

BY ROBERTA CARASSO



Artist Gwynn Murrill with her maquettes, 2009, bronze, various sizes

TOM VINETZ, COURTESY LA LOUVER, VENICE, CA

DECONSTRUCTING THE WILD

The Peter Blake Gallery has been transformed into a menagerie. Full-size creatures are placed on the floor, while maquettes (smaller sculptural sketches) are on shelves. Wild and tame animals fill the gallery – cats, birds,

cougars, coyotes, deer, and more. These primal forms, created by sculptor Gwynn Murrill, are reminiscent of ancient sculptures, but made from ceramics, bronze, wood, or aluminum. They prowl stealthily or gaze back at us with haunting expressions.

Some animals are serene and wise, others are slick and sensual, and some burst with energy and seem ready to pounce.

Yet, there is more to this exhibition than meets the eye. Murrill is not just another animal sculptor whose aim is to reproduce a creature in all its furry details. (Frankly, she dislikes animal sculptures.) Viewers with a sensitive vision will see that her crawling, creeping and flying creatures are primarily about what all sculptors strive to convey: three-dimensional space, shape and structure. And while her art seems figurative – after all, we actually see an animal – they are created in an abstract context where the emphasis is on the total

Big Twisting Cheetah, 2009, bronze, edition 1 of 4, 37" x 57" x 39"; background (left to right): *Eagle Maquette Trophy No.10*, 2005, bronze and pink sandstone, 7.5" x 8.5" w x 6.5"; *Cat Walking Downstairs*, 2009, bronze with wood base, edition 2 of 9, 3.5" x 9.5" x 2"; *Standing Cheetah*, 2009, bronze, 6.25" x 3.25" x 13.25"; *Sitting Cheetah*, 2005, bronze, 7.5" x 5.25" x 4.75"; *Little Sitting Cougar*, 1990, ceramic, 5" x 3" x 13"; *Little Standing Cougar*, 1990, ceramic, 4.5" x 3.25" x 11"

COURTESY LA LOUVER, VENICE, CA

VIEW IT

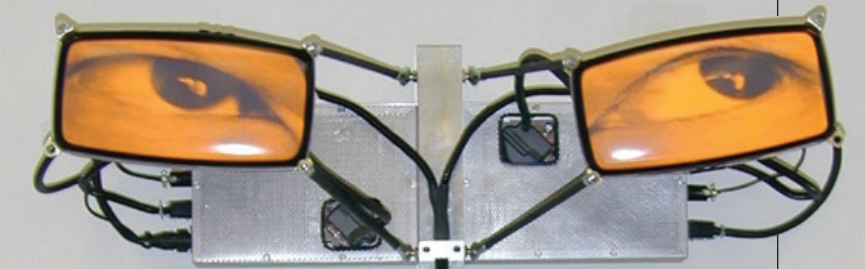
■ **THE PETER BLAKE GALLERY** :: 435 Ocean Ave., Laguna Beach; opens February 4 949.376.9994 :: peterblakegallery.com

■ **ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART** :: 850 San Clemente Dr., Newport Beach; through March 21 949.759.1122 :: ocma.net

negative and positive space in which each form is placed. Therefore, looking at Murrill's art requires that we shift, then expand, our vision, taking in more than a contour that looks like a cat, a bird or deer. Ponder the total configuration, including the empty space surrounding each creature in the context of the volume of the form, its posture, curvilinear design, and flowing, in-the-round contours. Seen in the context of abstraction – the aesthetic elements that compose the form – Murrill's sculptures take on a life of their own and become more than a reproduction of a living creature; they become a work of art.

Murrill began as a painter. Originally, she thought sculpting was a waste of time, but as a student at UCLA in the '60s, she needed to pass a sculpture course. Never a quitter, and never one to follow the pack, Murrill worked diligently, learning to work with free, discarded wood that was piled in a nearby construction site. Soon, skills such as gluing, grinding, sawing, and carving became second nature. Before long, she was hooked, particularly because what she was creating was unlike anything other artists were making. The challenge of mastering new skills, including solving engineering problems that led her in unique directions, encouraged her to continue. Besides having several exhibitions at fine galleries, she received a Prix de Rome to work with marble in Italy, and was awarded a National Endowment Grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. With her prize money, Murrill advanced her skills with new materials, such as bronze casting and carving in limestone, and took on greater sculptural challenges. At some point, as a seasoned sculptor, she forged a reputation for crossing the line, transforming the conventional subject of animal sculpture by infusing the work with the most cutting-edge theories. In the late '80s, Murrill began to receive major international commissions, such as the Ronald Reagan State Building in Los Angeles; the City of Obihiro, Japan; and, in 2009, public outdoor sculptures for the City of Pasadena on Colorado Boulevard.

The whole family will enjoy these friendly animals – but please, no petting allowed.

Alan Rath, *Watcher II*, 1999, aluminum, custom electronics, acrylic, two cathode ray tubes, 30" x 33" x 15"

In its mission to educate and to broaden our knowledge of art, the Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) is showing the second part of its year-long exhibition of its 40-year permanent collection of important video and new media.

OCMA, known originally as the Newport Harbor Art Museum, was among the first museums, in collaboration with F-Space, operated by UC Irvine graduate students, to recognize the value of video art. The exhibition traces experiments with electronic media from the early 1970s to the present. Adults will enjoy the nostalgia of viewing early to current images in the original technology. Children will be mesmerized by seeing technology in its infancy to the present time. Because children are welcome, additional adult videos have been placed behind a black curtain.

The collection is primarily by California artists who pioneered television as art, along with works by other national and international artists. Moving through the art, what stands out most is that while technology has advanced and the definition of art has expanded, timeless creative ideas by each inventive artist are the foundation of the exhibition – and they shine through despite seeing videos made on yesteryear's equipment.

A unique feature of the exhibition is that visitors can enjoy a guided tour through their cell phones. Dial 949.203.3053 and learn about many of the prominent works explained in the voices of the artists and curators.

The Moving Image

COLLECTION OF ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF THE CURATORS' CIRCLE