



Catriona McAra, *Mercurious*

Dr. Catriona McAra is University Curator at Leeds Arts University. She has published extensively on the art and literature of Dorothea Tanning and Leonora Carrington with a particular interest in feminist aesthetics and surrealist legacies in contemporary practice. She has worked closely with many contemporary artists and has written a range of catalogue essays for commercial galleries and public museums.



Sarah Woodfine *Boy* 2008
pencil on paper, wood and Perspex
47 x 60 x 30 cm



Kim L Pace *Mafdet* 2019
pencil on paper, wood and Perspex
22 x 24 x 18 cm

[The grotesque] is earthy and material, a cave, an open mouth that invites our descent into other worlds. It is a space where the monsters and marvels of our imagination are conceived.
- Frances S. Connelly (2012).

Snowlight, moonlight, a confusion of paw-prints.
- Angela Carter (1979)

*Mercurious*¹ is an excavation of the otherworldly, a marvellous archaeology that seeks to enchant and disrupt the known contours of reality, edging and nudging us towards the underside of our imaginations. Moving beyond the secure and predictable domain of exhibition-making, *Mercurious* deliberately seeks to undo this habitual sense of artifice in order to offer an alchemical fusion of ideas. Here, Kim L Pace and Sarah Woodfine have combined narrative forces to conjure a carnival within this grand Georgian townhouse curated by Danielle Arnaud.

Something primeval lurks behind every corner. When such sorcery comes to pass inside this kind of gallery-house, it can only be described as profoundly uncanny. Mythographer, Marina Warner, unpacks Freud's well-known notion as follows: "the feeling arises when a figure or an image stirs a memory of something familiar that has been mislaid, or lost – hence the shivery or uncanny feel of *déjà vu*, or the prickly sensation excited by feeling that someone is in the room when there turns out to be nobody there."² Pace and Woodfine similarly seek to surprise and unsettle. Their artworks reanimate inert matter and paw at our psyches. *Mercurious* comprises spooky personages, ominous spirits, and cult fetishes. For both artists, the medium is held in high regard, and can be understood in two interrelated ways: as the physical material being manipulated; and as a communicating vessel that might occur in a séance to convey messages. Moreover, their manipulation of malleable materials (in clay and watercolours or pencil on paper, respectively) enables magical images to transpire on their own terms.³ The chance encounter of what might become manifest is crucial to this practice. Mouths and other orifices are allowed to pucker expressively into shape as if summoned by the ritual of modelling. Meanwhile, form is given to the play of graphite beasts on the page, channelling abstract marks through fanatical execution into a persuasive visual narrative. Indeed, Woodfine has noted in interview that "the pencil process in itself has an extremely sculptural quality to it."⁴ Pace is equally emphatic that the transformation of inanimate material to animated being is at the very heart of her practice – her chosen media of clay, glazes and watercolours provide an inherent changeability that segues into the metaphorical dimension of what animated matter might mean. Not only do such media offer a fluidity of identity, even as they solidify and evaporate, but also an innate sense of ambiguity, neither one thing nor another, but something which subtly challenges stable taxonomies.

Woodfine's malevolent and confrontational *Teddy (A New Home for Harvey)*, (2000) wickedly taps into our childhood phobias and nostalgias. As fairy tale custodian Kate Bernheimer might caution: "you [cannot] quite find comfort in it."⁵ D. W. Winnicott's transitional object has a significant role to play here, usually a pacifier "between the thumb and the teddy bear," "the first 'not-me' possession which, assists the infant in transitioning between subjective and objective worlds (also the site of carnival)."⁶ Such plush toys are surely the uncanniest of objects due to their homely associations on the one hand, yet ever-present reminder that wild bears are surely the most unlikely candidates for domestication. Woodfine's epic drawing speaks volumes of the dubious cultural history of teddy bears, how we have come to rely all-too-easily on such stuffed accomplices. Didier Maleuvre has suggested: "[t]he child who breaks toys searches for the object behind the image [...] but [...] breaking through the toy's distance finds nothing but disenchantment."⁷ A familiar and cherished entity may turn out to be an empty signifier, the "soul of the toy" set psychically loose and roaming. In dwelling on such ghostly anthropomorphism, the surrealist scholar, Katharine Conley, has noted the teddy-bear-like status of Dorothea Tanning's work. Pace, especially, is drawn to the impish hybridity in Tanning's *Les Trois Garces (The Three Bitches)*, (1953), a hairy and provocative painterly reworking of Canova's smooth and genteel sculpture, *The Three Graces* (1815-17).

The fur of the fairy tale is pervasive; the wolf disguised as grandmother in Charles Perrault's 'Little Red Riding Hood' (1697) holds a particular fascination for Woodfine. This is borne out in her sculptural drawing *Boy* (2008) where hints of a wolfling child are cradled within the three dimensions of a cot. Again, the creature emerges out of a lozenge of potential space. The shapeshifting of werewolves or the wolf-transvestite grandmother evoke Angela Carter's revisions of the famous tale (1979).¹⁰ In Woodfine's *Untitled (Forest)* (2016), the story is retold once more as an episodic narrative drawing, collapsing the complexity into a more compact visual format whilst arranging the cast sequentially.¹¹ Woodfine is fond of the forest theme – 'Goldilocks and The Three Bears' (1837) is another favourite, perhaps due to its contradictory emphases on equilibrium ("not too hot, not too cold") and unresolved sense of chase ("she ran all the way home").¹² Again, domesticated bears and the perpetual search for home and comfort inevitably broach the uncanny. For Woodfine, the Ancient Egyptian and alchemical motif of the ouroboros operates on a similar basis; it is a mythical, infinite and recursive cipher for self-knowledge, a serpent that consumes its own tail. The hallowed title of her collective bronzes, *Just as fire burns away all dross and rubbish, so the three-fold suffering purges the heart from all impurity* (2019), is critically reflexive in this regard, demythologizing, as Carter might put it,¹³ the very process of art-making, and stressing the philosophical dimension of self-consuming tasks. Works on paper, such as *When all the birds are in the sky* and *Forever*

and *Ever* (both 2015), become concentric, elongated and labyrinthine in an effort to hunt the unruly monster of mark-making.

Personification runs riot throughout the ceramics and watercolours of Kim L Pace.¹⁴ Previous examples of her work have evoked the branch in 'Little Otik' or the voodoo like qualities of the mandrake root. Indeed, an interest in Karel Erben's nineteenth century folk tale 'Otesánek,' which provided the basis for Jan Švankmajer's film (2000), connects with Pace's Czech family heritage and serves as a persistent reference point for her. A preoccupation with masks accentuates her long-term practice which works within the theoretical continuum of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.¹⁵ Here, a sense of the topsy-turvy and unhinging of the everyday is imperative. Writing on the grotesque as a chief characteristic of carnival, Susan Stewart tells us: "the mask, the costume, and the disguise find their proper context in carnival and festivity [...] where hierarchy is overturned."¹⁶ The mask is a performance object, a conduit that imbues the wearer with the power to channel magical transformations, which is why they are so often used in rituals and rites. As with the teddy bear, the mask is another uncanny object – when we don a mask, and peep through its eye-holes, we become me/not-me. Pace is also intrigued by Frances S. Connelly's compelling idea of the grotesque as a "boundary creature," "something that creates meaning by prying open a gap, pulling us into unfamiliar, contested terrain."¹⁷ Pace's own boundary creatures charm and enchant, bloom, morph and convulse. This is true too of her gargoyle-like watercolours, *Pucks, Sprites, Spectres (Phantasmagoria series)* (2019), which envisage the grotesque as caricature and allow key features to coalesce on the surface.¹⁸ Whether on paper or in clay, some of these faces are eerie and looming, while others are mischievous and playful. They visually quote existing artefacts, both ancient and avant-garde. One thinks of antique cameos, death masks, or the faux-naïve appropriation of curiosities from native cultures – branches of collecting activity that have come to define a certain Wunderkammer revival. Pace playfully reforms these traditions, imitating their façades yet providing a fresh, contemporary response that combines creature design, emoji languages, and artisan techniques of dry glazes and flocking. Consider the "weathering" and surface "patina" on each. Chameleon-like, many of these masks mimic the hues, patterns and textures of the crystalline minerals, *Mask 36 (Azurite)* (2019), iridescent amphibians, *Mask 35 (Gourami)* (2019), and botanical specimens, *Mask 13 (Dianthus)* (2018), which provide their titles. Pace also musters the extra-terrestrial behaviour of insects, *Mask 30 (Pollinator)* (2019), and prehistoric existence of geological formations, *Mask 21 (Uluru)* (2019), in defining and differentiating her genus of disguise. Such attributes suggest an alternative evolution, and hint at an ability to transpose at will. These are beings hewn from a different imagination.

The prophetic possibilities of the Tarot serve as a curatorial strategy in this show.¹⁹ In the Moon Room, alchemy and mercury play more visual tricks, continuing the quest for pareidolia or mirage, of finding the-faces-in-things.²⁰ Both artists have described this as a drive, with Pace even naming one of her artworks, *Mask 7 (Pareidolia)* (2018), after this hallucinatory condition. This optical tradition is surely another automatic pursuit inherited from the surrealists, although Leonardo da Vinci also wrote about such phenomena during the Renaissance.²¹ The image of man-in-the-moon is one of the most ubiquitous examples of pareidolia, the craters of this great satellite suggesting facial features, much like Pace's pinched and puckering masks, or Woodfine's series *Hello Fruit Face* (1999). Here, the lunar phase acts as a fairy tale spotlight that serves to beckon dreamscapes, nightmares, not to mention those very forms of lunacy associated with the temporary nature of carnival, where the usual rules, laws and etiquettes are momentarily suspended.

Pace and Woodfine are part of a particular creed of artists, successive generations that have mastered the lessons of narrative art and conceptualism. Kiki Smith comes to mind, as do fellow English artists such as Kate MccGwire and Tessa Farmer, as harnessing curiosity and exquisite make-belief for the purposes of contemporary art. Again, both Pace and Woodfine acknowledge their debt to the writer Angela Carter, especially her insistence on the revolutionary possibilities of the carnivalesque and effort to shift the fairy tale into a more embodied sensibility that faces up to contemporary political issues in a defiant and unsettling manner. In sum, metamorphosis and the overthrowing of the everyday occur throughout *Mercurious*. Kim L Pace and Sarah Woodfine invite us into a playground of charged objects that can and should be used as conduits to access our elsewhere.

Notes:

¹ *Mercurius* is Latin for elemental mercury (Hg), as well as for Mercury the planet and Roman god of abundance.

² Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 54.

³ Both artists agree that the technique of frottage (or transfer rubbings) by surrealist Max Ernst offers a similar example of how accidental imagery is allowed to come into being. This is true of the process of writing and other art-forms too.

⁴ Sarah Woodfine cited in interview with Fiona Robinson, 'Interview with Strange Worlds artist Sarah Woodfine,' Royal West of England Academy (March 2017): <https://rwa.org.uk/about-us/blog/interview-strange-worlds-artist-sarah-woodfine>

⁵ Kate Bernheimer is writing about her topsy-turvy doll in this instance, 'This Rapturous Form,' *Marvels and Tales: A Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 20: 1 (2006), 71.

⁶ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 2

⁷ Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 137.

⁸ Writing on toys in contemporary art, David Hopkins has suggested, after Charles Baudelaire, that children become disenchanted when they fail to discover the "soul of the toy," *Childish Things*, (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2010), 55.

⁹ Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), p. 144. The proximity of *Mercurious* to the recent Dorothea Tanning exhibition at Tate Modern, curated by Alyce Mahon and Ann Coxon, is also noteworthy here.

¹⁰ Angela Carter, 'The Company of Wolves,' *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2007), 129-139. For more on human-animal hybrids in fairy tales, see Mayako Murai, *From Dog Bridegroom to Wolf Girl: Contemporary Japanese Fairy-Tale Adaptations in Conversation with the West* (Wayne State University Press, 2015).

¹¹ For more on notions of "compact" and "complex" fairy tales, see Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² Robert Southey is credited with writing this tale.

¹³ Angela Carter, 'Notes From the Front Line', *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, Jenny Uglow (ed.) (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 38.

¹⁴ See Angela Kingston, *Kim L Pace: A Fantastic Fermentation of Matter* (London: Danielle Arnaud, 2018).

¹⁵ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky (trans.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 107. Earlier Stewart notes the intersection between quotation and carnival as mutual "process[es] of restoration and disillusionment, for the boundary of the text is both fixed and made suspect," 20.

¹⁷ Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8; 2. The notion of the "boundary creature" is adapted from Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985).

¹⁸ Connelly, 92.

¹⁹ Channeling the known interests of Leonora Carrington, the conceptual artist Lucy Skaer has also utilised the Tarot for the purpose of composing her *Leonora* cycle (2006). For more on this, see my 'Wild Card,' *The Space Between* (2018): http://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol14_2018_mcara

²⁰ Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 312.

²¹ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, edited by Jean Paul Richter (1955), 254.

Cover: (left) **Kim L Pace** *Mask 36 (Azurite)* 2019
glazed ceramic, 29 x 17 x 7 cm
(right) **Sarah Woodfine** *Just as the fire burns away all
dross and rubbish [...]* 2019
bronze, 60 x 60 x 5 cm

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