

# The sculptor's hand is in it, but her fingerprints are not



**By Kyle MacMillan**  
*Denver Post Fine Arts Critic*

For most of the history of art, evidence of the painter's or sculptor's hand in the creation of a work has been an essential, desired ingredient.

But the emergence of new technologies in the 20th and 21st centuries and ever-changing working methods have increasingly distanced artists from direct, hands-on interaction with what they create.

While some in the art world condemn this trend, Mia Mulvey, an assistant professor of art at the University of Denver, enthusiastically embraces it

Denver artist Mia Mulvey uses a kind of liquid clay to cast pieces such as "Giraffa Camelopardalis (Giraffe)." *Mia Mulvey*

in her clay sculpture.

"Certainly, I am an artist and I'm imbuing ideas and things onto this, but the mark of my hand isn't present," she said. "It's very academic and formal and kind of removed from feeling and possible daily interpretation."

New work by this always innovative, forward-thinking artist — molded clay sculptures of giraffe, crocodile and elephant skulls — are on view through Oct. 31 at Vertigo, a handsome, renovated storefront space at 960 Santa Fe Drive.

Rather than represent a standing stable of artists, this 3-year-old, project-oriented gallery focuses on exhibitions by a changing array of often-emerging artists, putting a special emphasis on installation work.

Mulvey's latest clay sculptures are inspired by her long-standing interest in science; the Louisville native was even on a premedical track at

# MULVEY: Poetry, science interact

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one point in college.

The four installations all relate to animals — not living, breathing ones but the skeletons and specimens seen in natural-history museums. She has a special nostalgia for vintage displays that were more like cabinets of curiosities.

"I lean back to the old school," Mulvey said, "because it has this romance, and there's the kind of mixing of beauty and poetry, as well as science. And there's that nice transition of when you see something and can experience it on one level and then can get deeper into understanding what that is."

Mulvey marries her longing for the past with a keen-edged appreciation of the technology of the here and now.

In creating these latest pieces, she began with virtual, three-dimensional models of the animals from a scientific library in Texas.

"I was very interested in the idea of getting real anatomy tied to a real animal that was once living and is now deceased," she said.

She then "printed" these virtual images using a sophisticated kind of machine that functions much like an ink-jet printer, slowly constructing a physical, three-dimensional model, adding fine layers of a plaster-like material with each pass of the applicator. A few examples are on display.

Mulvey then made molds from these models and cast the pieces using a kind of liquid clay. The result of this manufacturing-like process, are works that have an identical look and feel.

"I like the fact that they're all exactly the same," she said. "The first one is the same form as the last one, and it is then tied to that original animal. I like that it's not



Mulvey has arranged her pieces into careful groupings — all on the wall, except for a set of elephant skulls on the floor.

changing across its production."

Mimicking the order and symmetry of museum displays, Mulvey has assembled these pieces into careful groupings — all on the wall, except for a set of elephant skulls on the floor.

In "Crocodylus Moreletii (Morelet's Crocodile — Life Size)," she has arranged 85 crocodile skulls into a formal, interlocking wall installation that looks like a patterned abstraction from a distance.

The pieces represent the 85 species of mammals that have become extinct in the wild or entirely extinct since the 1400s. Each of the gray skulls is incised with a name — Latin and general — of one of the lost animals.

Opinions are likely to be divided over these works. Some viewers will see them as cool, distant and even antiseptic. But others will appreciate their elegant precision and scientific underpinnings.

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"I really want things to be factual and true and not laden with my specific personality as an individual," Mulvey said.

Joe Amon, *The Denver Post*

At right: "Untitled Elephants" (detail).



**MIA MULVEY.** Art. Vertigo, 960 Santa Fe Drive. Mulvey's latest work — molded clay sculptures based on animal specimens — is featured in this solo exhibition. **Through Oct. 31.** 2 to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Free. 303-573-8378 or [vertigoartspace.com](http://vertigoartspace.com).