

Lorna Mills

# THE AXIS OF SOMETHING

ESSAYS BY

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# Chaos, Dearie: The Mad Love of Lorna Mills

AS YOU STROLL AND BUG-EYE your way through this orgiastic huddle, many words will come immediately into your dazzled mind: shiny, smart, kinetic, digital this and digital that, post-mechanical post-photography post-internet/post-information post-takeyourpick, hypnotic, hilarious, porny, meticulous, epic ... and, if you allow yourself to admit such a loaded and troublesome word into your otherwise careful mind, *beautiful*.

Yes, beautiful. Say it out loud. You know you want to.

Here, for me, is the grand code, the secret key, to Lorna Mills' non-stop parade of expertly, and devilishly, manipulated visuals, her clusterfuck of blinking and wheeling and spitting and lightning sparking wonders: Everything Must Be Gorgeous. Lorna forces the gorgeous the way gardeners force ornamental bulbs – gently but firmly, and without mercy for the under-performers.

Animals rutting? Sure, Lorna will show you that. But only when the critters make love just so, ever so uniquely, in such a way as to make us pay attention to their innate, madcap glamour.

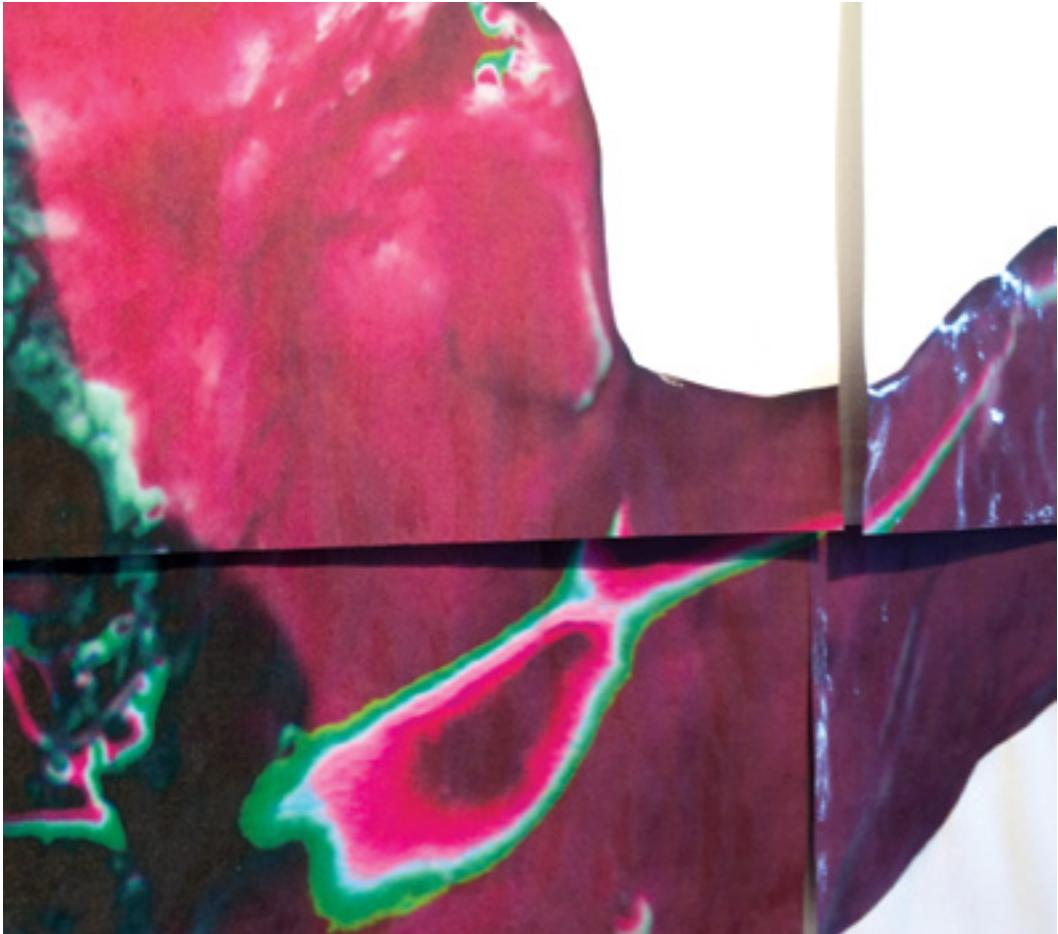
Google Earth mystery spaces? Yes, of course, these intrigue the artist, but only, and I do mean only, when the porcelain blue of the ocean and the crisp, newly starched shirt white of the ice caps are at their most desirable and live up to Lorna's exacting colour-sensitive standards.

Massive collages of found ornaments? Nothing excites Lorna more, but the ornaments best behave, accept that they will be neatly arranged and re-arranged and re-re-arranged, relentlessly scanned and re-scanned, then had all the correct sheens and flares pulled (and adored) from their surfaces, surfaces which will be printed, printed again (slowly, fussily) and finally lacquered, damn well lacquered, oh, 7 or 100 times.

Lorna Mills does not fuck around. Lorna Mills is the most exacting artist I know. She only fucks with your beauty-starved head.

Because, let's have an honest moment here, you and I are drowning in images, and it takes a lot to impress our clogged eyes. Lorna Mills knows that in order to catch our attention, she must *pay* (deep) attention to her final

product, must know where every pixel sits, must pinpoint, surgically, the tilt and jiggle of every itchy corner of a GIF, must feel, in her heart and fingertips, the measurable tactile value of a dozen layers of varnish in relation to, say, the tactile value of a mere 11 layers.



None of this is to say that Lorna Mills is bossy. Quite the opposite. Lorna, the person, aka real-time Lorna, is geniality incarnate. But Lorna Mills, as embodied in her work, is a whole other matter. She will, and does, boss the real out of reality, the I out of image, thus remaking the world to fit her idiosyncratic needs. Lorna understands that beauty is rarely haphazard, rarely an English garden of floppy, windblown accidents and casual causalities.

Beauty is science plus loving care plus military rigour. These works are tighter than a cadet's fresh-made bed and sharp as a bayonet – you can bounce a dime off this work, you could poke your eye out if you get too close.

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# The Axis of Something

SOMETIME AROUND THE YEAR 1280, the Florentine artist Cimabue painted detailed highlights on the robe of the Virgin with gold leaf. The result is very strange. The play of light on fabric has an illusionistic quality suggesting form and depth, but at the same time, the light itself takes on a very present materiality as an applied precious metal. Lorna Mills artworks have a similar quality in that they impact on several perceptual registers at once.

Scanned images of shiny ceramic animals, printed out so large that the highlights become colourful rivers of molten abstraction, gleam with a physical sheen of applied gloss medium. On the monitor, animistic fabrics twist and morph while the digital tools of their making - control handles and anchor points - feather and twitch around them like weird antennae. On another monitor, screens depicting maps of the earth jump around spasmodically, reminding viewers that today's material moments of earthly aesthetic interaction transpire in a conceptual register of global interconnectivity.



Mills largely conducts her practice online, networked within an active community of artists whose works bounce around between Facebook threads, tumblrs, Google Plus, curated web projects, blogs, etc. She is an integral participant in an international art scene – which is mostly generous, collegial, fluid and irreverent – in which art ideas seem to flow with unstoppable abandon. Mills’ art practice predates the internet by many years, however, and she is also an expert at objects, a deft manipulator of the connotative dimensions of media, technique and display.

The unicorns have a title, *Business Class*, but I will always know them by the artist’s shorthand, “unicorn clusterfuck,” because they are so very abject; shining, lumpen turds of clay, gilded with scanner-light, digitally mashed and monumentalized, printed, glazed and fussed over with skilled precision, like a religious icon that speaks of redemption for our fucked up earthly efforts. But the title *Business Class* is useful too, because it makes a link to the associated grid of animated GIFs, which represent a moment of inter-continental airplane turbulence, during which the in-flight map of the earth below jitters and glitches and threatens to blink out altogether. An internet artist travels by airplane when she is going to manifest something in a physical space, meaning that somebody, somehow, has found some money for the project. Business class clusterfuck!

The giant dogs, by contrast, have been digitally arrayed like noble figures in a Romantic 18th century History Painting – *Raft of the Medusa*, maybe, with dramatic lighting and exaggerated affect. In the very centre of the composition the shapes of the creatures meld into a single glob, forming a hybrid beast that bifurcates into many conjoined animal entities, with many heads, adopting many poses. The largest are at the back, turned away, dismissing the viewer and not giving a fuck about having their portraits done. This uncanny entity is comprised, not of dogs, but of darling ceramic figurines, and not of figurines, but of scans of figurines, and not of scans, but

of tiled paper printouts of scans of figurines of dogs. It is a clusterfuck of references implying commodification, delectation and the power of artistic image manipulation.

The physicality of the exhibition extends to the online component as well, where the dog cluster inhabits 22 feet of digital space. Here, viewers can only contend with lush, abstracted detail, scrolling across a massive image of the cluster of dogs translated into pixels on a one-to-one scale. The image loads into a lush colour space that is simultaneously abstract and highly specific. Hard, digital edges overlap softer, analog depths, high contrast highlights seems to burn through the screen, while in other areas, the surface textures of a three dimensional object swing into focus. It takes a bit of scrolling before the image starts to read as a representation. Eventually, the screen fills with the noble muzzle and dewy eyes of a porcelain canine, bravely staring into the light of the scanner bed where its image was originally captured. It is a bit like panning Google Earth – some areas are flattened out of focus, some are sharp and topographic – but here, the search for identifying features produces lurid surprises, as a rearing, florid, fuschia protrusion dissolves into a lurid green glow before resolving into dog-dick, dog-ear, or... something.

Back in Transfer Gallery, the uncanny hybrid doggy mass is paired with equally eerie animations that manifest on the monitor as digital, insect-like life forms. These creatures have been brought to life through scans, vectors, screen grabs, frame sequences and freeware. They have been set upon the world through social media networks, and live here, for a time, on a monitor in a gallery, as ambassadors from another plane. They are twitchy, and refuse to settle into shape or narrative, preferring to snatch and twist like chimeras struggling against the formal, looping structure of the animated GIF. The GIF is a light and unprepossessing medium, easily uploaded and easily shared, but at the same time it conveys a relentless finality; the loop is never-

ending, events will never change. Mills' GIFs put tension on the constraints of their medium, defying somnolent resignation through restless, shifty unpredictability.

At the time of writing, Google auto-completes "axis of" with "evil," "awesome," "symmetry" and "rotation." Yes, yes, it's certainly "awesome," in the sense that my grade school colleagues and I used the term in 1979. These works do rotate symmetrically around certain dichotomies – internet and gallery space, scan and render, object and image, abstraction and representation, digital print and painting – but they also slide in, out and through these polar notions. The work doesn't feel evil, exactly (although there may be a touch of evil wafting in on the breeze), but it does feel mischievous and provocative – a cunning blend of sensual presence and mind-fuck associations, operating simultaneously on multiple cognitive levels. The axis of something... something that is certainly much smarter and funnier and pleasurable, but maybe just as insidious, as the dumb-ass, boring evil that coined that infamous phrase.

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