

ABBY BAGBY

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*KINGDOM*



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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APRIL 29 - JUNE 8, 2017

AUSTIN, TEXAS



*Gazelle*, 2017, (detail), human hair, coated spandex, polyester resin, dimensions variable

Cover Panel: *Kingdom*, 2017, gallery view, human hair, leather, mixed media, dimensions variable

## KINGDOM

*"In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, define or be defined."* - Thomas Szasz

In the wild, animals will do whatever it takes to survive. In *Kingdom*, the surrealist sculptor and cosmetologist, Abby Bagby delves unflinchingly into the symbiotic brutality and majesty of the wild, exploring the beauty of animals with a particular interest in homo sapiens.

As we enter the gallery during the opening reception of Bagby's *Kingdom*, we instinctively look to the walls: there is no art. Our eyes look for hints, assuring clues as to where to find significance and beauty. (Focused lighting, perhaps? An authoritative velvet rope?) Instead, there is a pack of women circling and intermingling with the guests and each other. Female bodies of various shapes and sizes are wearing sculptures, each derived from a different exotic animal. These sculptures are made almost entirely from human hair. The material reveals the essential juxtaposition and presiding rule of Bagby's artistic *kingdom*: the exotic animal may be glorified formally, but everything from the raw material to the model's presentation, begins and ends with the human body.

Reconfiguring the detritus of the body into art, Bagby belongs to a great lineage of contemporaries, including Marina DeBris who uses marine trash to create "trashion"; Mike Kelley who repurposes stuffed animals; and Vik Muniz who is well known for his manipulation of commonplace objects such as sugar, chocolate syrup, and thread. Bagby's sculptures depart from her predecessors through the profound intimacy



Clockwise: *Lion*, *Gazelle*, *Snow Leopard*, 2017, gallery view, human hair, leather, mixed media, dimensions variable

of her medium. The visceral nature of human hair provides an instinctual side-door into the psyche.

Our relationship to hair is intimately charged; people spend hours coaxing it, styling it, and removing it in precise lines and shapes, and yet few think about what happens to it when it is removed from the body. Here is the glimmering strategy of *Kingdom*: once you realize each piece is constructed of authentic human hair, the sculptures are no longer merely a sight to behold. The sculptures are you. The artist has designed something that is constructed from the human body but no longer belongs to it.

Bagby regenerates hair into this manifestation by recreating the most beautiful designs of the animal kingdom. In *Kingdom*, human hair replicates animal fur. In some cases, it highlights how seamlessly human hair

mimics the fur or coats of various animals and in other instances, it subverts the characteristic hairiness and masquerades as scales, tines, or feathers. A colorful homage to a parrot is painstakingly colored, woven, and bound from hair. Human hair shaped into a lion's mane may feel glorious, even regal, and yet, it is made of you. Conversely, human hair dangling off an orangutan-like sleeve in a shape similar to what you pulled from your shower drain may feel slightly sinister, even disgusting. That is you as well.

Not only is Bagby working in a remarkably personal medium, but these hairs have been gathered in the most intimate way: heads and necks have surrendered to the hands of another, throat exposed. Before Bagby's hands constructed a leopard muffler, they held a pair of shears to a person's neck and head. Each sculpture began as an

entirely vulnerable act of human surrender, and each hair represents a person who is simultaneously a collaborator with her art and her prey. Which begs the question: if we are in fact the prey, if we have been poached, then is the artist a predator?

Bagby is not shy about this, “Artists are poachers. They are hunter/gatherers. They take a position of power that they have not been given in order to narrate natural selection. They spell out the state of humanity and record our history.” In *Kingdom*, Bagby unapologetically does what artists do best: stalk and prowl through human existence for significance and meaning. She then forages for objects native to her environment and repurposes them to survive and thrive. Unlike other animals, the artist puts her name on her scavenged work and accepts credit for originality.

Bagby reminds the audience that the apex predator in *Kingdom* is the artist herself. Through the hunting and gathering of human hair and the reanimation of the human body, she delights us while claiming us as her own.

These sculptures made from human hair are then presented on human bodies. Designed to drape upon, protrude out of, and nestle against the female form, Bagby’s hair sculptures necessitate their own participation with and embrace of women’s bodies. This intimacy between the hair sculptures and the feminine form invokes the obsession with the nude female body that has existed throughout the entirety of art history, in which women were objects to be admired or whose proportions were to be aspired to in and of themselves. By clothing the female form, Bagby’s sculptures conjure several contemporary psychological



*Parrot*, 2017, (detail), human hair, athletic mesh, dimensions variable

relationships including women’s relationship to fashion; sexual politics and its relation to “wildness” and inhibition; and the systemic treatment of women as prey. *Kingdom* examines the complicated way in which women decorate their bodies and camouflage themselves for survival or performance, ultimately reclaiming the female form as more than just a work of art, but also as an entity demanding participation in art itself.

Thus the life cycle of each sculpture begins when the material is removed from the human body. It is harvested by the artist and repurposed into transcendent animal magnificence. Finally, it is returned to the human body and labeled a thing of beauty. Woman is predator; woman is prey; woman is artist; woman is art. While animals are held by the code of their kingdom (either as predator or prey), no one is safe from the designs of an artist.

Janielle Kastner is a writer, actor, and performance artist based in Dallas, Texas. 2017



Clockwise: *Snow Leopard*, *Iguana*, *Pangolin*, *Orangutan*, 2017, gallery view, human hair, leather, chain, pleather, mixed media, dimensions variable

# Abby Bagby

## EDUCATION

- 2014 B.A. Fine Art, Concentration in Sculpture,  
University of Dallas, Irving, TX
- 2010 Cosmetology License, Tulsa Technology Center,  
Broken Arrow, OK

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Kingdom, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX
- 2016 *Havisham*, Living Arts Tulsa, Tulsa, OK
- 2015 *Space: A Look at Six Deep Ellum Galleries*,  
Umbrella Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2014 *Havisham*, Blakeley Annex, University of Dallas, Irving, TX

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 *Dance Partners*, Umbrella Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*ArtCon Anonymous*, Life in Deep Ellum, Dallas, TX
- 2015 *ArtCon 11*, Dallas, TX  
*ArtCon Skewed*, Life in Deep Ellum, Dallas, TX  
*10under30*, Fort Worth, Dallas, TX  
*Adjacent Conversations*, Mokah Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2014 *ArtConX*, Dallas, TX  
*Hot and Sweaty Show*, 500x Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2013 *500x College Expo*, 500x Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*FRAMED*, Mokah Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Synopsis*, Upper Gallery, University of Dallas, Irving, TX  
*XIII*, Loggia Gallery, University of Dallas, Irving, TX
- 2012 *FRAMED*, Mokah Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Go*, Loggia Gallery, University of Dallas, Irving, TX  
*1/5 x 12*, Foundations Gallery, University of Dallas, Irving, TX



*Snow Leopard*, 2017, (detail), human hair, pleather, mixed media, dimensions variable



*Iguana*, 2017, (detail), human hair, leather, mixed media, dimensions variable

## Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 39th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,894 artists in 307 visual art exhibitions, 125 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 28 literary readings and spoken word performances, and 605 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, the New York Times, ArtForum, and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 650 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and  
their work

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