

## **BIRDLAND**

**“Birdland,” David Lusk Gallery, Memphis, TN, 2006**

### **David Lusk**

At Charlie Parker’s renowned New York City club Birdland it was the legendary jazz performances that kept it flying for years. Most came for the music, others for the party, but it was definitely a hot and vibrant scene.

Melissa Stern, continuing her work in carved and fired clay, started with a germ of an idea to make birds more human. She stumbled upon a cache of taxidermy animal eyes that personified her bird heads. Then she attached the heads to humanish torsos and legs; she added a few wings and feather features; she selectively used a touch of color or graphite. The result is weird, feral birds with huge personalities. When those birds come together as a group they seem to squawk and sing and party collectively. The crowd of birds creates their own Birdland.

BIRDLAND is a collection of twenty-four sculptures, odd hybrid creatures, each exquisitely individual, a cross between man and bird. The figures are elegant but slightly awkward: men trying to fly, birds trying to talk. The work is at the same time scary and benevolent, odd and amusing. The figures that make up BIRDLAND sit in a field of 600 red silk poppies that are stuck into several inches of dirt. The surprising poppy color sets off Stern’s minimally toned figures dramatically. In the Gallery’s white cube installation space, her half-bird/half-human figures become even more animated – their attitudes and gestures enhanced, like a group of club kids or art lovers at a crowded opening.

BIRDLAND is at once dark and humorous: Under the watchful gaze of its figures, the viewer becomes both the observer and the observed. Stern forces us to recognize the way social mores and posture affect every reaction, both projected and received. The installation has the feeling of a film still – a moment paused in time, stationary but somehow still in motion, in which the fleeting interactions of each character can be studied minutely. Individually each figural sculpture is wonderful to look at, but when those flowers, that dirt, the small jabbering, gesturing birds and the waist-high beak and feathered creatures come together, the room is truly alive and intoxicating.

So it is BIRDLAND, and the joint is jumpin’.