

# Los Angeles Times

## Review It started with a sex dream about a gorilla ...

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Photo: Benjamin Weissman, "Trippadelic," 2017. (Fredrik Nilsen)

A couple years ago, Benjamin Weissman had a disturbing sex dream about a gorilla. He's been exploring it ever since in a series of drawings, 39 of which, along with a site-specific installation, are on view at the Box. These works raise questions about bestiality, certainly, and taboo desires in general, but they also probe more existential questions about the line between human and animal.

The drawings are dominated by images of "Nessa," the gorilla or "womanilla," as the press release calls her. She is a hybrid creature, with a gorilla's face and a hairy woman's body. Weissman depicts her in various poses — shy, sexy, beatific. Rendered in pastel and charcoal on paper, the drawings also range from isolated portraits to lavish dreamscapes, populated with Renaissance putti and flowers.



The vocabulary of pornography and pinup magazines figures prominently in the womanilla's provocative poses, sometimes in congress with Weissman. Surprisingly, art history and religious art are also touchstones. In "Saint Nessa," Weissman portrays the figure with a halo, although her body is improbably fragmented and doubled, as images sometimes are in dreams. Pop culture references also appear. "Busby Berkeley" depicts multiple womanillas in a circular, overhead view reminiscent of extravagant movie musical numbers. Lascivious, reverent, ebullient: Desire is a complicated thing.

Weissman also inserts himself into the mix, not just as a sexual partner to Nessa but also in a more introspective vein. "Could I be in her thoughts?" is wishful thinking, depicting a tiny self-portrait at the center of her face. In another piece, Weissman appears alone in a mug shot format, suggesting his own feelings of guilt and transgression. Nessa, it seems, has become something of a real person. Although she displays herself to us shamelessly, she nearly always returns our gaze.

What's most striking about this work is not that it depicts a freaky sexual obsession with a gorilla-woman hybrid, but that it discovers at its root an exceeding tenderness and respect.

"Trippadelic" is an unabashedly lovely portrait, a large image of Nessa's face surrounded by green plants and a butterfly. We know in an abstract way that all of us — people, apes, animals — are related. Weissman's work asks us to consider how far that relatedness extends.



Photo: Benjamin Weissman, "Saint Nessa," 2017. (Fredrik Nilsen)

*The Box, 805 Traction Ave., Los Angeles. Through July 8; closed Sunday through Tuesday. (213) 625-1747, [www.theboxla.com](http://www.theboxla.com)*

