

THE ROBERTS INSTITUTE OF ART

RESIDENCY

Jesse Wine in conversation with
Aude Campmas

A key part of the RIA Residency is opening up conversations with practitioners from diverse fields of practice and study.

Here inaugural artist in residence, Jesse Wine, meets with academic Aude Campmas to discuss their shared interest in hybrids, particularly in relation to plants and botany. The following conversation comes from their discussions together about their respective approaches to the hybrid, considering how it is reflected in each other's practice: Aude in relation to the ways in which exotic hybrid plants became associated with ideas of 'dangerous' femininity in 19th-century French literature; Jesse in how hybrids offer ways to unsettle categories and assumptions.

Hybrids and Monsters

Text by Aude Campmas
August 2022

Jesse's work resonates with my research on hybrids, particularly in French literature in the second part of the 19th century.

Hybrids are often the third, ill-defined or undefined term between two or more well-defined and classified species. The characteristics of hybrids are not constant over generations when, if they are not sterile, the seeds they produce are used to generate further plants. During the 19th century, natural hybrid plants were, for some scientists, considered mistakes or accidents that would eventually have disappeared naturally, allowing a species to return to its 'original' and 'stable' state. Volatile, impermanent and confusing, horticultural hybrids were considered as 'monstrosities' at least since the pioneering work of the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus.¹ Aware of these questions surrounding heredity and hybridity, some Francophone writers I study (like Victor Hugo, Émile Zola, Karl Huysmans) turned to hybrids both to question the prevailing scientific approach to the world rooted in classifications and to reflect on (re)production, life and disease. In many of these writers' works, hybrids are synonymous with the monstrous. They might be part-human, part-vegetal and part-object. Sometimes, they are real horticultural hybrids which appear to be monstrously artificial and made up as composites of various materials. Writers such as Zola and Huysmans even used the hybrid as a model for their own writing, integrating scientific descriptions and Latin words to create linguistically hybrid texts. Huysmans, as we shall see, used descriptions from catalogues and scientific texts.

In the context of Jesse Wine's sculptures, we might see not monsters but forms that allow us to think about life and materials as fluid, composite and unstable — features central to the hybrid and the monstrous. We see this in the way that materials come alive through touch and shaping, creating the sense that even though his sculptures are made and composed, they have a life of their own (something which itself suggests the monstrous or the hybrid — that which lies outside of human control). Jesse draws our attention to this aliveness of the material, focusing on the play between the will of the artist and the will of material, the two answering the other in terms of resistance and desire. By adding textures, objects and 'foreign' materials like dried weeds into his sculptures he creates actual hybrid structures. Like the hybrids I study, one of his installations (*Gossip I-IV*, 2016) exhibited at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, could be one of the

¹ 'Luxuriantes Flores nulli naturales, sed omnes Monstra sunt', 'Luxuriant flowers are not natural, but they are all monsters'; Linnaeus, *Philosophia Botanica*, 1751, p. 95.

hybrids created by horticulturists. Its enormous and strange inflorescence could perfectly fit in the anthropomorphous descriptions of plants in Zola's *La Curée* (1872) or Huysmans *À Rebours* (1884).

In that strange, latter text, Huysmans wrote of the creation of botanical hybrids: 'Decidedly, the horticulturists are the real artists nowadays'. Looking at Jesse's installation the opposite can be said to be true. Artists are the real horticulturists. They bring new beings into life. They show how hybridity is consubstantial with creation.



Jesse Wine
Gossip I-IV, 2016
Installation view, British Art Show 8, Victorian Palm House,
Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.
Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster
Ltd., Glasgow.
Photo: John McKenzie



Jesse Wine
Gossip I-IV, 2016
Installation view: British Art Show 8, 2015-17,
Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.
Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby
Webster Ltd., Glasgow.
Photo: Michael Wolchover

AC: In your work, you fuse the animate, organic world (plants and bodies) with objects considered inanimate, inorganic, (houses, trucks etc. although, of course, these things are also made up of organic and animate material). You often sculpt these fusions using clay. Does clay, more than any other material, allow for these polymorphous fusions? If your work is about the malleability of this material, might it also be about the malleability of life and of categories and classifications?

JW: I distinctly remember someone saying this to me, 'You cannot tell where the world ends and the object begins'. I must've been in my early twenties at the time, and although I have never voiced it, this sentence has been swimming in my head for the best part of fifteen years. Material is everything and nothing, it allows you to execute designs or desires but it can limit them too; you work with it and fight against it all at once. Of course, these concepts are platitudes on paper but in the art studio they are not, they are reality. My work is about manipulation: manipulation of form, manipulation of content through that form; it is an indirect form of communication that manifests between two defined places, distinction (figuration) and abstraction. My challenge is to have the two inhabit individual works of art. I am not exactly questioning categorisation, but maybe resisting it: if clay had an independent desire, it would want to be low and dumpy, a large part of making things from it is to resist the desire of the material while realising your own desires, maybe striking a balance between the two. The sense of resistance or categorisation may be best felt in the finished works, where from some angles it is impossible to see anything recognizable; but move 20 cm to either side and the work reveals itself in a new way.



Jesse Wine
Rising Youth II, 2022
Ceramic, steel, sand, paint
Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern
Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow
Photo: Dario Lasagni

AC: Monsters and hybrids are human inventions, they can only exist in relation to the category of the 'true', the 'pure' and the 'normal'. But they are also related to the natural, but as 'exaggerations' or the 'excessive' and 'defective' forms of nature. They appear both as accident and as artifice. And in this way, perhaps they are related to artfulness, or the technical heightening of or intervention in the natural. How does this impact your thinking around materials and disguise in your work, particularly in the context of a 'truth to materials'? I'm thinking of the way you use patinas and colours to suggest a material is actually something different.

JW: The work is always naked, or unclothed. I have made sculptures of clothes in the past but somehow the fact that the work is unclothed is significant and important in a way that I haven't fully realised. I think that I want to play with notions of truth and clarity which touch on consumption its lack thereof, presenting the work in a type of 'natural' glory. But, of course the actual surface of the work is a clothing or membrane of sorts (it is never the raw clay or fired ceramic), I select colour/texture/material and so this apparent lack of control (the unclothed body) is in fact, very much controlled. This is a simple trick, one that operates as hybrid both in concept and reality. What interests me here is the scheme of apparent nakedness, and how within the history of art the work attaches itself to the tenets of neoclassicism and/or modernism — the work jibes with a 'truth to materials' dialogue, especially because of the monochrome surfaces. However, the truth is that every work of mine denies its actual material makeup, hiding seams, breakages, surgery holes of reconstruction and the ceramic body itself, finally covered with coats of paint or oxidised metal concealing all of the 'truth' beneath.

AC: Some 19th-century writers like Huysmans used hybrids and monstrosity to challenge the idea that the home was a sanctuary, a place of 'purity' and stability. I'm interested in how you also make interior spaces (physical and metaphorical) unsettling and hybrid?

JW: My interest in the form of the house comes from trying to find autobiographical motifs that are relatable or easily recognisable. Expanding on how the house can function within the art, I am drawn to ideas around sleep and protection that are explored by Gaston Bachelard — 'I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.'² Using this idea as a framework for the house sculptures I've made, I imagine the interior domestic space as an interior bodily space. The dividing wall that runs down the centre of the sculptures acting as the separation between the conscious (waking) and unconscious (dreaming) mind. Within this construct there is the possibility for anything to happen in the interior space of the unconscious mind — I have opted for quite clunky, maybe even cheesy happenings such as billowing curtains or the walls coming to life through foliage growing out of them... In a way this comes back to the hybrid, and the more I think about it the

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 6.

more I am drawn to the proposition that the hybridity of a work of art manifests in its ability to do more than one thing, to be more than one thing. In relation to the rest of what I do I imagine these house sculptures to operate as the heads for all of the other headless sculptures that I make (that's why their interiors are so active) and to place this intention in form I have made an ear on the sides or foot on the bottom.



Jesse Wine
[Untitled as yet], 2022
Bronze

AC: The place of the vegetal is also very important in your work. What has drawn you to it?

JW: I am positively un-scientific. I don't even look at other human bodies to make my sculptures, I guesstimate form based on looking down at my own. Once I have made a sculpture in the studio I then mimic that form in the next and so on. The sculptures are versions of one another, slowly moving away from the interpreted original.

I've included plants by using so-called 'weeds'. The way I select these plants is by going outside the place I am working (gallery or studio, normally) and find the nearest plant that is breaking through the pavement, cut it and put it directly into the work. To me this does two things very simply: it places the work in time and location, making it possible to specifically and scientifically pinpoint the moment and place in which the sculpture was made. Second, the gesture brings the work a certain consciousness — it puts it in dialogue with its surroundings. The scene from which the plant is taken is often one of defiance: organic material breaking through rock-hard concrete. This street scene often makes me think of Holbein or Goya paintings and their respective royal courts, steadfast kings in all their pomp undermined by the slightest gesture just like the unapologetic urban setting broken by the tiniest crack through which a plant grows. Another aim is to subvert the art world's (or maybe insurance world's) obsession with legacy and 'archival' material; the notion of including a plant in an artwork pokes fun at these hopes for permanence — and yet, the plant has broken through concrete in order to be included in the work.



System Preferences, 2022
Ceramic, graphite, sand, paint, steel, flora
Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern
Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow
Photo: Dario Lasagni

JW: Aude, why and when did this category of monstrosity and hybridity emerge in literature and the arts? What examples have you found in your own work?

AC: There is a very long, worldwide tradition of hybrid monsters. These monsters are often part-human, part-animal, like Thoth or Lamassu, or made of various animals, like Cerberus, Hatsadiling or Ammit. The monstrous hybrids I am interested in are more recent. I am looking at late 19th-century novels and art works. My hybrids are part-exotic flowers, part-women. The best example of this type of monstrous hybrids is this description by Karl Huysmans in his novel *À Rebours* (1884). Below is an extract from chapter 8:

3 Huysmans, J. K., *Against the Grain*, 1884. Translated from the French by John Howard. (New York: Lieber and Lewis, 1922). Available online at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12341/12341-h/12341-h.htm>

'A sudden intuition came to him. "It is the Flower," he said. And his reasoning mania persisted in his nightmare.

Then he observed the frightful irritation of the breasts and mouth, discovered spots of bister and copper on the skin of her body, and recoiled bewildered. But the woman's eyes fascinated him and he advanced slowly, attempting to thrust his heels into the earth so as not to move, letting himself fall, and yet lifting himself to reach her. Just as he touched her, the dark *Amorphophalli* lept up from all sides and thrust their leaves into his abdomen which rose and fell like a sea. He had broken all the plants, experiencing a limitless disgust in seeing these warm, firm stems stirring in his hands. Suddenly the detested plants had disappeared and two arms sought to enlase him. [...]. He made a superhuman effort to free himself from her embrace, but she held him with an irresistible movement. He beheld the wild *Nidularium* which yawned, bleeding, in steel plates.³

Here the hybrid symbolises a fear of women's sexuality while also offering an ambiguously gendered creature. The women, via the plants, have masculine and feminine characteristics (*Anthurium* and *Amorphophalli* have phallic attributes as the name *Amorphophallus* suggests). The passage is part of a longer reflection on venereal diseases, in particular Syphilis, which the plant symbolises. In this way, Huysmans shows us how the hybrid, for him, is both about excessive life and imminent decay and death.

The plants are exotic plants, and they are signaled as such by their Latin denominations (often used for recently imported plants), creating a scientific connotation in a text rich with sexual overtones. These names allow Huysmans to use explicitly sexual words in a euphemistic way via the use of Latin (*Amorphophallus*). In many ways, the extract, with its mix of tones and languages and of course the monstrous hybrid itself, is about the central role of hybridity in the creation of a text.

In your work, Jesse, hybrids are about the energy of life. I cannot see anything morbid as with Huysmans' text. However, there is an intimation of something both humorous and threatening that might resonate with Huysmans. The bodies merge into some erected and polymorphous entities very similar, perhaps, to the *Amorphophallus*. In *System Preferences*, I like the real plant at the bottom. It is both playful and ominous: the plant might die and disappear, or conversely might grow between the legs of the man. This ambivalence between death and imminent sexual energy of plants is central to Huysmans' book. In the novel, Des Esseintes renounces human sexual contact only to feel sexually attacked by plants. At the end of the passage the *Nidularium* is used to

describe a vagina dentata, Huysmans comparing it to 'lames de sabres' (sword blades or steel plates). Mechanical and menacing, these plants for Des Esseintes are also biological viruses and represent the energy of a spreading virus.

JW: Why and how did the monstrous come to be associated with femininity?

AC: Women described as monsters is a recurrent *topos* in Western literature and art. But flowers, or rather women-as-monstrous flowers, might be considered a more surprising or novel metaphor. In the second half of the 19th century, new, imported as well as hybrid plants came to be associated specifically with both the monstrous and the feminine, once again conflating the two. These hybrids are the preferred metaphor for describing women without children, prostitutes, women with sexual diseases, or women presumed to have deadly sexualities. Women, flowers and botany are thus at the heart of a network of meanings referring more broadly the decadence of society and the fear of degeneration.

The metamorphosis of the 'woman-as-flower' metaphor into a monstrous figure starts with Carl Linnaeus, the 18th-century Swedish botanist responsible for our current taxonomy of plant species. He wrote overtly about the reproduction (which he describes as their 'sexuality') of plants. In his book, *Systema Naturae* (1735), he described the plants' reproductive organs in relation to human organs (for example the anther, terminal part of the stamens which is the male element of the flower, is compared to a testicle, and the style, the stalk that connects the stigma and ovary, to a vagina). To make his system clear, Linnaeus explains the scientific description of each of his classes with anthropomorphic metaphors describing plants as husband and wife during their nuptial.

This trend of thinking of plants in terms of sexual activity continues with the 19th-century craze for exotic flowers which, when in bloom, are compared to human sexual organs and sexual activity (see Zola's *La Curée* where he used greenhouse flowers to describe sexual intercourses; or in Marcel Proust's *Un amour de Swann*, 'faire catleya' (to make cattleya) is a metaphor used by Swann and Odette to describe sexual intercourse).

At the same time, as demonstrated by Naomi Schor in post-revolutionary literature, a fear of the feminine body and the sexual energy that may be released from it increased dramatically.⁴ To exorcise or conjure this energy away, the female body is either disincarnated (as is the case with Chateaubriand's allegorical depiction of woman in *Atala*, 1801) or hyper-incarnated (as with Zola's animalistic depiction of a woman in his novel, *Nana*, 1880). In the two cases there is a form of de-corporealisation, the human female body becoming other and disappearing, which neutralises women's sexuality.

The floral metaphor after Linnaeus also participates in this de-corporealisation of women. At the beginning of the century, plants' sexuality permitted discussion of human sexuality in a euphemistic way (a young woman is awaiting marriage as the flower does the bee). By the end of the century, the genital-flower

4 Naomi Schor, 'Triste Amérique: *Atala* and the Postrevolutionary Construction of Woman.' In *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, edited by Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). p. 139-156.

becomes near-pornographic via the description of hybrids. To the hyper-sexualisation corresponds a loss of fertility in which must certainly be seen a criticism of dissolute morals of certain city-dwellers and the fear of degeneration, even extinction, of the human race.

As hybrids of exotic flowers are perceived as unnatural (manmade) and are often sterile, the 'woman-as-flower' is the privileged vehicle of fears linked to dangerous forms of heredity.

In the novels I have studied, hybrid monsters represent the feminine body and female sexuality. When reading Huysmans and Zola, hybrids are used to describe women as monstrous and to criticise their way of life. For example, Huysmans' woman-flower hybrid is a nightmarish figure symbolising Syphilis. For the main character, Des Esseintes, women are, fundamentally, viruses: non-human but feeding on human life.

JW: How do these notions of the hybrid and the monstrous affect the category of the 'natural' and the 'artificial'?

AC: Hybrids are monstrous only because classifications designate them as such; or put another way, we have the category of monstrous because there is always something that cannot fit within a classificatory system. As mentioned above, monsters and hybrids are defined against the notion of species, but they also negate the very idea of species because a classification operating on a norm/non-norm dichotomy is fundamentally teratogenic: some things do not fit within the classification and therefore challenge its pretensions to being a total and sufficient system. Monsters and hybrids are 'natural' in the sense that they do exist, and so they are terrifying; they question the reassuring way the world has been organised, particularly since the European Enlightenment and they represent the persistence of the supposedly chaotic and the abnormal.

To expand a little further. In the 19th century, hybrids question the dichotomy natural/artificial because they exist as both natural and artificial. For example, Huysmans' hybrids are part-animal, part-vegetal but also part manufactured objects. In this sense, they also encapsulate a fear of what the rapid industrialisation (and consumerism) of modernity might do to our relationship with each other and the world around us.

When the great exhibitions, zoos, natural history museums display objects and things according to a particular classificatory system, Huysmans responded by creating a system that was decidedly *chaotic* because it was rooted in and defined by the hybrid form. In this way, he sought to destroy one attempt at ordering the world that was central to European bourgeois mentality. I read *À Rebours* as a deconstructed exhibition catalogue.

Jesse, you explain that your work is about resistance not about questioning classifications. I would say Huysmans' work is also about resistance, the only difference being the (im)materiality of his work. Huysmans works with words on paper, he is manipulating abstractions, creating abstract hybrids. You work with clay and, as you write, it is a resisting material which would prefer to stay

'informe' (shapeless), to use a French word, in its initial state: 'low and dumpy'.

Therefore, for you, resistance includes the materiality of questioning the way we organise the world with things we can safely recognise. The work is always 'more than one thing'.

JW: What impact did hybrids have on the notion of the aesthetic?

AC: Hybridity, which covers mythological, scientific and symbolic meanings, is an essential notion for understanding Huysmans' *À Rebours* or Zola's *La Curée* where the relationship to nature is marked by theories of evolution. These novels are based on descriptions of exotic flowers which are the starting point for a reflection on hybridity and the degeneration of species. But, in these novels, the notion of hybridity symbolises both biological creation and artistic creation. Novelists shift from one to the other, moving from materialisation to metaphor. Hybridity becomes an issue of writing and creating. Émile Littré, a 19th-century French lexicographer, emphasises that the term hybrid belongs as much to natural history 'which comes from two different species' as to grammar referring to 'words composed of elements from different languages'.⁵ Evanghélia Stead notes that 'Decadence, its very poetics, seem to be based on words and notions whose meaning is no longer one'.⁶ The notion of hybridity itself does not have one meaning in the novels, it conveys all the meanings: scientific, mythological and aesthetic. The novel form is itself therefore a hybrid.

5 Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*. (Paris: Hachette, 1863), p. 2069.

6 Evanghélia Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe et le fœtus, Tératogonie et Décadence dans l'Europe fin-de-siècle*, (Paris: Droz, 2004), p. 46.

For me, your work *Jesse* is about the hybridity of forms and of life. It is also a reflection on art and its contexts. You are playing with the institutions and their expectations. Putting a real plant in a sculpture creates a challenge for museums and collections. How does one preserve this work? Here hybridity (of materials) creates a tension between permanence and evanescence. It is a way to question our relation to art and creation.

Aude Campmas

Aude Campmas is a Lecturer in French and Francophone Studies at the University of Southampton.

Following studies in Semiology and History of Science at Paris Diderot University, and Trinity College Dublin, her PhD dealt with the relationship between these two disciplines. The thesis — 'The Monster and The Hybrid' — concerns the often-subversive use of classificatory systems and terminology from Natural History within French literature in the latter half of the 19th century. It focuses specifically on novelistic descriptions of biological oddities, hybrids, especially exotic flowers. Since then, Campmas has published articles on these themes in relation to novels by Joris-Karl Huysmans and Émile Zola.

She is currently completing a monograph on Women as Monstrous Flowers. This analyses the links between visual and textual representations of flowers, and the monstrous representation of women during the late 19th century.

Jesse Wine

Jesse Wine is a British artist, based in New York, who is known for his work in ceramics. Working with chance processes and unexpected detours in the making of his work, Jesse's practice is rooted in a curiosity in materials and how they inform our everyday lives. He has exhibited in galleries and museums internationally and was the recipient of the Camden Arts Ceramics Fellowship in 2013–2014.