

ARTS+

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JILL GREENBERG: MONKEY PORTRAITS
Clamp Art

We tend to think of portraits, when they are good, as momentary glimpses into the emotional makeup of the subject. Usually, the subjects are human.

Not so in a new photography exhibit at Clamp Art, which features a series of studio-produced headshots of monkeys and apes. "Monkey Portraits" is Los Angeles-based photographer Jill Greenberg's first solo show in New York. The exhibition coincides with the release of a monograph of the same title from Bulfinch Press.

Looking at the close-up images in "Monkey Portraits," one is tempted to ascribe human qualities to the facial expressions of our biological relatives: One looks angry, another sly, and one, reclining like a nude propped on her elbow, even appears seductive.

The tendency to anthropomorphize the figures comes so naturally, it's easy to forget that the monkeys are indeed monkeys, not humans. They come close, sharing roughly 98% of our DNA, but not that close. Do these facial expressions display emotions as we know them? Or are we imposing something distinctly human onto faces that resemble our own?

In the end, however, the photographs are more interesting for the questions they provoke than as photographs in themselves. Known as "the manipulator," for her digital manipulations, Ms. Greenberg makes her monkey portraits appear incredibly clean and manicured. The digitally textured background erases all context, and at times the photographs seem unreal.

It doesn't help to discover that many of the monkeys have appeared in movies and on television, making the images seem that much more "produced." Ms. Greenberg is largely known as a celebrity photographer, and these photographs seem to be of the same vein: All blemishes and impurities have been removed. But for whose sake?

There is no way to make portraits of monkeys in a studio seem natural. And yet that is, in some way, what they lack most — a sense of context in which true emotions emerge. For all their technical skill — and they are skillful — it is hard to trust these portraits. Like their form, the emotions fall flat.

— *Michal Lando*

Until November 11 (521-531 W. 25th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 646-230-0020).