

Animal fashion



Mary Miers investigates the curious world of Charlotte Cory

WHEN William Fox Talbot invented photography in this country, he stated that he'd started a process that other people would develop in years to come in all kinds of ways he couldn't begin to imagine. Charlotte Cory has certainly risen to the challenge.

An artist, novelist, journalist, photographer and playwright, she's combined her ingenuity and wit with a lifelong interest in photography and knowledge of the Victorian age to create an alternative, highly subversive world populated by figures made up of human bodies and animal heads. These images are contrived so subtly and sensitively that they feel more real and human than their sepia originals. 'The whole thing is very serious, but, at the same time, great fun,' says Charlotte, relishing the idea that these people, who would have played the popular Victorian parlour game *What Kind of Animal am I*, are now playing it for real.

Photographic calling cards were a Victorian craze. 'Millions of *cartes-de-visite* were produced and are now so commonplace that they're almost worthless. There's nothing sadder than fading sepia photographs of people who had themselves proudly recorded for posterity discarded in junk shops. Sadder still is the sight of stuffed animals in museums, shot long



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Gems from Charlotte Cory's Cabinet of Curiosities Playing Cards: (from left) a macau bride and groom, from a photograph taken in Greenwich; Lt-Col Fox, pictured the day before departing for duty in Ceylon; and, the joker in the pack, the photographer, with the head of a shoebill stuck on a creature that (appropriately enough) devours its prey after first decapitating it

ago, not on glass plates, but with guns, their very bodies likewise preserved for posterity to gawk at. One day, it came to me: why not recycle the dispossessed pictures and long-dead creatures? Give them all a new lease of life.' The double significance of words such as 'shot' and 'captured' proved irresistible. So Charlotte created an alternative vision of Victorian England that uses colour, humour and shock tactics to make you look and think again.

Underpinning these pieces are serious historical facts. The first generation that discovered they could 'immortalise' themselves by leaving behind an exact record of their appearance was the same that had to come to terms with Darwinism and the idea that, far from being made in the likeness of God, they were actually descended from animals. '1859 was the year *On The Origin of Species* was published; it was

also the year that the cost of photography spiralled downwards, so that everyone, from the queen to the lowest scullery maid, had their picture taken. In losing their godlike status, they found themselves immortalised by photography.' Nothing Charlotte does with the pictures, however outlandish, can compare to how disturbing that must have been.

She has drawerfuls of discarded photographic portraits, 'taken in the studios you'd once have found on every street corner. If you look at them carefully, you realise they're amazing works of art. I keep thinking how amused Mr Fox(!) Talbot would be to see how I use the process he began to reshape his own world'. Charlotte started creating these images after discovering the digital possibilities of Photoshop. 'I realised I could paint with photographs. They used to say a photograph never lies; now, it rarely tells the truth. Or rather, used imaginatively, it can help discover deeper truths. That's what my work is about.'

Charlotte's decision as to which animal a person should become is always precise—'when I look at a figure, I know immediately,' she says, and she has a wonderful collection of her own photographs of mammals, birds and fish from

which to draw. These she mixes with her own etchings, *collage d'art* and recycled images to create her 'photomelanges'. The results are often touching, sometimes disturbing, but always hilarious. They make you want to laugh and cry at the same time. Each one is a lively short story full of visual references and *Alice in Wonderland*-style humour.

Charlotte has transformed the Fitzrovia gallery into a veritable cabinet of curiosities, filling it with props and backdrops that extend the photographer's studio into the art works into another dimension. You literally walk into the world of her pictures, complete with a range of covetable merchandise that includes playing cards (which in themselves play on the idea of visiting cards), jigsaws, 'limited edition' tea towels and jewellery. Charlotte's world is more than just about cutting the head off a figure in an old photo and slapping on an animal head. Each work is an enormous intellectual joke. *'Charlotte Cory: The Cabinet of Light'* is at the Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, 27 Charlotte Street, London WC2N 3DF until October 31 (020-7252 2828; www.r-h-g.co.uk).

We are amused

Queen Victoria was 'crazy' about photography. One of her ladies in waiting is recorded as saying that 'Her Majesty would kill for a *carte-de-visite* for her collection'! How thrilled she would be to discover that two of Charlotte's pictures now hang in the Royal Collection at Windsor—one of these is a corgi, got up as a queen (right).

Charlotte Cory

