

Ellen Lesperance & Jeanine Oleson BY JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

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Legend has it that there is a video store in Portland, Oregon with a whole shelf dedicated to Bigfoot porn. Now what this porn might entail is a matter of much speculation: Do these videos depict Bigfoot doing it with men or women? Or is it Bigfoot-on-Bigfoot? Bigfoot orgies? But one need not travel all the way to Oregon to see a sexualized Sasquatch, given the recent art world interest in yeti, humanoids, and wild men. In September alone there was a Sasquatch-themed group show at New York's Sixty Seven Gallery and an exhibition of Allyson Mitchell's *Lady Sasquatch* project at Toronto's Paul Petro Gallery. Much of this work seems designed to titillate, even if that titillation is thinly disguised as derision.

Taking a different tack on the apparently emerging genre of Elusive Woodland Creature Art is the collaborative duo Ellen Lesperance and Jeanine Oleson's "Off the Grid." Billed as "performance-based," their large-scale photographs show the artists dressed (and undressed) as two characters—one a human woman in tattered knitwear, the other a naked, hairy she-critter—engaging in activities whose meanings remain obscure. In *Summer XIV* (2005), the woman, wearing a woolen bikini and wrist warmers, stands on a cliff overlooking the untamed ocean. Her upturned face receives a crimson line of blood that streams, alarmingly, and somewhat magically, from the sky.

In this piece, as in the others, there is a tension between what is on-camera and off, between the action in the frame and the suggested apparatus that hovers just outside it. Because of this, the photos are ambivalent, and profoundly self-conscious, about their staginess. *Bigfoot & Nioka IV* (2005) captures the Sasquatch figure as she squats down in a clearing, clutching fistfuls of rock and dirt. Her hunched back is encrusted with filth and fur, yet the sun shines off her clean, smooth blonde hair.

Lesperance and Oleson are not interested in an archaic return to nature nor in a mockumentary-style "exposé," but are ambiguous about the fantasy, longing, and desire that mythic figures like Bigfoot elicit. Ancient rites are invoked without being explained. The two are shown after a kill in *Bigfoot & Nioka V* (2005), with a dripping cow's head, bloody hatchet and all, yet their faces betray both horror and confusion. In another photo, sticks have been arranged around tree trunks, presumably by the creature that slinks off in the background.

The photographs evidence an interest in a contemporary fixation on place. Shot in locations like the Pacific Northwest and New Mexico, they nevertheless seem to exist in the space between somewhere and nowhere—a forest that is somehow too foresty, a stage set of a forest. Is there such a thing as primitive camp? Lesperance and Oleson mix deadpan humor and sly wit into their serious set of references to ethnography, feminism, and romanticized landscapes. By referring back to 1970s feminist performance that also made recourse to the naked body for political purposes, Lesperance and Oleson remind us that it might have also been funny—funny-sharp, funny-wise—to witness Carolee Schneemann outline herself in large messy brushstrokes (*Interior Scroll*, 1975), or see Judy Chicago's photo of a woman removing a bloody tampon (*Red Flag*, 1971).

In *Bigfoot & Nioka III* (2003/05), the two characters recline in a field of brilliant green grass. The grotesquely besmirched Bigfoot sprawls out—it is unclear if she is resting or injured. A gold band on her ring finger glints among the matted fur and smeared mud. The human mountain mama, in her rags, feathers, and stockings, gazes down at Bigfoot. The look in her eyes is pure tenderness; if this is theater, it is theater as revelation. That expression transcends both the fetishization of and disgust for all this female flesh and hair and dirt and blood. Lesperance and Oleson push beyond the usual dichotomy of ridicule and sincerity, and suffuse their work with a humor that coexists with a genuine affective charge.



ELLEN LESPERANCE & JEANINE OLESON, *Off the Grid* (I) (On the Grid), 2005, LAMINA C-PRINT, 40 x 50 in. (IMAGE) *Bigfoot & Nioka V* (On the Grid), 2005, C-PRINT, 28 x 36 in. COURTESY THE ARTISTS & MONYA ROWE GALLERY, NEW YORK. (ARTIST) *Bigfoot & Nioka III* (On the Grid), 2003/05, C-PRINT, 29.5 x 23.75 in. COURTESY GARY KAWANAGI GALLERY, NEW YORK.