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LINDA NOCHLIN ON NATALIE FRANK



Nochlin, Linda. "Natalie Frank: The Dark Side of the Fairy Tale," *Modern Painters*. March 2015.

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TALES FROM THE BROTHERS GRIMM A PORTFOLIO BY NATALIE FRANK

Presented here are 10 gouache and chalk-pastel drawings from *Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, for which artist Natalie Frank chose and reinterpreted 36 of the original fairy tales collected by the illustrious brothers, casting them in a surreal dreamscape. A book of the same title, including all the associated drawings as well as essays by feminist art historian Linda Nochlin and curator Claire Gilman, an introduction by Grimm scholar Jack Zipes, and a conversation between the artist and director Julie Taymor, will be published this spring by Damiani. The book was designed by Marian Bantjes. Nochlin's essay appears here on the following pages. • An exhibition of Frank's drawings based on the tales will be on view at New York's **Drawing Center** from April 10 to June 28, and at the **Blanton Museum of Art** at the University of Texas in Austin from July 11 to November 15.

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Lettuce Donkey!

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NATALIE FRANK THE DARK SIDE OF THE FAIRY TALE

BY LINDA NOCHLIN

"WHY," TO BORROW the words of the most famous scholar of the subject, Jack Zipes, "do fairy tales stick?"¹ Why do they still have the power to attract us, to seduce us, to lure us, to stir our imaginations? And by "us" I mean children, their intended audience, and the adults who immediately took them over. The answers are of course multiple and often contradictory, and I plan to speculate about them throughout the course of this essay. The fairy tale's radical irrationality seems to demand psychoanalytic interpretation, yet its rigorous social logic ensures—as the dream does not—that proper rewards and punishments, that is to say, socially sanctioned ones, are meted out to the protagonists at the end.

Fairy tales, especially those collected and published by Charles Perrault in France late in the 17th century and the Brothers Grimm in Germany early in the 19th, have been perennial favorites, not just with readers but with illustrators.² If no modern illustrator can quite match the elegant perversity of Gustave Doré's black-and-white bedroom scene from Perrault's *Petit Chaperon Rouge* ("Little Red Riding Hood"), featuring the sardonic allure of the wolf decked out in Granny's nightgown and the pre-nubile provocation of Little Red Riding Hood herself, many contemporary women artists have come close in their versions of the Little Red Riding Hood theme, with which I will be primarily concerned in this essay. The Portuguese-British artist Paula Rego has constructed the tale as a feminist farce, with Red Riding Hood's mother flaunting the wolf's pelt as a stole in the end; the American artist Kiki Smith has envisioned the Red Riding Hood theme as one of startling metamorphoses, one version with the starkly naked figure of the young woman emerging from the wolf's belly, another with the caped figure of Red Riding Hood sprouting a scary wolf-beard.³ The Japanese photographer Miwa Yanagi, in her recent "Fairy Tale" series (2004–06), created large-scale images enacted by

children and adolescents, in which playfulness and cruelty, fantasy and realism, merge. Yanagi shows Red Riding Hood and her grandmother clinging together, still enclosed in the wolf's belly—a furry zip-up sleeping bag.⁴

Natalie Frank's fairy-tale project, *Tales from the Brothers Grimm: Drawings*, a book of drawings in gouache and chalk pastel on rough Arches paper, stands out. It is unusual not only for the scope of the artist's ambition—there are 75 images in the book, one to five drawings measuring 22 by 30 inches for each of 36 fairy tales—but for the complexity of her technique and her thinking alike. These are Grimm's fairy tales before the PC censors got ahold of them, although even the good brothers themselves could hardly have envisioned them as Frank does, living as they did before the eras of psychoanalysis and Surrealism. Frank's versions of the familiar and not-so-familiar tales are un-syrupy and anti-Disneyesque, sometimes gruesome. Cruelty and crude eroticism, magic and bizarre fantasy, mark their folkloristic roots; weirdness and irrationality distance them from both everyday life and the moralism of happily ever after.

One might say that Frank has a natural affinity for the dark side of the fairy tale—for the dark side of life in general. Her earlier, monumental oil paintings are marked by an uncanny ominousness. Their alluring richness of coloristic and graphic virtuosity is always offset by a transfiguring realist gloom. Women especially are marked for physical or mental misfortune, their naked or half-clad bodies fated for the worst. In *The Stammerer*, 2007, for instance, a large-scale (72 by 62 inches) oil on canvas, a richly painted blond nude, her sexiness enhanced by lace bikini underpants, lies amid rumpled draperies, including a flowered shawl, her body tipped up toward the spectator (shades of Manet's *Olympia*!) in the foreground, while behind her, silhouetted before a window, a sinister couple—a nude, middle-aged man grasping a young girl by the throat—is

reflected in a mirror. The complexity of this sentence is generated by the structure of the artist's imaginative invention, with its strange variations of light and shadow revealing realistic bodies and seductively detailed textile patterns yet suggesting scarcely concealed violence and terror. In the even larger *Leftover Girls*, 2006, two forlorn young women, one black, one white, sit on the ground in the foreground, the white girl clad in a bedraggled wedding gown, complete with veil and gloves. Mystery lurks in the vigorously brushed setting behind them: in the spooky house with its curtained window; in the strange half-figure of a nude woman crawling into the lighted square to her left, in which other, half-adumbrated figures seem to loom; in the staring head encased in a cellophane bag silhouetted before the lighted area; and in the row of discarded bouquets to the left. A red-and-white pole connected to a hand emerges startlingly from the ground to the right. Ambiguities intentionally scar the abstract beauty of the virtuoso facture throughout: Is the dark "girl" a girl or a boy? What is going on inside the house? And is it really "inside" that the lighted square is meant to represent? The uncanny scene is designed to disturb our equilibrium—and it does.

Frank's engagement with the dark side reaches a climax in the complex iconography and monumental scale (192 by 74 inches) of *The Czech Bride*, 2006. Allegorical in its tenor, intensely personal in its references, *The Czech Bride* features the artist herself as participant-observer, literally connected to yet separated from her protagonist, whose heavy braid of blond hair she grasps at the borderline of tragedy. Veiled references suggest the tragic past of the Shoah; less veiled ones, the ever-present outrage of the violation of women's bodies. Violence and sex are clearly linked in the ominous central scene, the headless figure in a striped shirt holding a hammer over the inert, bound figure of the Czech bride, and to the far right, where a diabolically ardent male nude enters the naked female, her hands clasped as though in prayer, from behind. The fairy-tale images, in turn, foreground the violence and eroticism embedded in their purportedly child-centered narratives: They are definitely not meant for children, even contemporary ones inured to the carnage of video games. In some cases, even fainthearted adults may turn their heads away. At the same time, as works of art, these drawings are so truly resplendent, so seductive in the plenitude of their coloristic and narrative layering, so intriguing in their evocative ambiguities, that they indeed "stick," to borrow Jack Zipes's terminology. They can't be ignored!

For the time-honored fable of "Little Red Riding Hood," also known, as Natalie Frank titles it, as "Little Red Cap,"¹⁶ Frank devotes three of her most captivating pages, starting with the entry of our heroine into Grandma's bedroom, where the wolf, having swallowed the old lady and decked himself out in her nightclothes, waits to greet and eat Little Red Cap. In the words of the artist: "The wolf dresses up in Grandma's clothing. Little

Red Cap walks into Grandmother's house to find her in bed. Little Red Cap's reflection is in the mirror. The statuary watch her."¹⁶

In this opening image, Little Red Cap, nude, childishly plump, knock-kneed, and red all over, seen from the rear, dominates the foreground, where she stands transfixed, staring at the unmistakably lupine granny figure in the bed before her. The wolf/granny's head partially obscures the startlingly expressive and disproportionately large head of Little Red Cap reflected in the mirror on the wall behind, a Little Red Cap dressed, bonneted, quite grown up, and decidedly distressed. The wolf, big-eared, bug-eyed, and sharp-toothed, grins in anticipation, clutching the picnic basket of goodies in one clawed hand, his brownish balls clearly revealed below the pink weave of the basket in his lap. He seems more of a devil than a naturalistic wolf, and his satanic grotesquery is picked up by the animalistic

vase to the left with its naturalistic bouquet, and contrasted with the strange, surreal dog and cow viewed through the half-open brown shutters in the stippled blue out-of-doors, a blue-and-white stippling penetrating the interior space and also picked up in the blue-and-white patterned bedspread. The room itself is mainly colored an acid, striped yellow; one of the gratuitous elegancies of the composition is the flowing pattern of brown and differing shades of muted green created by the blankets over the wolf's hairy knee.

To say that this version of Little Red Riding Hood is unexpected is an understatement, and yet, on second thought, each deviation from the usual rendering of the tale is motivated. Yes, a naked Red Riding Hood is startling, but the body in question

is red, just like her traditional cape; yes, a wolf who shows not only his teeth but his balls wouldn't have a chance as a stand-in for Grandma, but the beast's hypocritical, moony expression is a wonderful parody of more successful masquerades of this stereotypical role; and the strangely voluptuous and anguished mirror reflection of the child foiling the wolf's head sets up the terrifying tensions of the situation as well. In addition, we—the viewers—are clearly entering the drama. Due to the placement of the heroine, with her back to us on a delicate platform of shadow in the foreground, we to some extent identify with her, are identical with her. What happens to her, happens to us.

The second drawing in the series is described by the artist as follows: "The wolf devours Little Red Cap and Grandmother whole. So when the farmer comes in to find the wolf, he can cut him open and deliver the two women intact. Limbs come out of every orifice." This is an image of unprecedented ferocity: the blue-eyed, gaping-mawed, sharp-toothed head of the ravaging wolf, a highly detailed human hand within its jaws, dominating the upper-left portion of the image. Below, we confront what seems to be the bent torso of the red-clad heroine with her staring head and, to her left, curled into fetal position, what is perhaps the granny figure in her white nightgown, predigested, as it

THE VIOLENCE AND EROTICISM OF THE FAIRY- TALE IMAGES ARE DEFINITELY NOT MEANT FOR CHILDREN.

were. Red Cap's torso is encompassed by her own red-clad leg on the left (or is this the wolf's leg, the hairy pelt torn off and dangling?) and the wolf's unmistakable masculine, hairy one on the right. The mattress is now bare and lumpy, the bed supported by a wolf paw in the foreground. The mirror in the background now shows a gnarled tree trunk against a blue sky; the striped, acid-yellow wallpaper background remains, as does a touch of the blue-and-white stippling beneath the bed. The violence of the scene is iterated in the sharp diagonal of the composition and the fragmentary bodily presences it encompasses.

In the third and final episode of the tale, the wolf is killed and Little Red Cap saved. In the artist's words: "Little Red Cap fills up the Wolf with stones and looks at him face to face. She has been inside him and now faces him, cheek to cheek. Their faces meld together and the picture falls away into abstraction."

In more conventional versions of the tale, the ending is heavily moralized: Little Red Riding Hood has been punished for disobeying her mother's command not to stray from the straight and narrow, even to pick flowers for her grandmother. The wolf is punished for his duplicity and savagery by being killed and stuffed with stones instead of the delicious human flesh he craved. The savior (male) is the virtuous woodsman or hunter who cuts open the wolf and releases his prey (female) from gruesome death and/or captivity. Red Cap is incorporated into the society of dutiful, obedient women necessary to keep the wheels of civilization turning. In Frank's version of the tale, the outcome is more ambiguous. The wolf and Red Cap confront each other in the center of the piece, more or less as equals amid a tangle of body parts, with only the wolf's body clearly specified as his own, with its dangling balls and muscular thighs. Red Cap's bodily apparatus is more ambiguously described: Is that her body clothed in crisscrossed pink that hovers in the air behind her face, clutching an ear of the wolf, or is it an avatar of her grandmother, identified by the partial, aged head at the far right? Or has the granny figure been transmuted into the almost abstract smiling angel raising her hand in blessing at the upper right, the compositional counterfoil to the faithful dog raising his head in the left foreground? The rest of the image indeed "falls away into abstraction," as the artist specifies, although there is a hint of the male figure of the savior huntsman looking superior in the left-hand margin, and other figures, heavily impastoed, partially emerge in the background. The figure of the wolf still dominates: His muzzle covers some of Red Cap's face, and his body is assertively thrust forward. On second viewing, I realized his figure shared some of the sleazy lupine narcissism of Paula Rego's lounge-lizard version of the same character.

Despite the triumphant rescue of Little Red Cap and her grandmother, the arrogant masculinity represented by the ballsy wolf dominates every scene in which he appears, even the one depicting his purported death and downfall. This, of course, has a great deal to do with the dynamic energy of the massed pastel strokes radiating from the wolf's skull; the hypnotic stare of his blue, blue eye; the reiterated patterning of his sharp teeth; and the assertive diagonal at which his body is pitched in the last two scenes or the equally assertive frontal pose in which he confronts us in the introductory one. Frank's formal language lies at the heart of her narrative project, her novel take on the time-honored story. Her color scale is breathtaking throughout: acid yellows, smoldering reds, and contrasting chilly, dappled, at-

mospheric blues. Sharp black outlines often deny or conflict with the volumetric rondeurs of the objects or bodies they articulate; meltingly fuzzy areas collide with stark, planar ones. Everywhere there are daring structural dissonances, contrasts, antinomies, but they are held together by Frank's unerring visual rectitude. The entire corpus of Frank's *Tales* bears close examination, scrupulous attention to its sophisticated layering, and requires a mind open to the power of her transformative imagination that can make the Grimms' far-from-timeless stories into new and provocative experiences for today.

It is not surprising that Frank's most recent work should bear the impress of her formal and iconographic experiments in the "Tales" series. A sculptural "portrait," *Anne*, 2014, with its realistic profile set off by uncanny blue drops backed by the displaced yellow silhouette of an arm, certainly brings to mind some of the fantastic imagery of the Grimm cycle. A kind of sculptural bust, supported on a stick, *Anne* combines realistic modeling with colorful decorative flatness; the presence of the red hood and collar specifically relates to the artist's almost contemporary imagery of Little Red Cap in the fairy-tale series. But an added element of grotesquerie marks this "portrait bust": It can be viewed with portions "open" or "closed," suggesting active viewer participation.

Even more complex, and more disturbing, is the recent two-dimensional work *Woman with Bugs* (what a title!), 2014, which raises the surreal contradictions of flat decoration and modeled flesh to a striking pitch of disharmony. Yes, there are bugs in this image, but whether they are protagonists or intruders is purposely left unclear. The effect of gorgeous creepiness is enhanced by the fact that the picture can be viewed either open or closed, suggesting, like the entire Grimm series, hidden or ambiguous interior spaces to be explored by the viewer. Frank's *Tales* illustrations are important not merely because they inventively reinterpret the material of the time-honored—one might almost say timeworn—fairy tales but because their creation demanded that the artist find new sources and resources of imagination, daring, and formal experimentation. Her most recent work bears the imprint of that achievement. MP

1 See Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

2 Charles Perrault published his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* ("Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals"), subtitled *Les Contes de ma mère l'Oye* ("Tales of Mother Goose"), in 1697; the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm first published their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* ("Children's and Household Tales"), known in the Anglophone world as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, in 1812.

3 Smith herself explains: "It's a resurrection/birth story; 'Little Red Riding Hood' is a kind of resurrection/birth myth. And then I thought it was like Venus on the half shell or like the Virgin on the moon. It's the same form—a large horizontal form and a vertical coming out of it." (Kiki Smith cited in <http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/kiki-smith/rapture-2001?slideshow=1>)

4 For other highly original versions of the Little Red Riding Hood theme by contemporary women artists, see the work of Ghada Amer and Nicole Eisenman.

5 This is Frank's own title for the first of her Little Red Cap images.

6 For a relatively succinct account of this tale and its many variants, see Jack Zipes, ed., *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1993). There are many recent studies of the Little Red Riding Hood tale and its illustrations. For an extensive bibliography, see my "Black, White, and Uncanny: Miwa Yanagi's Fairy Tale" in *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

A vibrant, abstract portrait painting of a woman with green skin and red lips. She has long, flowing blonde hair. On her forehead, there is a small, detailed figure of a person with a yellow and black patterned shirt. A bright red line runs vertically down the center of her face, starting from the figure on her forehead and ending at her chin. The background is a mix of purple, pink, and blue. The painting is framed by a thick black border, which is decorated with small, stylized illustrations of insects like flies and bees.

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All Fur I

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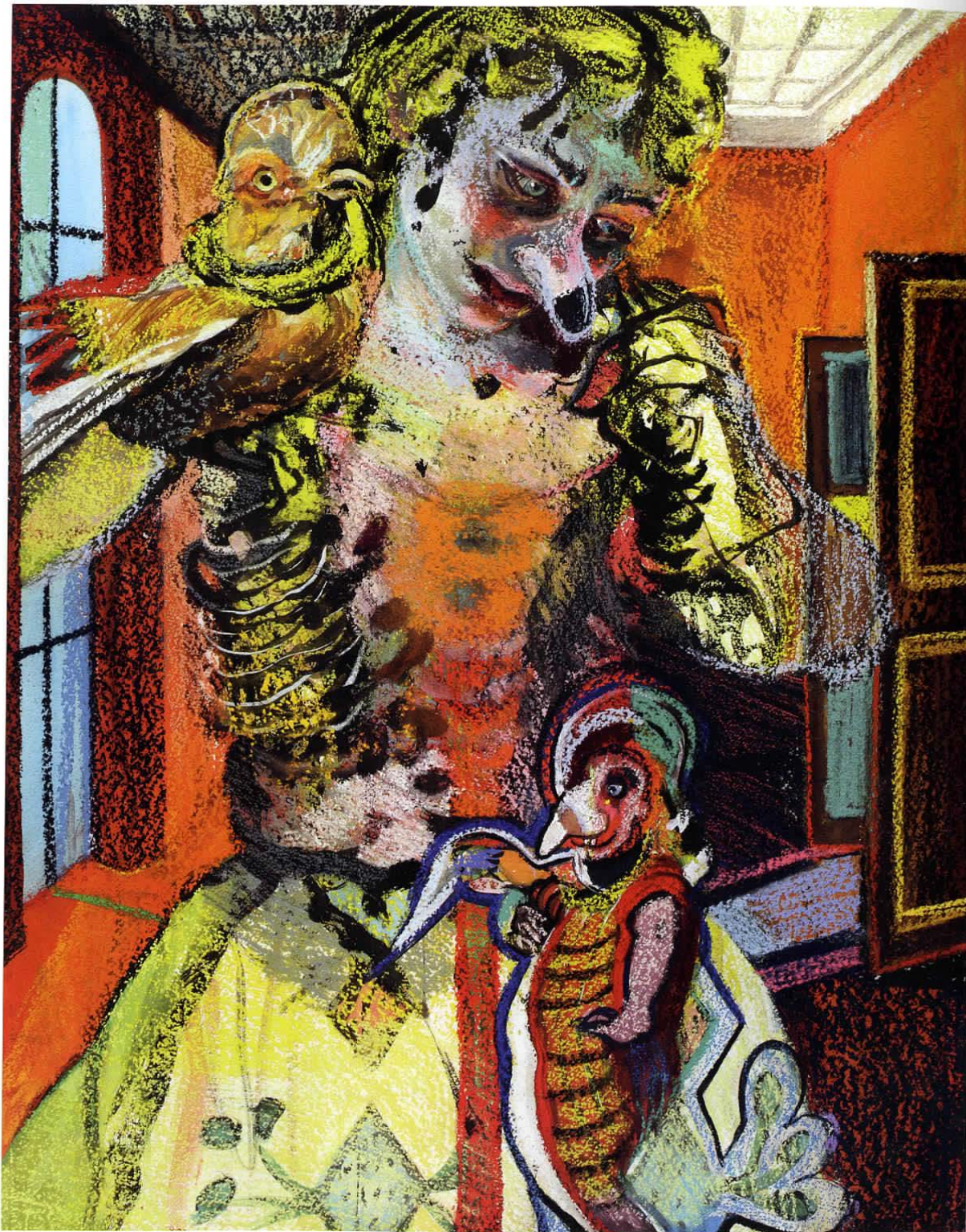


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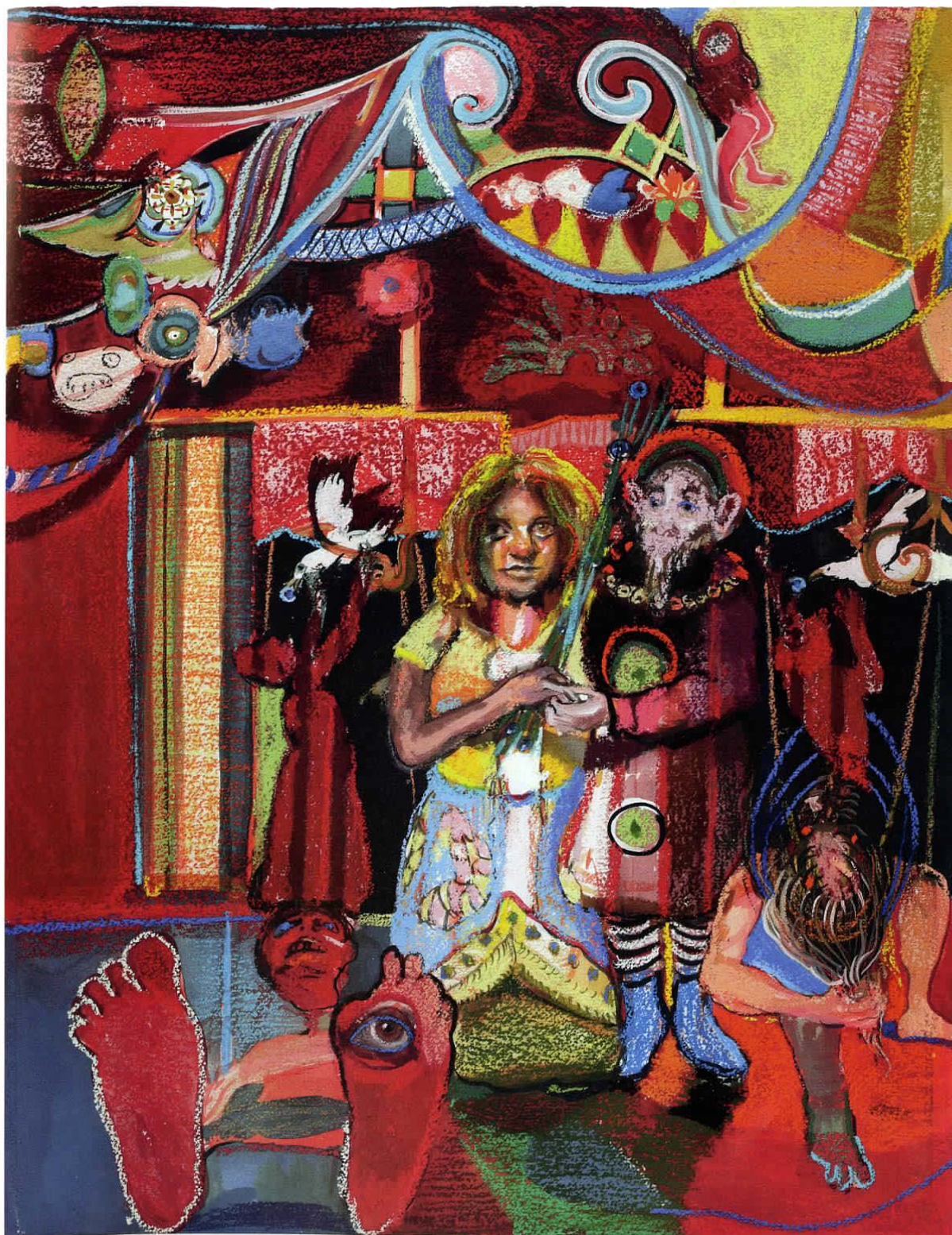


Cinderella III

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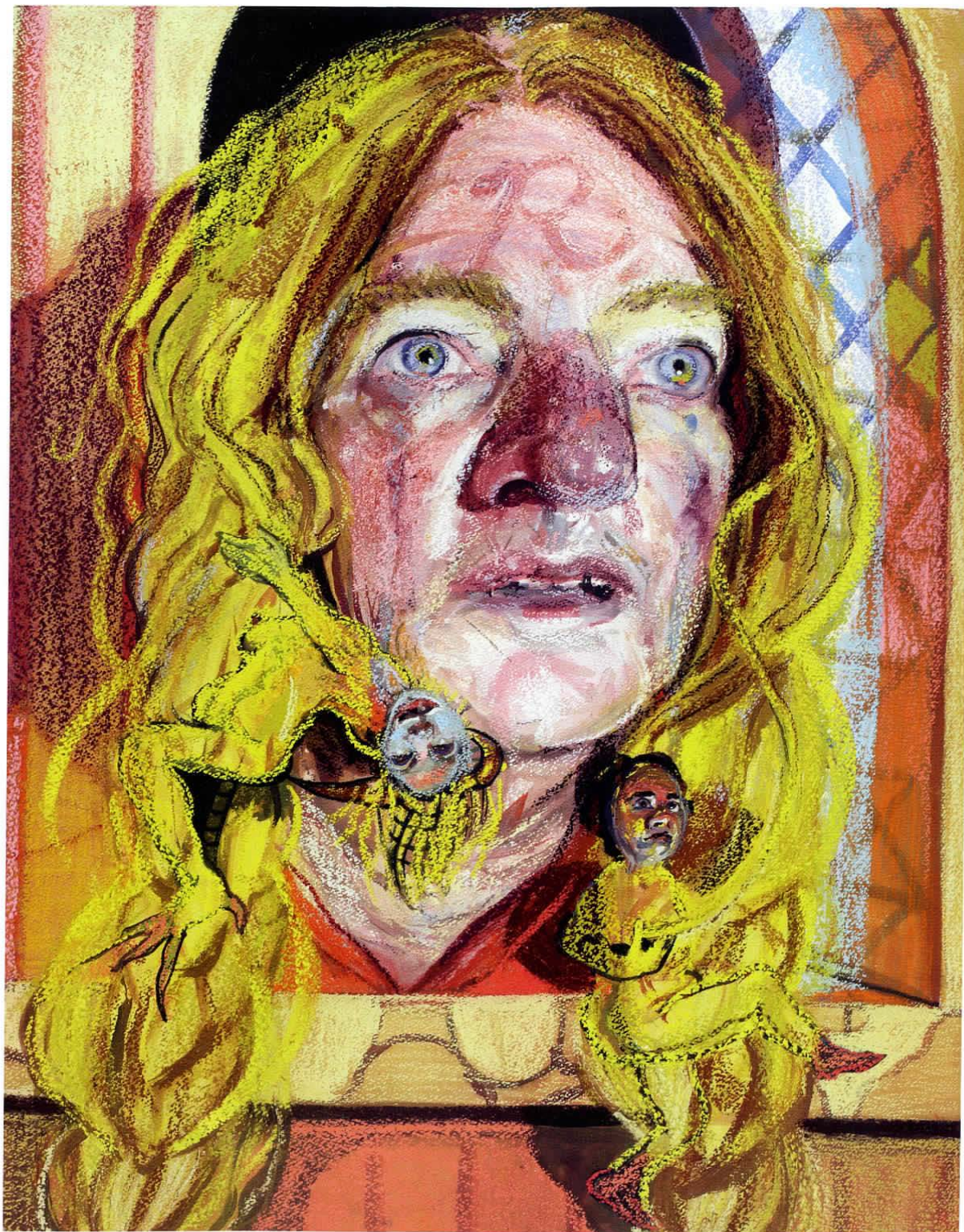


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Rapunzel II

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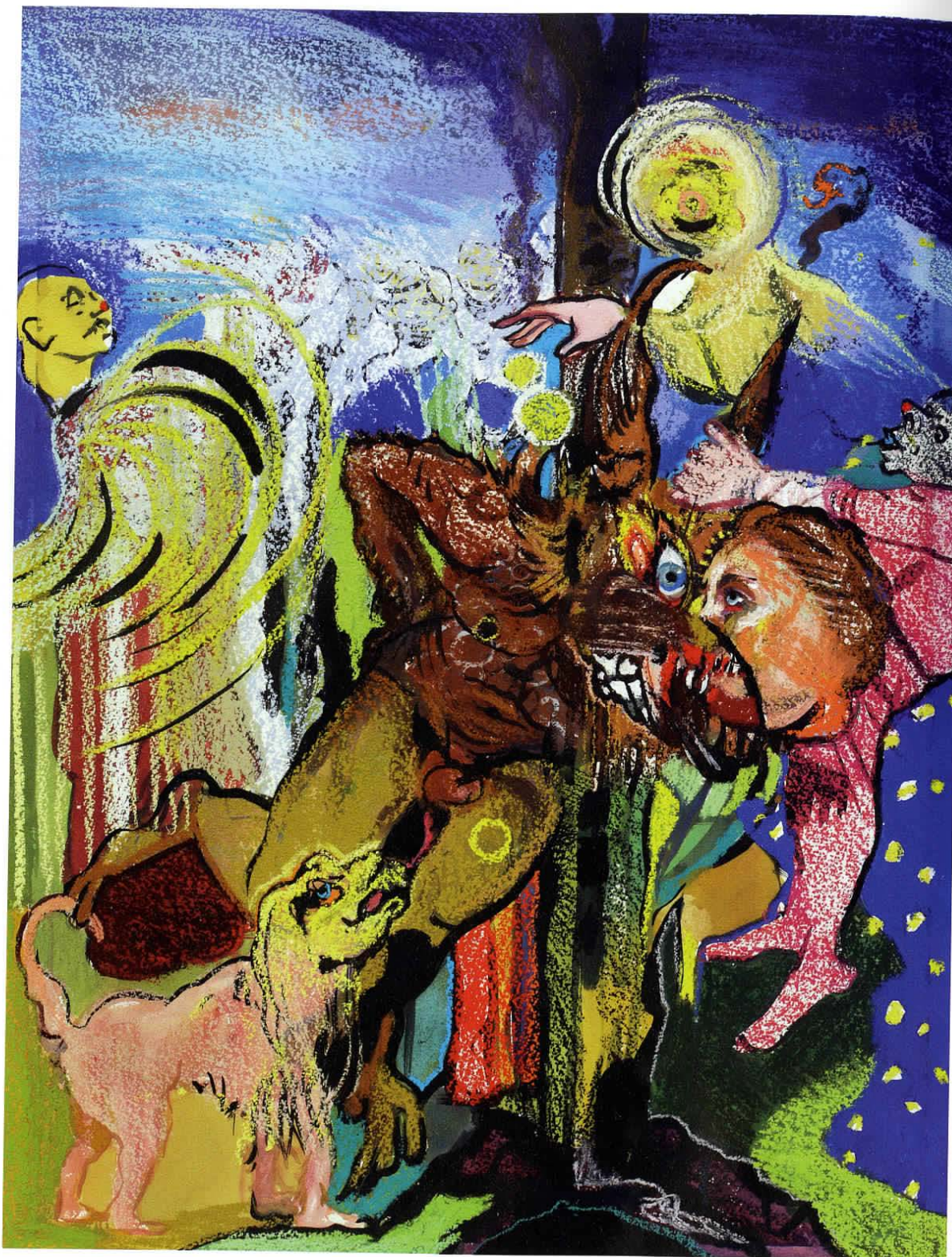


Rapunzel III

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Little Red Cap III

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Little Red Cap I

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