in our own bodies and the tree is not moving except in the wind and it holds still so you can stare at it and feel a connection. So when you say you see those joints, I feel this increases our ability to connect. I want us not to just walk by: "Oh, what kind of tree is that? Is that an oak?" I think, "Who cares!" I want its belly button, its great arm, or its ear moving—I love that connection because I suddenly realize I'm not here on this earth alone as a hideous species gone wrong. I am very connected and I'm comforted by this tree and its shape. That's one reason I wanted to split the tree. I don't want it to shut us out with its trunk and its whole sturdiness. I want its sturdiness, I want its bigness, I want its physicality, I want to get inside. So what if I just cut it apart like that and you could look through it? What better than John Davis's three floors cutting horizontally every so many feet giving you a section you can stare at, and go up the stairs and see another flight, look down. Stand underneath, look up. Where do we get to do that with any other creature? It's what I loved about horses as a little kid. They're bigger than me, therefore I can look at them and they surround me.

Rail: So you want the experience of a tree rather than the image of a tree. Would you say it that way?

Jagger: I want, you and I, if we get close and we're talking close I want us to move in and out of each other. I don't want a separation and "Look at your body, what a nice body! Well sort of, and I really appreciate it, et cetera." I want us to just blend. And I feel that way about a tree and I feel that way about that dog. And I feel that way about this cat and I think that's right. I think when David Lackey, who's been helping me with this, said, "You know what you've done, you've revealed it." When he came and saw that I'd cut it all through and he hadn't been here for a while, he said, "You've revealed it." And I said, "Yeah, I like that idea. I like that word. I haven't cut it, I've revealed it."

Rail: Yeah, the wood itself is so naturally articulated and so much of what you do to it seems to be kind of articulation, further articulation.

Jagger: I hope, because that is where I want to be with it. I want to go with it, further. Let it be further, let it come out further, let it come out to somebody else. It's the continuance of what the tree was about. Maybe I'm talking about the afterimage. I sometimes think that about us; we can die, but we're still here. And that person that affected me so much, as a 10-year-old I was affected so much by that 12-year-old. All my life I've been affected by that 12-year old. My personality shifted to that 12-year old. That effect of influence fascinates me. And I think that continuance of that tree that you remember is to me, I suppose, a kind of spirit. I hate the word spirit because it's so abused, but I suppose it is a kind of spirit. Because of our imaginations and the way we're made, I wonder if the people that we think of as dead are actually gone. If they were compassionate and you were a selfish little kid and they died, you get much more compassionate. You really get stopped in your tracks. You're not as happy being selfish. What is that? I think it's what we're able to leave to each other, to project. Why does somebody matter to you and then you love to see them and you feel good when you see them? Their atmosphere, when you think about them, makes you feel good. This does seem to be them. And for me, loving the physical, it's kind of weird how strongly I believe in this other thing. If this tree loses that then it's just dead.

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