

# **Stony Brook University**



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**Faults Not Forgotten**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Gina Altadonna**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

**May 2014**

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

**Faults not Forgotten**

by

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**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

**2014**

The beautiful appearance of the world of dreams, in whose creation each man is a complete artist, is the condition of all plastic art, indeed, as we shall see, an important half of poetry. We enjoy the form with an immediate understanding, all shapes speak to us, nothing is indifferent and unnecessary.<sup>1</sup>

My work stems from my own neuroses, obsessions, and insecurities, which reflect the stark and disturbing truths of who I am. The question does not lie in what I see in the mirror, but rather in what society dictates should be there. Using animals to illustrate these echoes, I attempt to rattle the foundations of the normative. The animals become a personification of my confrontations with “girl world policing.” Commenting on the impacts of these experiences and their effects on my past, current, and future relationships, I hope to alleviate the internal struggle of finding myself.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1871, Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, p. 1, <https://www.msu.edu/course/thr/431/BirthofTragedy.pdf>.



## Frontispiece



**Figure I-** MFA Thesis Exhibit 2014, Installation shot  
Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY

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<sup>2</sup> MFA Thesis Exhibit 2014, Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, Stony Brook University, March 18- April 15

## Introduction

The sudden shift in the air, a whisper, a slight crack of a smile, my heart skips a beat and the mood of the room is altered. I know they are watching me. Fear strikes me silent; the sense of loneliness and dread lingers in the air. I know they are talking about me. For as long as I can remember this fear has existed. The fear of being left out, ignored, teased, policed, and the uncertainty of how to maneuver through the land mines of female relationships. I felt that I had in some way failed. Failed at being liked and accepted. I was unsuccessful at being the “perfect girl” with the “perfect friendships” and the “perfect life.” The fear of admitting that every one hates me, that I have done something wrong, is palpable on my lips. I am racked with questions. Why must I always say the wrong thing? Why can't I just shut up, back off, and be more patient? It must be my fault, am I unbearable to be around? These remain open wounds and still sting. I constantly relive and repeat my past. I have finally embraced it, with all its pain, and channel it into my artwork. The anxiety is still real and it exists within me. I know that I need to use it, to visually express it, in hopes that I can keep from drowning. It is my intention in my work to make a statement that will touch others the way that it touches me. I now know that I cannot fail, because the failures are already laid out before me and no one will ever let me forget, I will not let myself forget.

Throughout my life, for as long as I can remember, I have been bullied. My sister once said to me it's because I'm an easy target. I never truly understood what she meant until now. My artwork has always reflected my pain, even though it was unconsciously done. It took me over five years to realize my purpose as an artist and as a person is to use this gift to express the hurt I experienced from bullying. I want to make an impact, whether it is just for myself or for the

whole of our society. My goal is to make the unseen world of girl aggression visible. To hold everyone accountable, and to reveal the pain many of us face in silence.<sup>3</sup>

Since relationship is precisely what good, ‘perfect’ girls are expected to be in, its loss, and the prospect of solitude can be the most pointed weapon in the hidden culture of girls’ aggression.<sup>4</sup>

My work has evolved and developed into a childhood memoir, to find and pinpoint my fears and the scars left behind. It literally paints a portrait of that which society appointed as my identity. I began using sociology to link my experiences to our culture. It allows to me see that what I went through is wrong, and that it should be exposed as more than simply a rite of passage girls must go through. I should not have had to endure the abuse to be who I am today, I do not have to grin and bear it anymore, I do not have to be silent and I am allowed to wear the pain openly instead of letting it remain invisible. I do not have to be ashamed, I have flaws, and these flaws won’t kill me. They do not make me evil. They do not make me unlovable. So my art has become the narrative of my life; a life that has been impacted and imprinted by society’s hand- and therefore it reflects a larger, more pervasive platform. It becomes a part of our society’s collective unconscious and it is still very relevant today.

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Simmons speaks about this invisible world of female aggression is in her book *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, This book opened my eyes to what many refuse to see. Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Simmons, 31.

Girls, ever respectful, tend to aggress quietly. They flash looks, pass notes, and spread rumors. Their actions, though sometimes physical, are typically more psychological and thus invisible to even an observant classroom eye.<sup>5</sup>

I am never allowed to forget my faults. Others constantly remind me of them. Each one of my failures is engraved upon my skin. It may seem that I have a tough skin, impervious to the pain from years of abuse, but I do not. I am plagued with my memories; I don't have elephant skin, but I am an elephant, I never forget. For as long as I can recollect I have been told all of my failures. I thought for a long time it was because I was so annoying, that people felt a sort of an obligation to make me aware of these traits. Is there something about me that invokes this brutal honesty? Their words echo in my head, "wow Gina, you really talk a lot, did you know that you talk a lot?" "You are such a spaz Gina, you are so loud and obnoxious," "Gina did you know that you are really stubborn, you are so hard headed," "wow you are so uncoordinated, you are a terrible dancer." These and many other little things ring in my ears, and I can't escape them. That is what the elephant represents. The memories are so real and fresh I could almost reach out and touch them. I'm metaphorically fused with the elephant, which can be seen in figure II. These failures become personified into the mule, the gazelle, the horse and the fox. Society has told me that I am all of these things. They created my identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Simmons, 10.



**Figure II-** *Memory*, 2013, Pen and Ink, 22” x 30”

How I became the gazelle, illustrated in figure III, started at my seventh grade school dance, a frightening landscape to navigate. I decided I could not and should not go. The fear of being there paralyzed me. I tell my mom that I won't be going, but my sister begins to berate me by calling me a loner and a social outcast, which worries my mom. My mom asks me to go, she even entices me with the prospect of a new outfit. I cave. I put on the new outfit, which is a requirement at an event such as this, and I find a few "friends" and begin to relax. I tell myself it will be ok and I begin to enjoy myself. I let my guard down, which is my first mistake. The second is deciding to dance. The mood shifts quickly and I sense something is amiss. There is a slight snicker in the air, a point, a smile, and I know they are talking about me. One of the girls says, purposely loud enough for me to hear, "Look at how ridiculous Gina looks dancing. What a terrible dancer." I didn't dance again for seven years.



**Figure III-** *Graceful*, 2013, Pen and Ink, 22” x 30”

Each of these moments is painful to recall. They bring up memories and fears I cannot let go. They shaped me and still affect me. My relationships with women are forever changed. I am forever wary of what they will say, what they will do. Will I be isolated and alone forever? In middle school I was the odd girl out, a social pariah. From fourth to sixth grade, I was in the popular clique with my best friend since I was in diapers, Kelly. She was my world. Kelly was not just a friend, but also a sister to me. Our moms were, and still are, best friends and so were our older sisters. We were inseparable, that is, until sixth grade. In sixth grade I got braces and I gained weight. I didn't have any breasts, and my hair started to get frizzy and unruly. My clique began to target me. I was being pushed out. They relentlessly mocked me. They began having parties and “forgetting” to invite me. They told me I was annoying and ugly. They told me I



talked too much. I looked to Kelly for help, but she remained silent. She turned a blind eye and eventually she too pushed me away. I cried for days. Finally, my mom had enough and called her mom. Kelly called me and told me she couldn't be my friend anymore because she did not want the same fate. I spent seventh and eighth grade completely alone and friendless. I ate lunch alone and walked aimlessly around the recess yard alone. I failed at my friendships and therefore I was a failure as a girl. When I went to high school I was determined to never be that girl again.

Fear of solitude is overpowering...what crushed girls was being alone. It was as though the absence of bodies nearby with whom to whisper and share triggered in girls a sorrow and fear so profound as to nearly extinguish them...Girls may try to avoid being alone at all costs, including remaining in an abusive friendships.<sup>6</sup>

Girls are sly, they are sneaky and they are manipulative, because that is how they are taught to survive and to express themselves. They are taught to be nothing but sugar and spice and everything nice. However, this isn't the case. Girls are mean. We are conditioned to be covert in our every interaction.<sup>7</sup> I am sly. I am a fox (figure IV).

In creation of this piece I went back to a time when I was no longer a target, or so I thought. I had a moment of becoming what I feared and hated most. I became a bully to save and to protect myself. It began in high school, when I walked into the cafeteria. I go to sit in my usual seat with my clique of girlfriends when I find my seat is taken. A girl named Kami occupied it. Fear washed over me. Was I being kicked out? A hot panic flushed my face and I knew what I must do. I walked up to her and in my snidest tone spoke, "excuse me are you lost,

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<sup>6</sup> Simmons, 32.

<sup>7</sup> "When meanness and friendship become inextricable, girls lose the ability to distinguish between them...some girls lose their ability to defend themselves against it" (Simmons, 56).

that is *my* seat.” She quickly replied, “I don’t see your name on it, I sat here last quarter, long before you were a part of this group.” I had known this and I had also known she had chosen to sit with her boyfriend for the past month, therefore losing her beloved spot in the clique and allowing my entrance. Her boyfriend had broken up with her and she decided to return to the group. I then proceeded to retort back to her, “no one wants you here, you made your decision, so now you must live with it. Get out of my seat.” With a look of total shock and humiliation she stood up and left mumbling under her breath “you don’t have to be such a bitch about it.” My friends and I heard this statement and my cheeks flushed. Murmurs from the clique rose, the consensus was that I could not let her get away with that. At seventh period English I had to take a stand. With sweaty palms and a pit in my stomach I approached her, I reminded myself to look strong, I had to be fierce, and in a huff I said “I can’t believe you would call me a bitch, Kami, when we all know that is exactly what you are. Don’t you know that everyone hates you? I would be embarrassed to be you.” She immediately ran out of the room in tears and I had won. That day haunts me. I became what I feared and hated. I am sly as a fox.



**Figure IV-** *Sly*, 2013, Pen and Ink, 30" x 22"

“‘Good Girls’ have friends, and lots of them...perfect girls have ‘perfect relationships.’”<sup>8</sup> I failed at being the “perfect girl;” this became my mantra for my life and it crippled me with paranoia. I could never hold friends. I felt a constant nagging in the back of my mind that I was being mocked and talked about in secret. My high school clique eventually dropped me in spite of all my efforts. It didn’t matter if I was a bully, a target, if I had beautiful hair and clothes; nothing I did allowed me to fit in. I still failed. I am the peacock (figure V). This is my fate, forever striving to fit in and be the “perfect girl” and forever failing.



**Figure V-** *Pretty*, 2013, Pen and Ink, 22” x 30”

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<sup>8</sup> Simmons, 17.

My work is deeply rooted in the nuances of female friendships, mean-girl policing and breaking my silence. “Silence deepens conflict intensity, as each side wonders what the other is thinking.”<sup>9</sup> This invisible world of girl aggression is what I attempt to reveal through my personal and anecdotal artwork. I draw inspiration from the world around me, from fairytales to fables, mythology to sociology, dreams and reality. I struggle to find myself and to get out from under the heavy weight of society’s rules and dictation of what it means to be me.

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<sup>9</sup> Simmons, 45.

## Chapter 1

### Biography

Throughout the course of graduate school I have experienced a lot of personal reflection, soul-searching, and deep contemplation while working in my studio. During this time, I came to ask myself the intimidating question of why I make art. It is not merely that I want to, but that I *have* to do my work. I am driven from a deep place to pursue my passion. I have always loved to draw; from early childhood I was on the path to becoming an artist. Filling notebook after notebook with a thousand drawings of horses, my excitement grew. Animals have always been at the root of my art-making practice. I draw inspiration and life from the curvatures of their infinitely complex forms. I began working with these themes subconsciously throughout my undergraduate career, where I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Pennsylvania State University in 2010. These animals have now grown to be a large part of not only representing who I am as an artist, but also as symbols of my identity.

I have carried my repressed memories, under the cloak of a smile, with me my entire life. The only relief I feel from the heaviness of these wounds is through making art. Before coming to graduate school, I had never fully realized what drove me to create, why I was drawn to the images I felt compelled to make, and more importantly, who I am as a person and how I fit into this world. I began to learn from those around me, my teachers, students and fellow graduate students, to go deeper into the meaning and symbolism of my work. I took Art History, Women's Studies and Sociology courses in order to push myself out of my comfort zone and into a place of honesty. These experiences have altered me and helped teach me how to create works of substance and depth. These years have been inspiring.

At the root of all the art that I have created and that I am currently making, is this theme of societal pressure to conform. I have always been pressured into a social construct of femininity that I can never quite live up to.

Girls (like all of us) absorb the cultural messages of what a girl should wear and own, and how she should conduct herself, and then they take that information and develop strict social hierarchies based on it... But it's also confusing because girls don't know what these rules are because they're invisible. You only learn them when you break them or you see someone else break them and live with the fallout...girls themselves who are usually the enforcers. They police one another...<sup>10</sup>

The harder I try to become a "perfect girl" the more I fail. I am at the heart of it all scared and insecure about myself. I make art to own up to these insecurities. It is my intention to create something that will one day touch the thousands of other girls struggling with the same issues that I am currently working through. I am searching for my own redemption. I am seeking to rise from the ashes.

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<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*, (New York: Three Rivers, 2009) 12.

## Chapter 2

### Art Practice



**Figure VI-** *Trophy*, 2013, Pen and Ink, 22" x 30"

Patience, repetition, detail, control, and internal reflection, all become mantras to my art practice. I revere these qualities for I lack control of them in other aspects of my life. I want to have more patience, less repetition, and more control over my failures in relationships as well as in other aspects of my life; the lack of these qualities, as well as many others, lead to many of my insecurities. Art is the one place I have both total control and complete liberation. Creating becomes a cathartic, contemplative space for me. I choose techniques that are slow, technical, and methodical in order to generate dark narratives and worlds that are chaotic yet serene. I try to



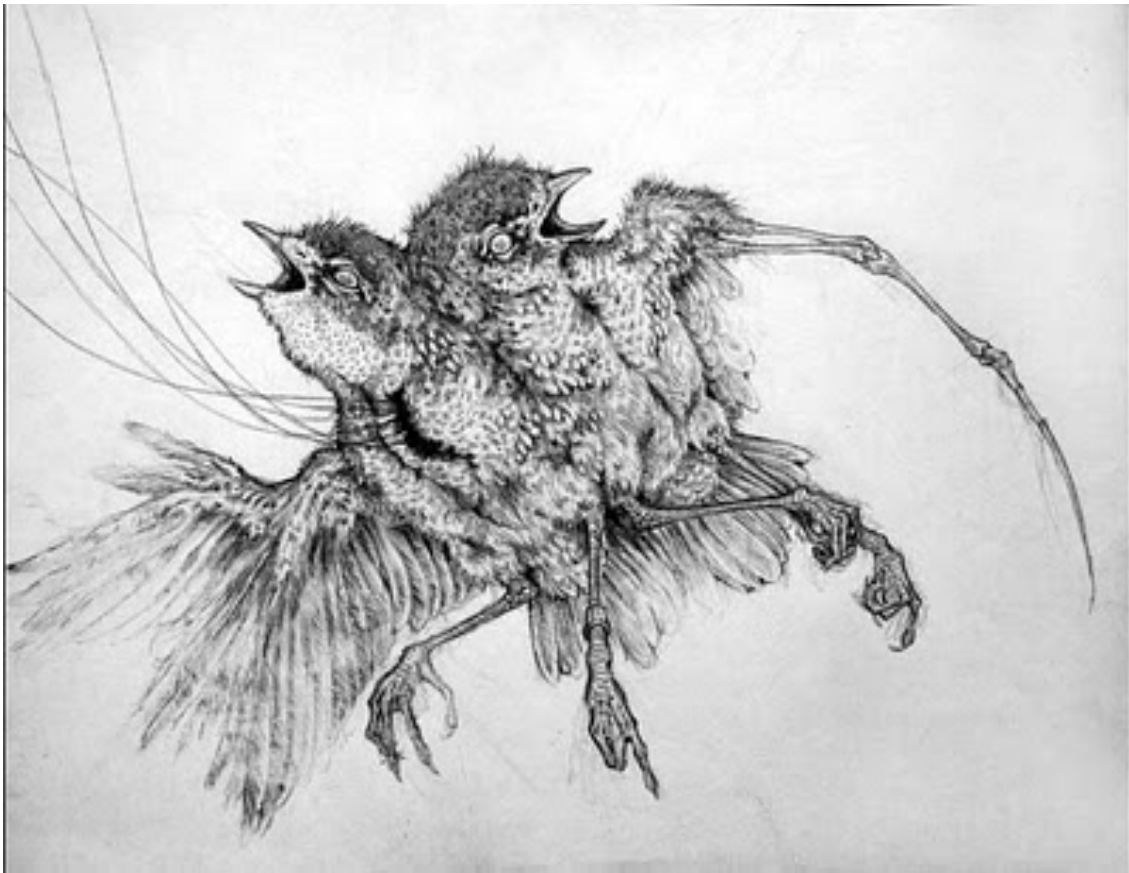
create beauty together with ugliness in each piece of art that I produce. Contradictions and odd juxtapositions mold a visual language that is all my own.

Diptychs and series dominate my art practice. I strive to illustrate an obscure world of fantasy and fairytale that narrate my life. I chose to do this through a variety of mediums and techniques that lend themselves to long studio sessions and deep contemplation. As a painter and printmaker, process is a large part of my work. I often work with watercolors, pen and inks, and intaglio printmaking. Time and patience are important for me in working with these mediums. Craftsmanship and beauty are a crucial part of my intent. In the end I want to create a body of work that is not only thought-provoking and sinister, but also beautiful and awe-inspiring.

Nature and animals occupy this visual narrative. They are fascinating and striking; they are iconic and enigmatic; they are encrypted with symbolism. Animals create a narrative all their own, allowing viewers to enter into the work with their own particular thoughts and emotions. Throughout history, literature and religion, animals- from Aesop to Sendak- have been and are used to tell stories, reveal morals and direct mankind's awareness. Animals become symbols of human attributes, portraits of their faults and failures. They illustrate ambiguous, foreboding tales. I strive to produce a narrative that is personal and universal as well as to form my own dark fairytales that illustrate my deepest secrets.

I am inspired not only by my own history but also the world around me. Sociology, mythology, art history, and my dreams inform the work that I create. Contemporary artists, such as Caitlin Hackett (figure VII), Julie Heffernan, and AJ Fosik influence my art practice. These artists all strive to create a visual link between humans and animals. They each stress craft and beauty in their art.

I am fascinated by the way in which people personify or objectify animals; the way in which the human view of an animal can render it into an object of utility, or a trustworthy companion, or a monstrosity, regardless of that creature's true nature. It is this dichotomy that I aim to reveal in my work, the 'real' animal versus the abstract animal as it exists in the human mind, an animal mutated by social constructs and mythology alike.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure VII-** Caitlin Hackett- *Specimen*, pencil drawing in the songbird series, 12" x 9"

Animated films are another source of inspiration for my work. The Japanese illustrator and director Hayao Miyazaki's work sets my imagination on fire. The folklore, mythology and

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<sup>11</sup> Caitlin Hackett, "Contemporary Mythology," 2013, Carbonmade, 11 April 2014  
<http://caitlinhackett.carbonmade.com/about>

characters in the films, *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, create a modern twist on old legends and traditions. He creates realms in which animals are gods and spirits that protect and defend the world of the living and the dead.



**Figure VIII-**“Princess Mononoke,” Film Still, Hayao Miyazaki, 1997

I will continue to include in my work elements of classical art, illustration, and the contemporary world- and continue using drawing, painting, and printmaking to visually represent my personal

narrative, in the hope of making a more universal impact. As Carl R. Rogers states:

What is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others. This has helped me to understand artists and poets as people who have dared to express the unique in themselves.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, (Boston, MA, 1961) 26.

## Chapter 3

### Sociology, Mythology and Dreams

Drawing inspiration from my own life experiences as well as from the world around me, I found that sociology, mythology, fairy tales, literature, popular culture, biology, memories, and dreams all fuel my creative process. Am I who I am because of what is on the inside or does society also mold and shape my identity? My art therefore deals not only with my own personal self-discovery, but also questions and encapsulates the society that fosters it.

#### Part 1: Sociology

Writers Rachel Simmons and Rosalind Wiseman, opened my eyes to the hidden world of female aggression. All my adolescent life I believed that I alone suffered from the fear and solitude of the loss of female friendships. I felt that I was different and unlikeable. These insecurities have followed me throughout my life, dark shadows looming over me. “Behind a façade of female intimacy lies a terrain traveled in secret, marked with anguish, and nourished by silence.”<sup>13</sup> I never realized that most young girls face similar struggles. Specifically female aggression is finally being studied, allowing it to come out of the shadows.

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<sup>13</sup> Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002) 3.

Society expects boys to be aggressive. They tend to solve problems, at a young age, using physical violence, whereas girls are conditioned to always be “sweet.” In the book, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, Simmons describes the pressure society puts on girls to conform to what it means to be female. “...Daughters are expected to be sugar and spice and everything nice...Good girls have friends, and lots of them.”<sup>14</sup> However, girls are still human beings, they have all the same emotions as boys- which means that they, too feel anger and aggression.

Our culture refuses girls access to open conflict, and it forces their aggression into nonphysical, indirect, and covert forms. Girls use backbiting, exclusion, rumors, name-calling, and manipulation to inflict psychological pain on victimized targets.<sup>15</sup>

Girl aggression therefore becomes hidden, secretive and calculating. Female friendships are a complex world, full of land mines, and treacherous roads in unknown terrain. There is no map, no guide and no hope for a girl deemed as an outcast; friends are also enemies. And isolation means failure.

Rosalind Wiseman, in her book *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*, attempts to inform and advise parents in order to help them understand what their daughters are going through. She too is trying to cast light on this underground world that is psychologically damaging to most young women. Like me, many girls hold on to these insecurities and fears for the rest of their lives.

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<sup>14</sup> Simmons, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Simmons, 3.

Most people believe a girl's task is to get through it, grow up, and put those experiences behind her. But your daughter's relationships with other girls have deep and far-reaching implications beyond her teen years... Girls' friendships are often intense, confusing, frustrating, and humiliating; the joy and security of 'best friendships' can be shattered by devastating breakups and betrayals. And beyond the pain in the moment, girls can develop patterns of behavior and expectations for future relationships that stop them from becoming competent, authentic people who are capable of having healthy relationships with others as adults. <sup>16</sup>

At the heart of all my actions and relationships lies the fear of my past.

My art, although covert and subconscious at times, carries these experiences. I place a part of myself in most of my images, whether it is my portrait or just my hair, in order to pay homage to the pain in my heart and to place myself into a larger sociological picture. The study of Sociology has helped me to see my story as part of a larger picture. It has empowered me to work through these issues. What is my voice as an individual person and as a member of our civilization?

## Part 2: Science

Animals, nature, and biology play a large part in the narrative I aim to create. Throughout history, in literature, mythology and religion, animals are often compared to humans, regarded as gods, or simply used to personify human actions. The symbolism of animals is vast and far-

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<sup>16</sup> Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World*, (New York: Three Rivers, 2009) 3.

reaching constantly being reborn and remade, in a continuous repeating cycle. Why do animals hold so much meaning? I believe we are drawn to their mysterious allure, seeing ourselves in them searching for significance, trying to solve the unsolvable, and discover the answers to the questions of life. Fear of looking inward causes mankind to project their faults and failures on an unaware third party in order to unburden their souls with the light of truth.

I believe we study animals in order to understand the world around us and to comprehend our own existence. It is now more commonly believed that these creatures may not be so different from us. In 2012 scientists signed “The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness” which states,

The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness.

Non- human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.<sup>17</sup>

I have always felt a deep connection to animals and I wish to depict these links through my art. Animals allow me to visually personify my psychological wounds because they are something real, tangible, something that can be studied and examined, as well as understood.

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Low, ed., et al. *The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness*, (Cambridge, UK, 2012) 2.



These beings are so often misjudged by mainstream culture, just as I am so often misjudged. This connection bonds me to animals, I relate to them, and it is my goal to further study and explore their mysteries.

### Part 3: Dreams

My visual and emotional stimuli come together and are born into my artwork through dreams. At night, right before I fall asleep, all these ideas are pulsating in my mind and they begin to create an image. The image is therefore shaped through not only my conscious, but also my unconscious mind. I became intrigued with the power of my dreams. What is the root of these dreams and why do they become such a large part of my art-making?

There are many theories about why human beings dream and the significance of dreaming. Sigmund Freud believed dreams help us to suppress desires that we are not able to act upon in society. Other psychologists suppose that dreams allow us to reflect on our waking selves' actions. Philosophers have also theorized about the meaning of dreams. Nietzsche states,

In ages of crude, primordial cultures, man thought he could come to know a second real world in dreams: this is the origin of all metaphysics. Without dreams man would have found no occasion to divide the world. The separation into body and soul is also connected to the oldest views about dreams, as in the assumption of a spiritual apparition, that is, the origin of all belief in ghosts, and probably also

in gods.<sup>18</sup>

More recent studies state that dreams are simply random brain impulses pulling images from our memory.

For me there is validity to all of these theories. I discovered that dreams draw upon my own knowledge, society's influences, and my hidden desires. These dreams allow me to paint a portrait of my inner thoughts that are rooted in my own subconscious. I am able to create a strange and multifaceted visual narrative that links together who I am and the influences of culture on my psyche. "I have always been a great dreamer; in dreams I am more active than in my real life, and these shadows sapped me of health and energy."<sup>19</sup>

#### Part 4: Mythology, Fables and Fairytales

I find myself attracted to reading and studying various legends as they often include animal-human hybrids, magic, and mystery. My imagination explodes into a million different worlds of symbolic and narrative possibilities. They are dark, humorous, deep and enticing. These literary and visual representations of society provide a foundation for my thoughts and imagery.

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human, Part II* (New York: The MacMillan Company 1913) 3.

<sup>19</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Demian*, (United States: BN Publishing 2008) 27.

The mythological being known as Siren has become an underlying symbol for my work. A Siren is a creature of beauty, desire and allure. She is half bird, half woman and her song is so sweet that all those who listen are hypnotized and die. She is a temptress, an omen, and she is evil. "Since the dawn of time, women and girls have been portrayed as jealous and underhanded, prone to betrayal, disobedience, and secrecy."<sup>20</sup> Sirens steal the souls of the living. Beauty and femininity are therefore associated with death. I use birds because of the many deep symbolic meanings they possess in order to create my own kind of mythological narrative.

Harpies represent another form of Siren. They too are female creatures with bird bodies that snatch and ensnare human souls. They are the messengers of Hades, omens of death. Mythology creates animal-human creatures that represent the themes that I want to deal with in the contemporary world. I wish to escape the fate of these creatures. I wish to be the Phoenix. To allow myself to be re-born from the ash and the destruction that society has buried me in.

Fables are another example of animals having human-like qualities in order to impose morals and teachings on society. I began reading Aesop's fables in order to find symbolic animal references to the dilemmas I face in my own life. In the fable *The Stag at the Pool*, we are given a vivid picture of how vanity plagues us in our society, and how vanity is a dark force that can lead us to our own demise.

A thirsty Stag went down to a pool to drink. As he bent over the surface he saw his own reflection in the water, and was struck with admiration for his fine spreading antlers, but at the same time he felt nothing but disgust for the weakness and slenderness of his legs. While he stood there looking at himself, he

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<sup>20</sup> Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002) 16.

was seen and attacked by a Lion; but in the chase which ensued, he soon drew away from his pursuer, and kept his lead as long as the ground over which he ran was open and free of trees. But coming presently to a wood, he was caught by his antlers in the branches, and fell a victim to the teeth and claws of his enemy. "Woe is me!" he cried with his last breath; "I despised my legs, which might have saved my life: but I gloried in my horns, and they have proved my ruin."<sup>21</sup>

All of these cultural and historical examples are important to understanding my work, however, for me the most influential is the impact of fairytales. I have always been drawn to the magical narratives of fairytales. I find myself continuously going back to them. They are morbid at times and paint fictitious worlds that are filled with both good and evil. Grimm's fairytales often include brutality and violence and yet are still widely read and popular. I want to make my own form of fairytales that are both dark and serious and comical and striking.

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<sup>21</sup> Aesop, "The Stag at the Pool," *Aesop's Fables*, 2004, PDF e-book.

## Chapter 4

### Image Intent

Although my art can be viewed as a continuing series, each piece working together with the others to create a visual narrative, my intent is also to create an individual image that can stand on its own and contain its own strength and story. I fill and fuel these works with the symbolism of my personal history.



**Figure IX-** *Femme* (left), 2014, Pen, Ink and Watercolor Diptych, 47" x 31.5"

*Fatale* (right), 2014, Pen, Ink and Watercolor Diptych, 47" x 31.5"

In the diptych, *Femme, Fatale* (figure IX), I strive to create my own version of a mythical seductress. I draw symbolism from literature, mythology, fairytales, and fables to depict my own struggle with femininity. Society is pressuring me to conform to its idea of the “perfect woman” and I am always found wanting. The harder I strive for perfection and beauty the more I fail to achieve it. The portrait on the left depicts me as unsure and underserving to wear the crown, or the symbol of beauty. I struggle to hold a fake smile. The crown begins to dissolve and disintegrate into doves frantically flying away from the failure. Doves hold a lot of symbolic meaning and often are used to portray femininity, purity and beauty. The figure is left decapitated and floating in nothingness. Pearls become the literal thread that unites this image with its counterpart, the stag. Pearls are given to girls as a sign that they are now women and have succeeded in wearing their prize. However, the pearls are fading, scattering and falling away from the figures. They are tangled in the image of the stag, symbolizing my failure. The stag is vain and is an omen that foreshadows my shortcomings. He is a trophy of vanity and a dark plague on the soul. He is expelling crows, which symbolize death and foreboding. This image details the struggles, pitfalls, and dangerous terrain of reaching for perfection. I am always striving to be a “perfect girl” who is worthy of friendship, respect, and the title of womanhood, and I am always falling short.





**Figure X-** *Sugar* (left), 2014, Pen, Ink and Watercolor Diptych, 30” x 22”

*Spice* (right), 2014, Pen, Ink and Watercolor Diptych, 30” x 22”

Recalling the work of Rachel Simmons<sup>22</sup>, I decided to create my own interpretation of the significance the saying “sugar and spice and everything nice” has on female friendships and how girls express aggression. Throughout my life I have learned that you cannot trust any girl with your secrets or your love, for everything that you share can be used as a weapon against you. The nice girls are the most dangerous and your enemies and friends are one and the same. This is what the image *Sugar*, on the left, depicts. The supposed “sweet” girl is actually a conniving monster. A snicker becomes your worst nightmare. It is easy to be fooled by outward expressions

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<sup>22</sup> Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (New York: Harcourt, 2002)



of kindness. Is the girl in the image *Spice*, who you should have trusted all along? Who can you rely on with your intimate thoughts and feelings when everything revealed is as dangerous as a knife in your back?



**Figure XI-** *Carousel*, 2014, Pen, Ink and Watercolor, 22" x 15"



A swirl of light, the slight tinkle of music, a laugh, a smile, and your head begins to spin. All you can see is a blur of legs and hair, a flash of something colorful. A whirlwind of sound and sight makes you ill. The gorgeous locks you failed to replicate on your own head dangle in front of you. Is this a dream or reality, a memory or a nightmare? “Carousel” represents the dizzying moment when innocence and friendships drastically alter into something darker and more sinister. When did your best friend stop talking to you? What did you do wrong? The simple joys of girlhood, candy, colors, smells, carousels, slip away into confusion and hidden symbolism.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself. What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us.<sup>23</sup>

Every person has a story to tell. For some that story is paved with kindness and compassion, but for many others it is a gnarled path with obstacles too treacherous to overcome with little light at the end. Sometimes we choose that path, but for the most part we are thrust onto it. How we choose to navigate this path despite the past and the future is what defines us. We cannot erase the past or run from it. I choose to confront my past. I want to learn from it, use it to generate and stimulate my art and to drive myself to reach for the unreachable. I want to push my craft, talent, concept, visual language and narrative into the realm of the masters. I wish to pay homage to their sensibilities as well as to comment on the contemporary society I live in.

Girl aggression is dangerous because it lies in the realm of the unknown. It is covert and hidden. Many are unaware of its existence. My art can illustrate not only my own story, but also that of the thousands of other girls who are silently struggling with the same issues that I have faced in my life.

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<sup>23</sup> Hemann Hesse, *Demian*, (United States: BN Publishing 2008) 97.

Having the ability, knowledge and training to make art is a great gift: I hope to be able to use this for a greater purpose. Involving others in my narrative, through my art, may come to engage them in what I believe to be a significant social issue.

I am the gazelle, the fox, the stag, and the peacock. I am not just one thing. I embody all of these animals. Adorn their antlers as a crown. Shatter into birds. Become a Siren, a Harpy and then a Phoenix. I will be reborn. I will rise from the ashes.

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