

HYPERALLERGIC

In Memory of Gillian Jagger, Artist and Teacher

Gillian granted her students permission to be in love with the unpopular and unfashionable, to persist in spite of circumstance, to retreat if necessary, and to be boundlessly passionate.

by Ben La Rocco
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Gillian Jagger with her sculpture, "Reveal" (2011); (photo courtesy Edward M. Gómez and the John Davis Gallery)

Where did we go that day in Gillian's Land Rover? I'm pretty sure it was a Land Rover, but I can't remember where we went. I was still a student then, 15 years ago, and though many of the details of that day's adventures escape me, I will never forget the sight of Gillian behind the wheel.

Gillian's driving was carefree careening. It wasn't reckless exactly, not out of control. But there were sudden quick movements in unexpected directions with no apparent fear of her surroundings. And she was talking the whole time, confident and at ease, her mind on more important matters than Brooklyn traffic.

I had known Gillian Jagger for some years when I first saw her drive in the early aughts. As a student at Pratt Institute, I signed up for as many of her classes as I could. But a chance encounter with one of her sculptures entitled "Matrice" dated my familiarity with her art to an even earlier period.

It was 1998 in Soho when I strayed into the Phyllis Kind Gallery, tired from my wanderings in search of the New York Art World I had heard so much about. And there was "Matrice" (1997-98), a suspended whirling mass of old



Gillian Jagger, "Rift" (1999), calf stanchions, animal bones, farm implements, barbed wire, 132 x 360 x 240 inches (image courtesy of the Estate of Gillian Jagger and David Lewis, New York)

wood, rusted metal, and stone slabs. And, if my eyes did not deceive me, at its center, dangling from a chain, was a half-decayed deer carcass.

I was shocked – and thrilled. Without knowing it, it was exactly what I had been looking for: genuine, challenging, and unaccountably beautiful.

Years slipped by before I found myself in New York again, at Pratt Institute, as Gillian's student, and this time only by a second twist of fate. I had no idea, when I enrolled, that the author of "Matrice" was a tenured professor there. Chance has played as great a role in my connection to Gillian Jagger as it does in her art. This element of the unexpected only served to heighten the impact that her teaching had on me.

They say that artists give permission. Although I always liked the sound of that, I never knew what it meant until now, writing this. In order for permission to be granted, one must first identify with the one who will grant it, otherwise what possible authority could the permission have? Permission is granted through action, and it is only by studying an artist closely – not just her work, but her life – that one can understand what kind of permission is being offered.

Gillian granted her students permission to be in love with unpopular and unfashionable things, to persist in spite of circumstance, to retreat if necessary, and to be boundlessly passionate.

She was the child of a prominent British sculptor known for his public commissions. She was a relative of Mick Jagger, which I always thought was cool – you could see the family resemblance. She had art in her family roots. Despite the weight of that legacy, she found solidarity with a common human strain – our animal heritage – a passion that was all but overpowering and made itself felt in the massive husks of trees she would suspend to reveal their kinship with the human body.

Perhaps I should say our plant and animal heritage. But it was the body, its messy, heavy, material patterns in whatever form it took, that seemed to ground her work the most. Sometimes the smell of her exhibitions, which contained all sorts of organic matter, could be repulsive. She remained unashamed of it. She clearly knew and understood our messiest and most unpleasant sides. I think it was that knowledge that moved her to redeem the body in her work. This was the spirit she carried into the classroom, the walls of which, in her presence, seemed to extend far beyond their architectural limits.



Gillian Jagger, "Aon" (1992), wood, steel chains, 132 x 72 x 30 inches (image courtesy of the Estate of Gillian Jagger and David Lewis, New York)



Gillian Jagger, "Raging Tree" (1983-86), wood, steel chain (image courtesy of the Estate of Gillian Jagger and David Lewis, New York)

When an artist lifts creative freedom out of the weight of personal history, everyone benefits. Gillian lived like she drove, moving the bigness of her personality with apparent abandon. There was a kind of fullness about her, an irrepressible suspension of judgment. She was opinionated. But in her presence, I had a sense of a person in touch with her own injuries, in her case, via the injuries she witnessed inflicted on animals. As a result I felt permission to feel my own. These are therapeutic terms, but Gillian always welcomed that, one of many stands she took despite its unpopularity.

Gillian's teaching introduced a possibility that, although it has become more remote with time, remains nonetheless real for her advocacy of it. She demonstrated art's ability to take you closer to nature, that art's artificiality was itself the bridge to that unaccountably strange place we call reality. That truth, for which, though not strictly hers, she advocated so passionately, lives on in her sculpture. I will miss its peerless expression in her life.