



“THE MANDRILL AND THE MANTIS,” 2011

**Cyrus Tilton**

CONCRETE, STEEL, WIRE, MUSLIN, TWINE, WOOD  
30" x 17" x 19"

PHOTO: COURTESY VESSEL GALLERY

### OAKLAND “Portraits” at Vessel Gallery

Portraits are often said to reveal the soul of the sitter. Taking various forms, they can flatter, caricature, abstract or depict with straight-on realism. Vessel Gallery director Lonnie Lee recently assembled a six-person exhibition exploring the notion of portraiture. Ranging from quirky and intimate works investigating gender and ornamentation to large-scale photo-based installations pondering issues of memory and loss, the airy multi-story space—once a stable for Oakland fire department horses—was packed with an engaging array of paintings and sculpture, as well as photo and video. The result was an unusual grouping of well-crafted works that spanned from whimsical to melancholy, sometimes, curiously, within the same piece.

Vivid and somewhat surreal, variations on the self-portrait by Tino Rodriguez and Virgo Paraiso are infused with prolific flora and fauna. Rodriguez’ *Serenity* (2008), a small oil on panel, offers an attractive, androgynous figure with full, sensuous pink lips, eyes cast heavenward through a large green butterfly mask. Paraiso, adjacent, presents tropical imagery of bird-like young men. In *Love Poem* (2008), a figure with extravagant bird mask finds an avian amour, his up-thrust tongue

meeting that of a cockatoo. Sohyung Choi and Sanjay Vora explore memory and identity. Choi’s large-scale, quilt-like installation, *Notes on a Self-Portrait* (2011), hung in the lower gallery, presented viewers with a solemn, enigmatic grid of faces, ending with the artist’s own—all flickering with the projected image of a passage of Korean text. Features of the artist, friends and family co-mingle, suggesting their shared heritage and connection. Vora’s accomplished small works on paper, and large-scale oil and acrylic paintings, such as *In Her Element* (2010), recall the artist’s upbringing in New Jersey, as the offspring of classical Indian musicians, through hazy memories and poignant musings. Cyrus Tilton’s sculpture *The Mandrill and the Mantis* (2011) perhaps portrays our collective humanity. Its claw-like hands and feet reveal gnarled wires and clumps of string, while wrappings around the torso suggest evidence of mummification. Nearby, Walter James Mansfield’s large heads for some reason speak to me of Buckminster Fuller. An appealing *Architectural Head* (2005), in hues of grey-green and salmon pink, features shapes and marks suggesting the morphing of a human head and a well-landscaped modern apartment building.

—BARBARA MORRIS