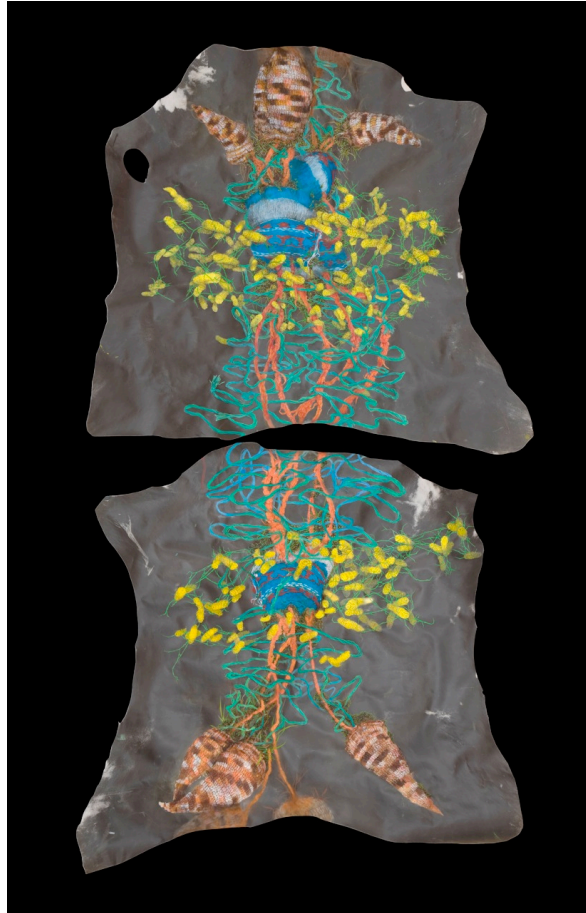


# BravinLee programs

Rebecca Morales  
In the Anderson Collection



*Chimera*, 2007-2008  
Gouache, watercolor, ink and pastel on calf vellum 77"x 48"

Rebecca Morales's intricate and precisely rendered gouache drawings on calf vellum conjure up a wide range of associations. Guided by her extensive arsenal of cross disciplinary interests – which span from scientific drawings to bacteria and micro organisms to how-to guides to knitting and crochet – she paints ambiguous forms that provocatively teeter on the boundary between nature and culture.

*Chimera* (2007-2008), one of Morales's first large-scale works, is an excellent example of work that slips seamlessly between otherwise distinct realms of thought. This is apparent as early as the title. Though "chimera" is primarily defined as "a mythological fire breathing monster," or "a horrible or unreal character of the imagination," it is also a scientific word that refers either to "an organism that is partly male and partly female," or to an "artificially produced individual having tissues of several species." Reflecting the artist's allegiance to humanities and

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sciences discourses alike, the title opens up new ways of interpreting Morales's immaculately rendered forms.

Indeed, though her drawings are visually alluring, Morales is also interested in their ability to inspire a degree of repulsion, one which finds parallels with the associations of horror or monstrosity that the first definition of chimera suggests. As she explains: "I am interested in images that are seductive and attractive...maybe there is a repulsion that might emerge after looking at them for a moment." Often inspired by bacterial forms, ranging from the molecular structure of salmonella to that of the HIV virus, Morales's work makes persistent allusion to the body. This extends to her choice of calf vellum as the material support for her work. Through the practice of working on calf vellum is one with significant precedent – in part because of its longevity it was a commonly used surface for medieval manuscripts and for old master prints as well – in Morales's hands the reference it carries to skin and the body are equally important. Indeed, in the context of her larger interests, this partially transparent surface alludes to the permeability of the body. To exaggerate this sentiment, Morales employs a detailed process of layering pigment. As she explains, "The design of passages rendered in focus and other sections out of focus are not always premeditated. The effect often emerges while building layers. Specifics of the composition, placement, clarity etc. eventually become exposed with time." The resulting images challenge assumptions that a firm divide exists between interior and exterior, human and animal, even nature and culture. Adding to this is the ambiguous scale of Morales's drawings, which seem to fluctuate as much between the microscopic and the life-size as they do between two and three dimensions.

Morales's work also finds fit with the second definition of chimera: "An organism that is partly male and partly female," or an "artificially produced individual having tissues of several species." Indeed, if Morales's imagery is partially inspired by the (classical male) tradition of scientific and botanical drawings, it also makes explicit reference to the more historically female realm of knitting and craft. This influence is apparent in the almost photorealist manner in which she depicts the properties of stitched together pieces of yarn and thread. At times, rendered so precisely that they are easily mistaken for collage elements, these images lend a hand-made, domestic quality to Morales's hyper-precise paintings, one that reinforces her interest in bringing otherwise separate world together. Both a source of anxiety and a source of possibility, the collapsing – together of seemingly – distinct categories – between male and female, nature and culture, small and large – is, paradoxically perhaps, for an artist as detail-oriented and obsessive as Morales, in many ways, about *losing* control. As she explains "it may seem a 'horrible or unreal character of the imagination,' possibly because my work is addressing things we don't control...As horrible as nature often can be, I find that nature, which continues to be oblivious to humanities' established systems, quite amazing." As small sprouts of unidentified plants emerge out of patterned swatches of knitted forms, it is clear that the world Morales offers us is meant to be both familiar and foreign, an amalgamation of commonplace forms rendered strange not only through their juxtaposition but also through their apparent symbiosis.

Karen Rapp, May 2009  
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Parasite Promastigotes, 2007  
Pastel, gouache, and ink on paper 14" x 11"

## ***Interview with Rebecca Morales The Anderson Collection May 2009***

***Could you give us a little information on your background and training? How did you come to work in this method? Who or what do you consider to be your key influences?***

Along the way, I've gleaned inspirations from sources of natural histories, as well as revisionist feminist art histories. I've found inspiration in the works of self-driven artists (having especially gravitated toward the Prinzhorn collection<sup>1</sup>) and in systematic painting such as Himalayan thangkas and Illuminated manuscripts.

I've spent earlier years working with and illustrating for varied practices of field biology, investing much time in the field both alone and accompanying biologists while they collected data. I've found botanists particularly interesting, for their ability to absorb themselves (often for days to years) with flora growing on a square meter of earth. A biologist's practice demands acute

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<sup>1</sup> The Prinzhorn Collection was founded by the art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933). It contains over 5000 works of art by 450 patients of the psychiatric university hospital in Heidelberg. Well-known enthusiasts of the collection from its' hey day included Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Max Earnst.

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perception of details, assigning relevance to an organism's most obscure differences. I've a kinship with their approach to observing diversity.

Revisionist feminist histories have introduced me to approaches of understanding how cognitive systems are dictated. Feminist historians' de-constructions of established art hierarchies have illuminated options in creating my own broadened approach to what can be considered content in art making.

While being employed to assist in conservation of art, I've invested long hours with the process of in-painting losses in art works for restoration purposes. The tenets of conservation call for any application to be reversible and obscure. It is a practice of passive intervention that requires hands-on involvement with a historical array of art. Spending many hours applying myself to the surface restoration of another artist's work offers an intimacy of sorts with other artist's ideas/presence through mimicking their touch. And conservation as described, has enhanced my sense of involvement as a viewer; I've developed a rather deep attachment to/appreciation of particular works. Especially while considering the self-driven and systematic art mentioned.

***I'm curious about the details of you working process. How did you come to work on calf vellum? What are the advantages and limitation of that medium? How long does it take you to create a piece from start to finish?***

Calf vellum was found while researching the materials of 16<sup>th</sup> century German renaissance nature studies. At the time, I was working as an assistant to a conservator of art works on paper, she led me to sources of vellum and parchment... I eventually settled with transparent skin for its ability to allow layering of pigment, recto/verso, and so allowing layers of glazing. An application similar to using oil on canvas.

Regarding transparent calf vellum preparation; it is a traditional material used most often in the conservation and repair of book bindings. Made in the same way as goat or sheep parchment, vellum's transparency is achieved by running through weighted pressure. My application is almost identical with the traditional mediums of illuminated manuscripts. The few things that have changed are the synthetic pigments now available, and modern skins have a less porous surface.

Since I work on many pieces consecutively, for years sometimes, it is difficult to keep track of how long they take to produce. *Chimera* for instance, was with me in the studio from Nov 2007 through the end of 2008.

***When I first saw your work in person I was struck by the way it seems to slip between 2 and 3 dimensions, almost creating a trompe l'oeil effect. How is that effect created? What is interesting about it to you?***

All the works on vellum of paper, are applies in layers. Though gouache is water based, it is intended to be layered. In the beginning, as an image is laid out, the application has the consistency of a stain, very watery; the drawings have the quality of suggestion. Further applications become much more opaque, all the while the image shifts, sometimes disappearing in sections. The design of passages rendered in focus and other sections out of focus are not always premeditated, the effect often emerges while building layers, specifics of the composition, placement, clarity et al., eventually become exposed with time.

***The piece in the Anderson Collection is titled "Chimera." There are two dictionary definitions of the work that seems relevant to your interests: the first, "a horrible or unreal character of the imagination" and the second "an organism that is partly male and partly female." I wonder if you might comment on the relevance of either or both definitions to this piece?***

Chimera can also mean an organism created from different species. I've accumulated many experiences and sources over the years of my practice, in one way or another they appear throughout the exhibit "Vermis." Regarding 'Chimera'; the 19<sup>th</sup> century wall charts of Rudolf

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Leuckart (1822-1898)<sup>2</sup>, his (or his hired illustrator's) renderings of microscopic observations of nematodes and other zoonotic organisms, heavily influenced the composition. For many years I've used manufactured/ pre-owned objects as models and they've become part of my visual vernacular. The manufactured and the natural models represent a cusp of non-delineation, where man-made hierarchies dissolve into and are equivalent to the natural realms they exist in.

***I wonder if scale is an important concept for you? It seems that your interest in bacteria implies that what we are looking at are enlargements of invisible things while the references to crochet and knitting seems closer to life size.***

Yes, the scale of the work is important. This is the first time I've worked as large, incorporating full sheets of multiple vellum panels. The smaller works contain an intimacy that requires a viewer to walk forward, looking into the image. The larger works, and I think especially *Chimera*, because it is vertical, relate to the viewer's body initially, then solicits for close inspection. I was pleased with *Chimera*; it described the intersection between the seen and unseen, manufactured and the natural, the viewer's body and the work.

***Finally, your work is often included in landscape exhibitions. I wonder if you could comment on your interest in landscape and how you see this concept manifesting itself in your work? What kind of relationship do you see existing between humans and nature and, perhaps more importantly, the body and nature? Related to this, I wonder if you might comment on your interest in decay here too – I was really interested to read a quote from you where you describe “the process of decay as a place worthy of portraits.”***

I'm intrigued with, somewhat haunted by actually, how well and instinctively we accept ourselves as being utterly distinct from what surrounds us. Our physical mechanisms toward survival, establish such rifts between our bodies and all things other than ourselves. In parallel, also for survival purposes, we nurture a sense of cognitive hierarchy, separating our approach to perception from the approach of other cultures and things that think or maneuver differently through the world.

I want my work to describe the place in between categories, the manufactured and the natural, or what we do and what happens. With these descriptions, I illuminate a place of cognitive dissonance. In that sense, it may seem a 'horrible or unreal character of the imagination,' possibly because my work is addressing things we don't control. The subject of decay is another wonderful process we ultimately have very little influence over. As horrible as nature often can be, I find that nature, which continues to be oblivious to humanities' established systems, quite amazing.

Interview conducted by email in May 2009  
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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Leuckart, who is considered to be the "father of parasitology," was one of the most famous zoologist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is best known for his work on the vertebrate infections and is famous for his scientific wall charts, which he used as teaching tools.