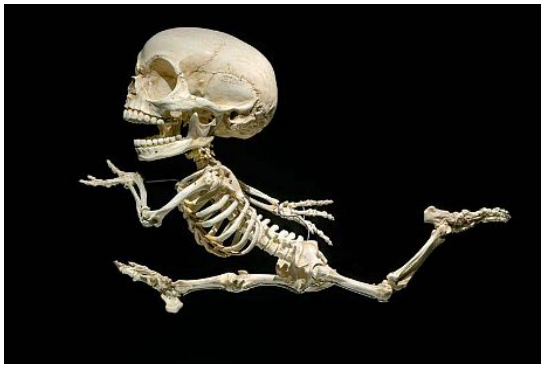
the village VOICE
Art

Mickey's Fibula, Courtesy of Hyungkoo Lee

Behold the skeletons of your favorite cartoon characters

By **Ben Davis** *Tuesday, Mar 18 2008*



Details

Hyungkoo Lee
Arario
521 West 25th Street
Through April 19

It's a pretty neat gag: Displayed in elegant, low-lit galleries at Arario, Hyungkoo Lee's sculptures look like the archaeological remains of extinct cartoon characters. There's the skeleton of Road Runner (titled *Geococcyx Animatus*), with raptor-like claws, frozen in chase with that of Wile E. Coyote (*Canis Latrans Animatus*), as if a natural-history museum were recreating a scene from the life of these species. There's Bugs Bunny (*Lepus Animatus*), formidable incisor teeth looking like they could do some real damage.

It might seem like punch-line art at first, but the more you scratch the surface, the more interesting the gesture becomes. Lee is a Korean artist who graduated with an MFA from Yale in 2002 and represented his home country at the Venice Biennale in 2007 (Arario was started in Korea, opening its Chelsea branch last year as a bridge for East/West creative exchange). Lee's work may seem like Pop Art dressed up in pseudo-science, but its undercurrent is the experience of cultural dislocation.

A mock evolutionary chart on one wall traces all of Lee's creations back to a common ancestor: *Homo Animatus*, a runty, big-skulled creature, also on display. It represents a kind of twisted self-portrait Lee made while living in the States, in response to feeling self-consciously foreign. From there, he has taken the exaggerated but very familiar features of Looney Tunes characters, Mickey Mouse, and Tom & Jerry and rendered them alien through mock paleontological reconstructions.

They make cool objects, but it's the process of translating the images that Lee wants you to see. There's a re-created version of the artist's studio on display, illustrating the scientific equipment he employs. Elsewhere, detailed drawings show Lee working out bone structures based on animal anatomy, or trying to figure out how giant cartoon eyeballs might actually function (they wouldn't). The results show how simple movement from one cultural sphere to another can have unexpected, freakish effects—even as the sober, scientific way in which Lee works sketches a world in which this sort of disorientation isn't freakish at all, but an understood fact of life.