

Jill Levine

Cats Talk



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**Jill Levine: *Cats Talk***  
April 17 – May 11, 2014

Hionas Gallery  
124 Forsyth Street  
New York, NY 10002  
info@hionasgallery.com  
www.hionasgallery.com

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Essay by Tavia Fortt  
Photography courtesy Jeff Sturges  
Catalog by Justin Wolf

All sculptures: Styrofoam covered with plaster-dipped gauze, outer surface of modeling compound and oil paint

All drawings: Untitled, pencil and gouache on paper, 5 x 7 in.

Cover: *Llena*, 2011 (detail); 19 x 14 x 9.5 in.  
Title page: Untitled drawings, 2013; 5 x 7 in.  
Back cover: Untitled, 2013 (detail)

**Jill Levine** is a native New Yorker. She attended Queens College, where she earned her BA and also received a fellowship to the Yale Summer School of Art at Norfolk, CT. She earned her MFA from the Yale University School of Art, which included a semester at the Royal College of Art in London. She has been exhibiting regularly since the late 1970s in both group and solo exhibitions. In 2000 she was the recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and in 2005 a NYFA Fellowship. Her sculpture is included among numerous private and corporate collections worldwide as well as in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and the Art in Embassies, Mumbai Embassy. She lives and works in New York.



## Hello Kitty: Jill Levine's Fourth-Wall Movement

When I first saw Jill Levine's most recent group of wall sculptures, my first thought was how much her work had changed since my last studio visit, and how unexpected and intriguing those changes were. My second thought was how impressive it was that so many small breaks could still come together in such toothy continuity with what had come before, and how much that continuity is strengthened alongside such dynamic changes.

What hasn't changed? The power of her sculptures' flavorful dimensionalities, their fluid, interleaved levels of playfulness and gravitas. The stealthy rewards offered for the thoughtful approach and deliberate circumnavigation of each physical piece. The luscious intensities of their colors, and the pop-rock of their chromatic cosmologies. Their unrepentant layers of wit, of humor. The sense that one has stepped into the middle of an extended translation of ideas both elemental and complex. The promise to repay with delightful, variegated bounty each period spent in visual contemplation. The graphic power, in every sense of both words; the symmetrical asymmetries, the layers that reward careful examination even as they remind you of the potential peril of approaching an unknown creature and lingering in its presence.

And what *has* changed in Levine's totemic universe? These new pieces have been created with, and are speaking, a new language: Figures and glyphs from Mexican codices provide the alphabet for this new language, which Levine uses to create completely new hybrids that almost seem aural—more like the scattling of jazz vocals than the more direct quoting of borrowed images, filtered through a strategic round or two of conceptual Telephone, that were featured in earlier sculptures.

Physically speaking, these new works are also more straightforwardly frontal than their predecessors. They're all about the same size as well, and for the first time, they all share the same open—"armed" gesture of invitation—or perhaps of excitement, or flight, or even liturgical dance. Some have the look of upholstery with thick batting and brightly contrasting piping, or of fleshiness hammocked in tight netting, or pulled-taut piano wire. Some

feature newly independent linear overlays that resemble Kabbalistic Trees of Life, excerpted diagrams of mysterious molecular structures, a sample of *shibari*,<sup>1</sup> or an occult chart of ancient divinities' familial interrelations. This last is especially appropriate, considering the fact that much of Levine's imagery for her wall pieces has been sourced for more than two decades in borrowed images of the divine, from Hindu to ancient Aztec and Mayan. Now various pre-Colombian glyphs have found their way into her drawings, even as her own new drawings have broken her self-imposed fourth wall to communicate directly for the first time from the surface of her sculptures.

Until now, Levine's works, while they've displayed obvious intramural kinships, were more about individualism; each had its own delightfully solipsistic streak, but also showed the very particular/peculiar ways in which it helped her to refine her vocabularies and her rules of operation, and to carry them forward. This latest group, however, is different: They relate with more power and clarity to each other; they're related to each other, and descend from each other, in an order that seems linear, even Darwinian. At the same time, they have a sense of the critter about them—critters that have things to say, offers to make, mysteries to protect, dreamworlds to usher us into. Each one bears the vibrancy of its own colorful, *Paprika*-esque parade of figures<sup>2</sup> tattooed on its skin, but still somehow it remains both tranquil and inviting on the wall.

That's one more thing about Levine's work that hasn't changed: its ability to bring unique coherence to a multiplicity of meanings and valences without sacrificing lingual or liminal dexterity.

Tavia Fortt, 2014

1. *Shibari* (also known as *kinbaku*) is a Japanese style of bondage wherein the "bottom" is tightly bound with an abundance of thin, intricately knotted ropes or strips of linen.

2. *Paprika* (2006), the final film by the late Satoshi Kon—creator of such *anime* (Japanese animated) works as *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003), *Millennium Actress* (2001), and *Perfect Blue* (1997)—is one of the most surreal explorations of consciousness ever committed to screen. In the film, which is based on the 1993 novel of the same name by Yasutake Tsutsui, dreams are weaponized (in an attempt to take over the world, of course) via a stolen device called a DC-Mini, an incomplete invention that was meant to allow therapists to enter a patient's dreams for the sake of analysis and treatment. One of its repeated images is that of a gigantic, seething mass of animated toys, animals, and objects of all kinds, all tumbled together and dancing through city streets in a chaotic parade.





*Mario Simpatico*, 2012; 18 x 15 x 8 in.



*Rejas*, 2011; 18 x 11 x 6.5 in





*Catch of the Day*, 2012; 15 x 16 x 8 in.



*Cats Cradle*, 2013; 14 x 16 x 10 in.



*Llena*, 2011; 19 x 14 x 9.5 in.



*Viento*, 2012; 14 x 10 x 7 in.



*Over the Top*, 2013; 20 x 13 x 8 in.



*Aztec Chakra*, 2013; 19 x 14 x 6 in.



*Double Talk* , 2012; 20 x 13 x 9 in.



*Nester, 2014; 19 x 13 x 8 in.*





*Frazada, 2011; 19 x 13 x 9 in.*



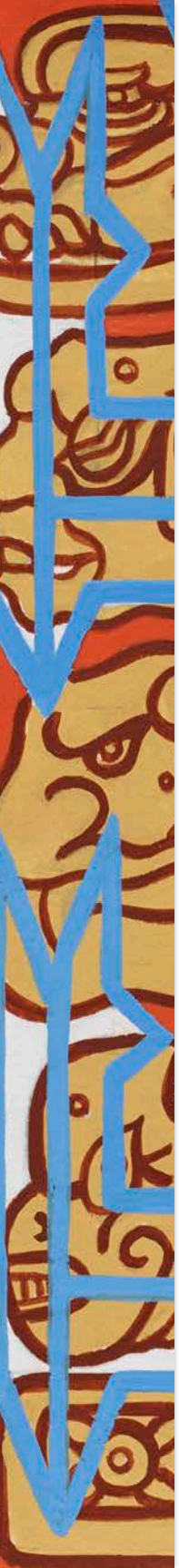
*In the Balance*, 2013; 18 x 15 x 10 in.



*Ciento Azul*, 2012; 21 x 13 x 6 in.



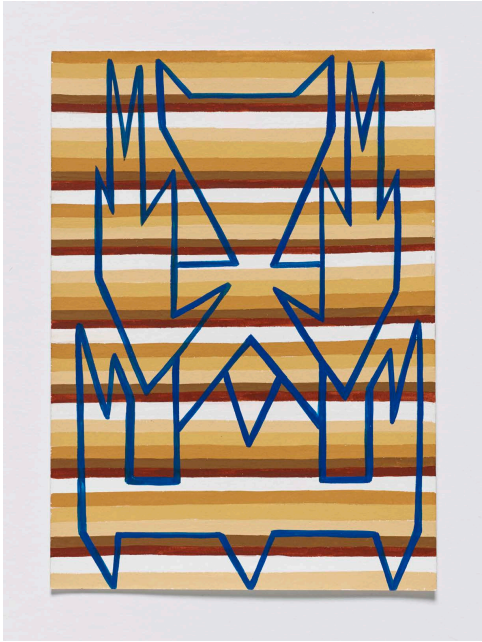
*Pega*, 2011-2013; 18 x 17 x 10 in.



Drawings



Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.



Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.



Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.



Untitled, 2014; 5 x 7 in.



Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.



Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.

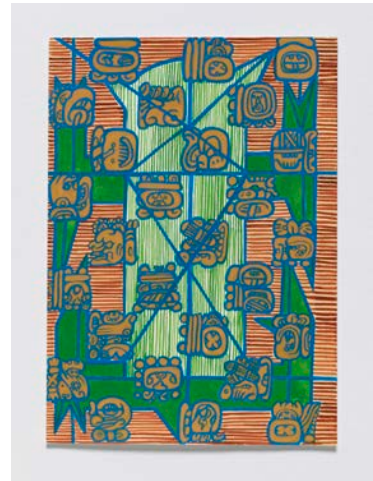




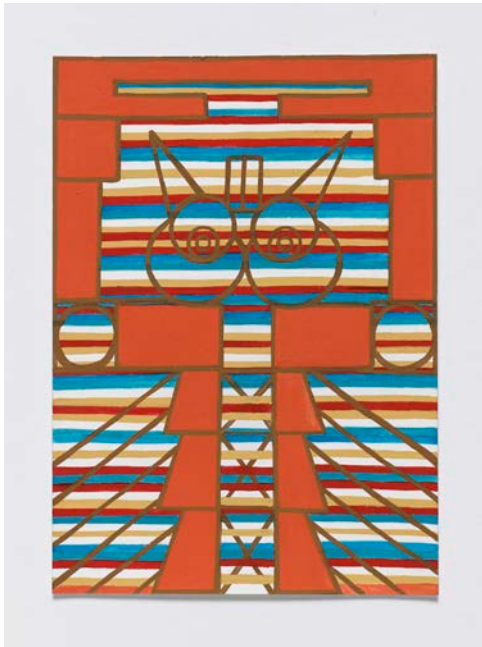
Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.



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Untitled, 2013; 5 x 7 in.

Special thanks to Steve, Deak, Grilla and Lina



