

## Daniel Lee's 'Animal Instinct' explores what makes us human

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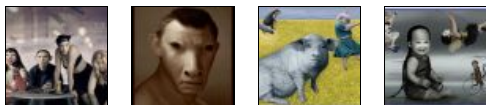
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"Nightlife," by Daniel Lee, a photographic mural that stretches 14 feet, was composed from individual portraits shot in a studio. COURTESY SAN ANTONIO MUSEUM OF ART Photo: San Antonio Museum Of Art / SA



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"Animal Instinct: The Photographs of Daniel Lee" at the San Antonio Museum of Art, is one of a handful of exhibits featured in this year's installment of Fotoseptiembre USA for the Year of Taiwan, the city's cultural exchange with sister city Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

Michael Mehl, director of the photography festival, curated shows by Chang Chaotang ("Sightlines"), Cheng-Chang Wu ("Vision of Taiwan") and Isa Ho ("Fairy Tales") currently at the Instituto Cultural de México, 600 HemisFair Park. The exhibits continue through Oct. 24.

In addition, an exhibit of work by Chaotang, "Introspectives: Photographs of Taiwan 1960-2005," is at the City of San Antonio International Center, 203 S. St. Mary's St., through Nov. 20.

— Elda Silva

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One of the disturbing things about Daniel Lee's "Manimals," a series of 12 sepia-toned portraits of human-animal hybrids, is how normal they appear, at least at first.

Even more disturbing, however, is how possible they seem in the gene-splicing age.

Bare-shouldered, Lee's creations either look off into the distance or straight ahead, evincing such a quiet dignity through their seamlessly merged features it almost feels impolite to stare.

"I got a pretty big response, from both the audience and the media," says Lee, recalling his first exhibition of the works in 1993 at the OK Harris Gallery in SoHo.

"I was very surprised. A lot of magazines started to contact me, especially from Europe. They all seemed very fascinated, seeing images can be created like that."

Since then, Lee, 66, has continued exploring the central theme of "Manimals" — what makes us human? — in his photo-based images. "Animal Instinct," a mini-retrospective of Lee's work, is at the San Antonio Museum of Art for Fotoseptiembre USA. Curated by David Rubin, the exhibit is also part of the programming for the Year of Taiwan, a cultural exchange between San Antonio and sister city Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

Rubin came across Lee's images on the Internet when he was researching the work of Taiwanese photographers in anticipation of Fotoseptiembre.

"I loved the work immediately," Rubin says. "I looked at other work, and this really to me was the most innovative, provocative. It does what art should do. It should get you thinking

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about things.”

Born in Chunking, China, Lee grew up in a Taiwanese army village. Two years after earning a bachelor's degree in painting from the [Culture University](#) in Taipei, he immigrated to the United States to study photography, television and animation at the [University of the Arts](#) in Philadelphia. In 1973, he moved to New York, where he soon established himself as a commercial photographer.

Living in SoHo in the 1980s, Lee was surrounded by a thriving gallery scene. Inspired, he was “anxiously trying to switch from commercial art to fine art,” says Lee, who speaks in a near-whisper because of surgery to remove his thyroid gland two years ago.

But it wasn't until Lee purchased a Mac computer in 1992 that he had a breakthrough. Using photo editing software, he was able to combine his skills as a photographer and painter to create “Manimals.” The series is based on the Chinese Zodiac, in which a person's birth year corresponds to one of 12 animals, each with a distinct set of characteristics.

“I invited people around me, most of them artists, photo assistants, to be my models, taking their portraits and find out their birth year,” he says.

When no one would agree to pose for the monkey sign, Lee used a self-portrait though his own birth year, 1945, corresponds to the rooster.

In subsequent works, such as “Nightlife,” Lee expanded on his concept. The photographic mural, an elegantly composed tableau in which nightclub denizens look to be literally on the prowl, stretches out more than 14 feet. Lee composed the piece from individual portraits shot in a studio.

“Again it's very provocative work,” Rubin says. “At the same time, it's very beautiful. It's almost a Renaissance kind of positioning, orchestration.”

In other works, such as “Celebration,” it is the animals that have taken on a human aspect. Pigs dressed in clothing dancing in a bright yellow field, while a fox-like figure plays the cello. In the center, a pig gazes out of the frame with mournful, human eyes, a drawing on its flank outlining how it will be portioned for human consumption. The image is part of Lee's “Harvest” series, inspired by a vision of the future in which animals are genetically engineered to produce replacement organs for people.

While Lee's work has garnered a lot of attention over the years, it hasn't always been to its liking. Early on, the artist received angry letters from creationists incensed by what they saw as a pro-evolution message in his work. Initially, Lee says, he was shocked by the response.

“I'm a Catholic, but, of course, I think in art we should have enough freedom and leeway to do anything to express the imagination,” he says.

“Animal Instinct,” is at the San Antonio Museum of Art, [200 W. Jones Ave.](#), through Feb. 19. Call 210-978-8100. Go to [www.samuseum.org](#).

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