

We haven't any and you're too young.
A short essay on the work of
Stephanie Hier

Claire Walsh

Wandering through the Wonderland of Lewis Carroll's famous tale, the child protagonist Alice asks for directions from a speaking cat with insights into the inner workings of this strange world (the cat's summation: "we're all mad here"¹). Alice: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." Alice: "I don't much care where—" Cat: "Then it doesn't matter which way you go." Appearing and disappearing at will and threatened by no one, the Cheshire Cat occupies the position of a grinning outsider to the tribulations of the other Wonderland characters. Opaquely, it tells Alice that if she walks for long enough she's sure to get somewhere.

Stephanie Hier
*Walnuts and pears you plant
for your heirs*
David Dale Gallery, Glasgow
16.06 – 21.07.18

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, (Boston: Branden Books, 1922), 75. First published 1865.

In her artist statement, Stephanie Hier reflects on time spent traversing digital space; “no idle query is protected against the danger of an afternoon lost down the rabbit hole of search to search.”² She is interested in the ways imagery is consumed in the 21st century, how meanings shift as images are brought together temporarily by algorithms seemingly indifferent to hierarchies of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, and how we experience art and painting within this continuum. An online search for ‘rabbit’ took me to a constellation of thumbnails ranging from pet photos, costumes, roadkill and Bugs Bunny to 17th century ‘still life’ paintings of dead game strung up by the hind legs next to bowls of fruit and silverware. Her work, she writes, emerges from this “flatness of possibility”.

Imagery taken from clipart, personal photographs and the Golden Age of American animation—the era of Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Betty Boop and Wile E. Coyote among many others—shares a canvas with painted scenes recalling 17th and 18th century European classical figurative painting in the styles of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon

Chardin, Jacob van Ruisdael and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. For example, in the current exhibition the painting *Hot tongue and a cold shoulder* features Foghorn Leghorn and Henery Hawk, two avian characters from a 1940s Looney Tunes cartoon, with sections of their bodies cut away to reveal a meticulous underpainting of fruit and silverware in 17th century Dutch still life style. As with this work, traditional figurative elements tend to appear in the background of Hier’s paintings, with the cartoon or illustrative imagery in the foreground often looking like humorous later additions made by another hand. A number of works feature temporary tattoos but aside from these each element is hand-painted or hand-wrought (in the case of the ceramic frames) by Hier, who trained in both classical painting and animation.

Some of the titles read as old-fashioned parenting idioms, or things that an adult might say to a child. For example, the name of her recent solo exhibition at NEOCHROME in Turin, *Be true to your teeth and they won’t be false to you*, and titles of paintings including, *More important to click with people*; *It comes soon enough*; *Knee high to a grasshopper* and *Got more nerve than a bum tooth*. These captions

2 Statement sent to me via email correspondence with the artist.

add a further layer of framing to the images, supporting a light-hearted but sometimes awkward dialogue between ‘older’ and ‘newer’ components.

Adult/child and adult/adolescent dynamics seem to emerge within the work; from the array of visual references on Hier’s canvases (classical painting, template tattoos, cartoon imagery) to her use of materials (oil on canvas, image transfer, handworked ceramic) and their associated ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural values. This text outlines interactions between these elements, looking at the use of temporary tattoos in particular, and links Hier’s practice with artists whose works explore the connections between childhood imagery and adult identity.

Hier describes using temporary tattoos and their templated imagery within her work as a means of “elevating the status of the mass produced (ready-made) to that of painting.”³ A number of works in the current exhibition feature these ‘ready-made’ images. The swirling picture of a tiger in a fantasy landscape that appears at the centre of the painting *Clinging*

3 From email correspondence with the artist.

to the life raft, for example, is a life-size full back temporary tattoo. In another work, *Finer than a frog hair*, a colour tattoo illustrating two birds in a tree has been transferred directly onto the centre of a blank canvas. In this analogy, canvases are like bodies. On their stretched skin-like surfaces, Hier folds in imagery from multiple sources. By transferring these materials to the canvas, she points to how images are read differently in different contexts. In a text accompanying the exhibition *Be true to your teeth and they won’t be false to you*, curator Lumi Tan remarks on the fetishisation of mass-produced imagery such as template tattoos within the sanctified spaces of the art world: “We may judge the appearance of a pink butterfly on a human body, but would never do so on the wall.”⁴

These types of temporary image transfer have been in circulation since the early 20th century, beginning with simple food colouring ‘spit designs’ marketed to children which were transferrable onto skin by water

4 Lumi Tan, *Be true to your teeth and they won’t be false to you* (exhibition text), NEOCHROME, Turin, Italy, January 26–March 4, 2017.

or saliva, before newer methods of printing onto translucent film were developed in the 80s. The drive for more sophisticated and realistic designs that resulted in these new printing processes coincided with Hollywood's desire for a product that could be used to temporarily tattoo actors, allowing them to inhabit certain roles more legitimately.⁵ As with the actors needing to move fluidly from one identity to another for work; temporary tattoos, like fluorescent hair dyes and piercings, represent temporarily constructed identities associated with passing 'phases' of childhood and adolescence.

Artists like Bunny Rogers (b. 1990) and Ellen Cantor (1961-2013) provide us with rich frameworks for thinking about the connections between childhood imagery and adult identity. In different ways, their works underline the significance of popular childhood imagery and template characters (for Cantor this was Disney and Hollywood, for Rogers, Neopets and Second Life) and embody the intense and earnest ways that young people consume and connect with imagery and characters

5 https://www.tattooarchive.com/history/temporary_tattoos.php, accessed 30 May 2018.

from pop culture. Donna Schons describes these affiliations in relation to Rogers's work: "Ridden by insecurities connected to the transition from children to grown-ups, young adults identify with pop culture in unsurpassed ways."⁶ While these connections are often considered unimportant and superficial by adults, Rogers forefronts the intensity of these kinships through her first person poetry, installations and objects featuring material from her preteen and adolescent years.

Writing about the references to cartoon animation in Hier's work, Lumi Tan gives a brief outline of the technology that was key to the phenomena and widespread appeal of Disney in the 20th century. The singular popularity of early Disney animations, Tan explains, was aided by the studio's pioneering use of the multiplane camera. They would shoot through several layers of imagery at differing transparencies; creating "a heightened sense of dimensionality in which 2-D characters could more readily

6 Donna Schons, 'Bunny Rogers: On the Unsettling Obsessions of Youth', *Sleek*, May 2017, <http://www.sleek-mag.com/2017/05/18/bunny-rogers/>, accessed 2 June 2018.

exist in 3-D space.”⁷ She gives the example of *The Old Mill* (1937), an early Silly Symphony short in which small woodland creatures including frogs and birds experience a violent night time storm: “The combination of lucid depth perception in the highly detailed backgrounds with the far more simply rendered eyes of the panicked animals effectively draws out a sympathetic reaction from viewers; their temporary peril feels in and of our world.” Since then, at quickening pace, cartoon characters have stepped further and deeper into the spaces of our lived realities. Fictional avatars and virtual pets governed by users in digital spaces, and the wider online cultures of which they are part, feature strongly in Rogers’s work. She describes growing up online as an experience of moving from character to character; beginning with *Neopets* (a website that allows you to create and care for virtual pets), onto *Furcadia* (a role-playing game set in a world of magical creatures) and then *Second Life* (an online world in which residents create virtual representations of themselves). References to these online worlds that she ‘inhabited’ for long periods of her life appear

7 Tan, *Be true to your teeth and they won’t be false to you* (exhibition text).

throughout Bunny’s practice. *Sister Unn’s* (2011-12), for example, comprises an installation of black roses in white vases (a reference to the black rose items from the world of *Neopets*) in a storefront in New York which she describes as a sort of real-world *Neopets* gallery.⁸

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Ellen Cantor’s work and her bold representations of female sexuality and desire, often explored through fairy tales and the animated Disney characters that were the subject of her childhood fascination. Her practice was largely driven by issues of reconciliation between the media narratives we are immersed in as children and the inevitable disappointment and disillusionment of adult experiences. A vast majority of her work (including painting, drawing, sculpture, video, and film) explored the relationship between fictional narratives and lived experience and the role of the female protagonist as depicted in popular culture. Often these characters (which she appropriated as a means of

8 Bunny Rogers, ‘Portfolio: Bunny Rogers’, *Frieze*, 9 Mar 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/portfolio-bunny-rogers>, accessed 2 June 2018.

autobiography) were taken from Disney films. Examples of this include her 1999 film *Bambi's Beastie Buddies*, a series of pencil drawings made in 1996 depicting Snow White's sex life, and the painting *Untitled (Alice in Wonderland)* (c. 1990), in which Alice is depicted with a menacing skull looming over her shoulder. Her relationship to cartoon heroines was complex and respectful; she celebrated Cinderella and Snow White for the hyper-feminine traits they were given and recast them; "as the women that she believed they actually were, which departed altogether from their creator's intent."⁹ Describing a 2016 retrospective of Cantor's work in New York, Laura McLean-Ferris writes, "It's an adult world, but one in which agency has been constructed by a femininity whose sweet, confessional aesthetics mask erotic powers of a challenging nature."¹⁰

9 Johanna Fateman, 'Scene Stealer: Jonathan Berger talks to Johanna Fateman about the Art of Ellen Cantor' *Artforum*, no. 55 (2 Oct. 2016): 218-223.

10 Laura McLean-Ferris, 'Open Failure or Conditions for a Failed Self: Confession, Narcissism, and Empathy.' *Mousse*, no. 55 (October-November 2016): 246-253.

The "flatness of possibility" that Hier mentioned in her artist statement is a result of the unprecedented flow of information through digital channels in which images are constantly reframed and recontextualised as they are accessed by users worldwide. These developments are accompanied by a renewed interest culturally in exploring the experiences of those who have grown up online. Subjects related to childhood and adolescent experience (especially, as with the artists mentioned above, from the point of view of female-identified artists), that have traditionally been absent from art history narratives, are now becoming more visible within cultural institutions. Although in form and content her works are decidedly different to the respective outputs of both Cantor and Rogers, the adult/child and adult/adolescent dynamics that operate within Hier's work creates a link between the three. In various ways, their practices prompt thinking about the agency of youth (and youthful femininity) and the reframing and repositioning of disregarded visual systems within art. These ideas percolate subtly around Hier's works. In her paintings a clear narrative is never specified so that readings are left open to the

interpretation of the viewer. On the surface, visual elements ‘talk back’ to one another, framed by titles that take a similar tone.

While writing this text, a friend told me a story about woman she knows who one night decided to declare her love to her boyfriend using a temporary tattoo. Adhering the words ‘I LOVE YOU’ upside down onto his chest while he slept knowing he would look down and see them in the shower the next morning. The playful form of her admission sounded to me like a deliberate attempt to undermine the gravity and potential embarrassment of a declaration to which there is really only one correct reply. In Hier’s titles, and the cartoonish imagery drawn over her laboriously painted nature scenery, flippant remarks and swift brush marks seem to act as stand-ins for something weightier. The wording of titles like *Get your tongue out of my mouth because I’m kissing you goodbye*, and *Pick me up or let me down* belong to an adolescent syntax in which, in a pre-emptive act, the urgency of feelings are dismissed in the same breath as they are expressed.

Charmed at first by the eccentric characters she meets in Wonderland, Alice becomes

increasingly frustrated with their opaque and unhelpful exchanges. Pleas for advice from the Cheshire Cat are met with vague and unrelated responses. Similarly when she meets the Hatter at a tea party later in the story, he subjects her to nonsensical tales and riddles such as “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”¹¹ to which he himself has no answer. Alice’s reasonable behaviour and her inquiring curiosity about her surroundings are inconsistent with the operating principles of Wonderland, which is ruled by nonsense. In this context, Alice appears to be the one who is ‘mad’. Before she departs the tea party, the Hatter offers her a drink; “Would you like some wine?” and when Alice replies that “Yes...” she would like some, he responds with “We haven’t any and you’re too young.”

11 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: 81.

Claire Walsh is a curator and writer based in Dublin. She is Assistant Curator at the Irish Museum of Modern Art and her writing appears in MAP (mapmagazine.co.uk) and Paper Visual Art journal.

Stephanie Hier (b. 1992, Toronto) lives and works in New York. Recent exhibitions include: *Dinner that Night*, Bureau, New York (curated by Weston Lowe) (2018); *No Vacancy II*, Alt Esc, New York (curated by Cecilia Salama) (2017); *Part and Parcel*, Downs and Ross, New York (2017); *NADA NY*, NEOCHROME, New York (2017); *Be True To Your Teeth and They Won't be False to You*, NEOCHROME, Turin, (2017)

This exhibition has been produced in partnership with Royal Over–Seas League and Hospitalfield. In 2017 David Dale Gallery were invited, alongside Liverpool Biennial, to propose an artist to participate in ROSL and Hospitalfield's Visual Arts Scholars programme. Stephanie Hier's exhibition is the result of this partnership, and the time she spent in residence at Hospitalfield as part of the programme. David Dale Gallery are very grateful to Royal Over–Seas League and Hospitalfield for the opportunity and support in developing this exhibition.

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