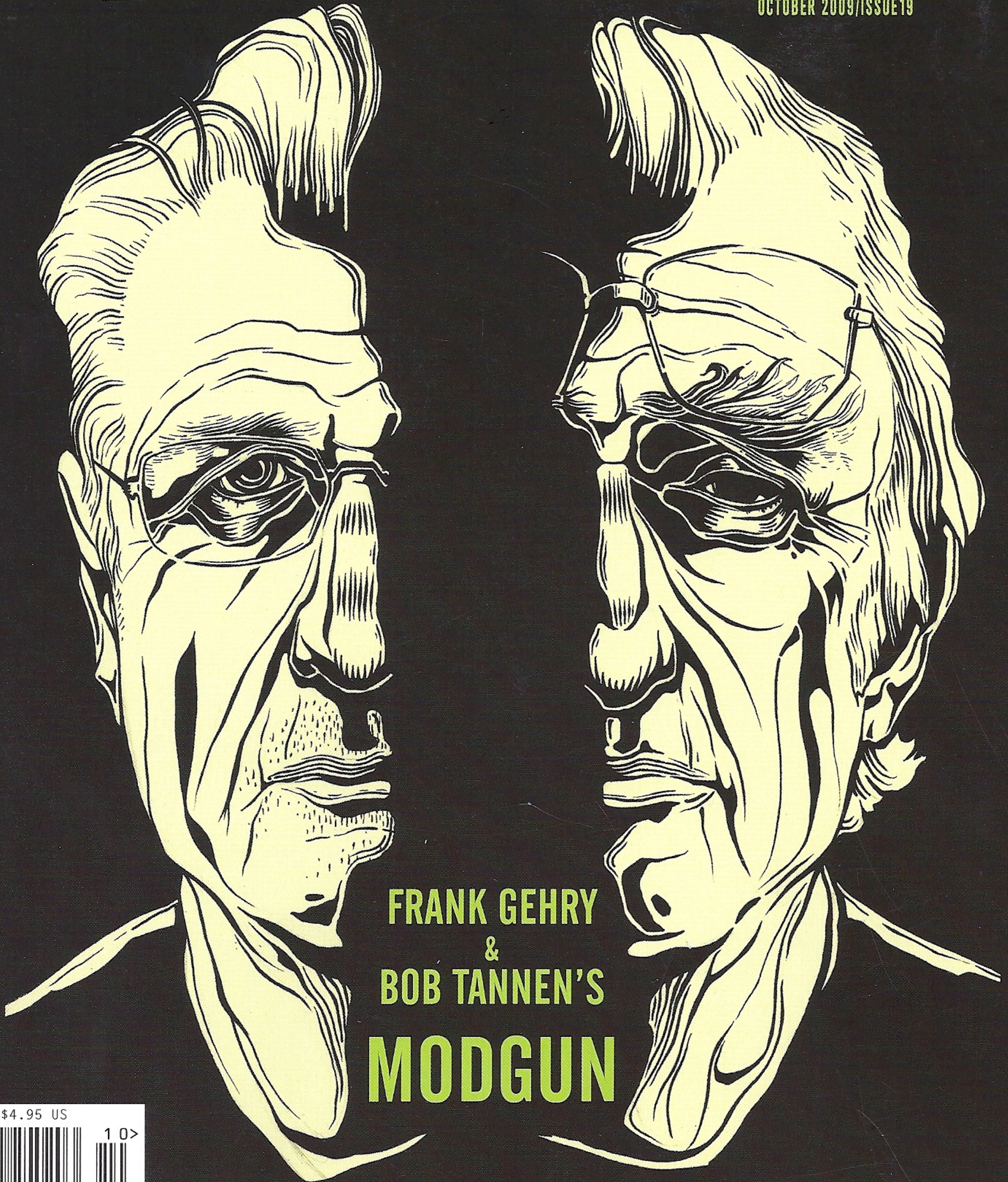


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HUMAN NATURE

A CONVERSATION WITH

SIBYLLE PERETTI

BY CHRIS HERBECK

Sibylle Peretti is a German-born artist who has lived in New Orleans for the past 13 years. Her upcoming exhibition, “The Unusual Kind,” opens October 3rd at Gallery Bienvenu. Peretti’s mixed media works on Plexiglas and her porcelain sculptures are poetic depictions of fragile children morphing into animals, insects or plant life. Chris Herbeck met the artist at her studio in Louisiana Art-Works to discuss the ideas behind her mysterious imagery.

Chris Herbeck: What part of Germany are you from?

Sibylle Peretti: The Rhine area. I lived in Cologne, where I went to school at the Academy of Fine Arts.

CH: Is that where you were born?

SP: I was born sixty kilometers above Cologne, in the Ruhr valley. It’s the industrial part of Germany, very close to the Netherlands, about a half hour drive. It’s all coal mining and steel industry.

CH: Did this setting have any impact on how you began working as an artist?

SP: I don’t know; well, somebody else asked me this before but I don’t think so. I like this setting because I like honest people, and this area has always been an honest part of Germany, consisting of workers, you know, real people. I don’t know how you say in English, but its serious—people form clubs where pigeons fly around with notes. How do you call them?

CH: Pigeon carriers?

SP: Yeah! I have never seen them here—in New Orleans.

CH: Me neither! (Laughter)

CH: So what brought you to the United States and New Orleans in particular?

SP: After going to the art academy in Cologne, I got a residency in New Jersey and that was my first contact with the U.S. As an artist I looked forward to going to New York City. My other reason is

very personal; my husband, Stephen Paul Day, comes from Baton Rouge. He was teaching in Germany where we met at a summer academy for arts in Bavaria. He brought me here to New Orleans and here we are still! (Laughs) But seriously, I think it's a very special city. It always carries these two extreme sides, in every possible thing—the love and hate, the beauty and decay, all of these extreme, opposite feelings that can be found in this city. I think that's why I like it here. There is a love-hate relationship that you find here and it's very New Orleans. A lot of people ask me if I get my inspiration for my work from living in New Orleans, but I don't think so. It's mostly from something inside that I carry everywhere with me. It really doesn't matter where I live, I would still make the same work.

CH: Are there any other artists that influence your work?

SP: (Long pause) No. (Laughter.) Maybe other people think there are, but I don't.

CH: Where does the imagery in your work come from?

SP: For a long time I have been using images of children mostly found in medical books from the 40's—so I have this collection of photographs that I find very strange, interesting and dramatic. So with these images of diseased, injured children, I try to heal them by taking them out of their scientific context and placing them into another environment that is dreamlike, and they are often combined with a natural element. I also use images I find in animal books with some of my own photography along with stills from documentaries.

CH: Do you have a certain theme in your show "The Unusual Kind"?

SP: A theme in my work is the relationship between humans and nature, and how we fail to connect with the natural world. Right now I am working with certain images of feral children that I collected. There are two cases, Genie and Victor that are the subjects I have been using for "The Unusual Kind" show at Gallery Biennu. From there it gets very complex; in the 70's they discovered this girl, Genie, who was put away in this room and

grew up with very little human contact. It's a horrible story, but there are several reasons why I think these children hold our fascination. First off these feral children are pure, they are the purest version of humans and they face the biggest fear we carry as humans, this fear of living alone, in solitude. In a certain way they are the humans that are closest to nature, if that's possible. They may carry the answers to our questions about what makes us human. Somehow for me it was a natural direction to go because of my overall theme about the human connection with nature that I have been working with for a long time.

CH: Is there a reason why you chose this as a theme in all your work, something personal, or is it purely just an artistic direction for you?

SP: (Laughs) I'm sorry but I have to laugh again, because everybody thinks that I had some bad experience from my childhood. This is of course the cliché, but I really don't have this kind of story. I had a happy childhood growing up and I don't have this tale of abuse or neglect. Really I just use images of children because of their purity; they just work for me in communicating what I want to say. I think that the viewer is more open when they look at an image of a child, but it's definitely not based on any personal experience I had.

CH: You said earlier that you feel very attached to your work. Do you feel separation anxiety when your pieces sell?

SP: No, because for me it's about creation—a bit like the idea of Frankenstein, especially with my figurative work. It's like you create these characters and you want to give them life so, I think that's why I am attached, but I think most artists have this feeling. So I think in the beginning maybe I did feel this way, but when I create something new I think it's ok. I can justify it because I believe that somehow they are strong enough that they can exist somewhere else.

CH: Thank you for sharing.

