STORIES FROM THE WHITE SQUIRREL

A Thesis
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By
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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the sculptural work of Caryn Lynne Marquardt. Included is a discussion of the artist's personal and historical influences in relationship to the work, as well as an analysis of the parts that create the whole.
To Nana and Dodie
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OVER TEACUPS

The stories I want to tell are those that have taken place while no one else was looking. The kind of stories that only one person can know, the ones we tell ourselves. The stories that define us.

There is one story in particular that has stuck in my mind since childhood. It is a family story, but one that I overheard at a young age as it passed in hushed voices over the rims of teacups at my grandmother’s kitchen table. The story was about a squirrel who once knew my great aunt. A squirrel who was pure white.
THE STORY

That half-heard story of the white squirrel sparked my imagination and filled my the pages of my mind with full-color illustrations. The version that follows is one that has been told to me recently, about eighteen years after I heard it the first time.

My grandmother’s youngest sister Dodie once noticed a squirrel whose fur was as white as snow sitting in a tree in her back yard. She spent an entire year and a half training this squirrel to come to her. With prizes of fruit and walnuts, she was able to tame him enough to sit on her arm and even to eat from her hand. No one had ever seen another like him. The two became quite good friends and would visit one another every day. Until about two weeks before Dodie’s birthday, when the squirrel stopped coming.

My Uncle Jean was a hunter, and had a different idea of what it meant to appreciate wild-life, but he loved my aunt, and knew that she loved her squirrel. The days went by and still no squirrel. Her birthday came, and that morning she was still on the look-out for her friend. She called for him, and lined up several slices of apple along the banister. She missed the quiet communication that they shared. She worried terribly, had he been hit by a car? or eaten by a cat? why would he just stop coming?
That night, after a piece of cake, Jean brought her a beautifully wrapped gift. She loosened the bow, and careful not to tear the special wrapping paper, she opened the box. There was the little squirrel she had loved so dearly. Thinking how thrilled she would be to have the beautiful animal with her forever, he had shot and stuffed him. We don’t know what happened to the squirrel after this, but my uncle has never shot an animal again.
ANIMAL HEADS ON A WALL- A COLLECTION

As a child, like most children I suppose, I used to conduct funerals for dead birds and small animals that I found left behind by the family cats. To me, they were strange and beautiful bundles of feathers or fur. My desire to bury them wasn’t from sadness at the sight of death, but rather it represented for me, an act of appreciation for this beauty, and for the life that had passed through it. I was offering respect for what they had lost, and for the magnificence that they still contained. I wondered about the kind of lives they had lived in their short time here on earth. Preparing a sacred tomb in which a tiny creature could rest, wrapped in a scrap of cloth or ribbon, is a very private and intimate act. A beautiful or somehow special object from my collection was often included. All together they became treasures; unusual, cherished things, tucked away- and honored.

The animal heads that I am making for a collection on the wall are individuals who were removed from the lives they were living. Like us they have their own histories and experiences, stories to share or to keep for themselves. We can look into their eyes and recognize their individuality.

When I was about ten years old, I met a family whose own collection of real animal heads made quite an impression on me. Having come from a family who enjoyed nature by quietly watching deer who came to eat our garden, it was difficult for me to be faced with the same animals stuffed and mounted as trophy heads on the walls of my girlfriend’s home. On display, supposedly, to be “appreciated for their beauty.”
Some were young, and some much older, bigger with large antlers hanging from their heads, the rear ends of some were even mounted to show off their pretty white tails. We would sleep on the floor in the room where most of them were hanging when I was asked to stay the night. Their faces glared across the dark room as I lie still, fabricating their many stories and listening to the ticking of a nearby pendulum clock. Sleep had to sneak up on me on those nights. The piece “Others You Have Known” has grown from this experience.
A WOLF IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING

A common tool used by authors to gain the empathy of children who read their stories is to create characters who appear in a form that is not specific to a particular boy or girl. The use of animals as characters gives us the room we need to relate directly with the personalities and roles in a story. Think of the characters in the book *Charlotte’s Web,* for instance. Like children, the animals are at the mercy of human adults. Their personalities and social roles are clearly developed, and yet unrecognized by the adult world.

There is a long history of mankind personifying animals. As animals ourselves, we share many facial expressions and postures with animals of other kinds. Human personality types and temperaments are often referred to with the help of animal imagery in phrases like, “he acts like a bear, but when you get to know him, he’s really a pussy-cat,” or “Be a lamb and help Grandma with her suitcase.” Of course, a specific kind of animal is not limited to one kind of personality. There are many different characters in a pack of dogs or a pen full of pigs. When we look closely, we recognize the parallels between animal societies and our own.

Animals have been present in my work since I was an undergraduate and long before. Recently they have regained a prominent place in my imagery. Many times when I am making animals, their faces will remind me of those I have known. A cat with a long narrow nose, gentle eyes and ears a little bit larger than expected may be given other characteristics that continue the personality of a similar cat that was once a family pet. Or in another case, characteristics of a person whom I know or have met may be applied to
an animal. A sloppy and sluggish boy in the neighborhood may appear as a similarly slovenly swine. Faced with these animals, one gets the notion that they may even recognize their viewers in the same way that they feel strangely familiar to us.

As a child I considered animals as equals. My family’s pets were most definitely individuals, and were treated as if they were members of the family. I often wondered what they were thinking, what adventures they’d had without me, what they’d seen and what stories they could tell. Things have not changed much as far as this goes. It still feels quite natural for me to imagine and assume for animals the same things I do about the people who have stories and histories to which I am denied access. Each has experienced a lifetime of things I can never know. I have a great curiosity about these things.

The cat that used to come around with one front fang missing and the other sticking way out. The boy in the computer lab who sometimes wears a dress and fake breasts, or just the very quiet plain girl who sits by the door in class, rarely lifting her eyes. I cannot help but to begin imagining the past that has lead to these individuals’ present, and what stories they must know. What kind of things do they daydream of?
THE BIG BAD WOLF, THE WICKED WITCH,  
AND OTHERS YOU HAVE MET

Children’s literature has influenced my life and my work. These stories can play a big role in the development of the bank of knowledge and experience that stays with us throughout our lives. Some are written to entertain young minds, but most often they are written to teach lessons, and to provide a base for understanding the world and one’s role in it.

Life is full of uncertainties, beginning from the time we are young. Though it may not be the first thing we think of when reading bed-time stories to a little one, a great deal of traditional children’s literature preys on the fears and insecurities of young minds. Often the character with whom we are supposed to identify is made completely vulnerable. This may be accomplished by removing the protecting circle of people who love this character, a story of an orphan lost in the forest for example, a child alone in a world of uncertainties, an adult world, or even worse, a world ruled by supernatural beings or forces which are far stronger than any human adult. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is carried far away from home by a tornado and threatened by an evil witch. These types of stories are paired with and reinforce the awareness of real dangers in the world.

Children are usually very much aware of the fact that the world is not all sugar and spice. Portraits of missing children on milk cartons, warnings by parents to beware of
strangers, stories over-heard from adult conversations, and even situations from
central’s literature give the message that things can happen over which we have no
control.

This awareness of the possibility for things to go wrong, and of injustices
happening to the innocent seeps into my work. Like the field of poppies in The Wizard
of Oz, I try to create things that are intriguing and pleasing to the eye, without forgetting
that there may be something amiss. For instance, in the work “Others You Have Known,”
lovely powder pink wallpaper spotted with roses may catch your eye with its beauty, and
familiar animal faces may seem to look out from the walls innocently. But upon a closer
look, the expressions on these animals faces raise some suspicions, they seem cognizant
of their surroundings and the mood of the whole experience shifts. I imagine one
approaching my work like a cautious child.

Attention is given to this knowledge of potential danger in Sally Mann’s intimate
photographs of her children. I am drawn to her ability to reveal the treacherous place that
innocence is forced to exist within, if it can exist at all. These children show a awareness
of life, they take their lives and their play very seriously. They posses a feral grace, and a
defiant strength.
THE RETURN OF THE WHITE HORSE

Horses, in my mind, are strange, almost vacant animals. They are mysterious and wild, and actually quite difficult for me to relate to. When I think of horses I think of riding or of travel, and of the size and strength of their bodies. In the piece that I built called "Awaiting the Return of the White Horse," the horse acts as a living method of transportation. He is a character who remains a stranger. Head held high, he pushes his way through space, not hesitating to make eye contact. He is strong; rigid lines of steel give him a mechanical feel. His large hollow body acts as a protective hiding place for the delicate creatures within.

The butterflies contain portraits of children from Victorian photographs. They each represent a life and a history that is past. The paper butterflies show the ephemeral quality of life and especially youth. The sturdy shell of the horse’s body appears to have performed it’s task before. Broken and bandaged, it carries the children safely back where we can get another glimpse of them before they disappear.
FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Over the past year and a half, it has become clear that my interests lie in the
elements that create a narrative. In my work, I present characters and objects that when
placed together suggest a story. The viewer is left to fill in the blanks, and to make the
connections for him/herself.

One’s imagination and life experiences are called upon when trying to understand
things for which we are given no explanation. Children will often need to use their
imaginations to fill in blanks in order to make sense of the world around them. Mysteries
like why a parent goes away every morning in a car full of strangers in suits, for instance,
could be explained in any number of ways by a child who knows nothing about the world
of carpools.

Our memories may work in a similar way. In Geoffrey Sonnabend’s writings
from Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and The Problem of Matter, this memory
researcher and neurophysiologist states that:

“...what we experience as memories are in fact confabulations, artificial
constructions of our own design built around sterile particles of retained
experience which we attempt to make live again by infusions of imagination-
much as the blacks and whites of old photographs are enhanced by the addition of
colors or tints in attempt to add life to a frozen moment.”

This idea intrigues me. Are we just making things up? Are our memories more beautiful,
terrible, or exciting than the actual moment we are recalling?
I once had a history professor who asked the class if history falls under fact or fiction. Most of the class chose fact as an immediate response. Her point though, was that fact is in itself a dangerous word where events in the past are involved. There are always as many versions of reality as there are individuals. Everyone will have his or her own take on a situation, because every person brings a unique set of past experiences and personal baggage with him or her to help understand and cope with the world. When recalling a memory, as Sonnabend suggests, this individual slant is also going to inject some imagination, the seeds from which tall tales may grow.
BROKEN MEMORIES/GAPS IN PERCEPTION

Similar to a fractured recollection of a dream, my pieces come together from dislocated bits: clay linked to wire linked to cloth. Sometimes the connection points are subtle. Other times, the sections are brought together in a more haphazard, spontaneous way.

This joining of parts acts as a parallel to the way the narratives form for me. Things that may not exactly match come together to build changing stories. A small sheep, pinched from clay mindlessly during a conversation and left sitting on a table in front of a drawing of a house, may spark a thought that leads to the development of a new piece. Legs made for a specific idea that has not yet come together may turn into something much more interesting over time as I watch them interact with other things happening in my studio.

Annette Messager’s fragmented photos of bodies, combined and hung together have a very attractive quality for me. I enjoy seeing things divided up and scrambled together in this way, giving the potential for many variations.
Kiki Smith: “When you start making figures, you’re in a sense making effigies or you’re making bodies. You’re making physically, bodies that spirits enter or occupy, or that have their own souls, presence and physical space.”

I feel that the figures I make are existing between this world and some other realm close by. They seem to stand in a sort of ghost time, a cross-over of recent or distant past with the present. Not exactly living, but showing signs of a life. They are not tied down to an existence in our world.

By assembling parts to create a figure (human or animal) I am drawing connections to dolls. In the book Dolls in Contemporary Art, Curtis Carter writes that, “. . . dolls share a personal, if in part fantasy world that helps to define the personal narrative that constitutes the individual self.” Although it has not been my intention to make dolls per se, as they are traditionally thought of as toys, my work does take on some of the roles stated by Carter. The pieces are not useful playthings, but are more like the Velveteen Rabbit, recorders of emotion and history that have been discarded. I am interested in the way that representations of living things can allow individuals to find a world in which to explore their own narratives. I want to provide a similar opportunity.
Some of the figures are suspended. By doing so they can avoid real contact with this world. Hanging from above, they gain a potential for movement. By giving them this potential, they cease to be static objects, existing within a definable space.

With these suspending strings or wires, a reference to marionettes is generated that adds to the expectation of possible motion. In the book *Dolls in Contemporary Art*, German poet R.M. Rilke, “likens the puppet to a child’s doll that has grown up and become independent.” This type of independence heightens the element of uncertainty or vulnerability for the viewer.

I am truly drawn to the idea of the characters I make having an independence. I need to believe that they can make their own decisions- turn their heads or walk away, if I am to believe that they are potentially alive.
WHEN THE LIGHTS ARE OFF

There is a balance that happens between sweetness or sentimentality, and a mood that can be considered unsettling. It happens, I feel, as an awareness of both the good and the bad in life experiences. Being tempted to touch the soft fur of an animal you don’t know, and recognizing that you might get hurt.

There is a stuffed animal from a thrift store in my studio that exemplifies some of this crossing over. Its fur, partly missing as if it might have some terrible kind of disease, reminds me of birds and squirrels one sees who have been infested with mites. Its nose and mouth are brown with old dirt trapped by something sticky—probably the remnants from a child’s attempt to feed the animal some kind of sugary delight. Its body shows holes that have been re-sewn and pulled open again. With all of these imperfections present, this animal seems more real to me than a new toy animal might.

The presence of these signs of decay can be unnerving. If you catch a glimpse of this animal, its forearm partially severed, lying on its side head down on a clay stained pillow in the corner of my studio, you may feel a wave of horror. Or you may feel pity for an object that was once so loved, and now questionable to even touch. It is these types of mixed feelings that keep resurfacing when I work—a guarded poignancy.
BEHIND A VEIL

It has been suggested that I have continued my childhood practice of burying things. Oftentimes I want to put a layer of distance between my pieces and the viewer. There are times when allusions to death or the passage of time accomplish this. The pieces are removed from tangibility by the sheer fact that their lives have been suspended in time. We can only imagine what they must have been like before this moment.

Other times we are allowed a glimpse at what lies behind the layers that are keeping us at a distance. Victorian photographs of children, imbedded in tissue paper butterflies, peer through when the light is just right. Wallpaper made of many layers of tinted transparent paper holds a pattern of roses, captured between the sheets. Rice or birdseed used to fill bellies pushes its texture through cloth bodies, or is seen through areas of transparent fabric. Duck legs hang on a line inside the wire body of a horse. A little girl stands with a pink party dress painted with glaze on her bare body. She is covered, but still, something private about her is being revealed to us. In some ways, this exposure and burying refers to the impermeable distance that lies between ourselves and our memories. It also has to do with the space that exists between individuals. There are times when this distance is great and times when it is less so, but we can never truly see with another’s eyes.
SKIN AND BONE

Touch

Clay is soft. It responds to touch, and with it I am able to build things that appear as if they too could respond to touch. I choose to give my clay pieces a surface that suggests change. Folds appear in places where an arm or neck might bend, and the clay itself sometimes appears to be eroding or crumbling. The rough, stained surface of my work can create a feeling of distance by alluding to the passage of time. Once it is fired, the hardened clay captures a moment, a gesture, and freezes it. It records the property of softness once present and mummifies it, removing the water that gave it life.

The softness of the fabric sections stirs an emotional or empathetic response in the viewer. The trim from a fuzzy yellow baby sock or a sleeve from an old sweater for instance are materials to which we can easily relate. Like soft clay, the cloth responds to our touch. It reacts. This type of responsiveness, the way it gives under the pressure of one’s hand, conjures thoughts of skin or fur, making it possible to imagine that the object is, was, or could be a living creature like ourselves. When paired with the stone-like quality of fired clay, cloth can act to inject a more recent memory of life into a piece. It confuses one’s certainty of realness, and invites touch.

The fabrics I use are mostly from clothing or other things that have been used and owned. I am attracted to them for their aged and worn look, but also for their history. Old, time-worn things become sentimentalized because of the history they symbolically contain, the memories they can evoke. An old kid glove for instance, may be treasured for
its inherent beauty, but the life or lives that knew that glove, the places it has seen, the life it has had can also be cherished. It becomes a token that holds a memory.

The worn, cracked, raw-looking surfaces on much of my work lends to this idea of history held by an object with age. I want to tell something of the preciousness of these objects.

**Line**

Drawing helps me to work through ideas quickly and allows me to pull easily from my subconscious. With loose brush strokes of ink on paper, I can create the image I want without the limitations of gravity. Three dimensional pieces are not usually the direct result of drawings made in advance, but ideas that are generated on paper may add to or bring about the making of a sculptural piece.

The use of wire allows me to provide a framework, a simple indication of form, without giving too much away. The gestural line quality I can get with wire allows me to feel as if I am drawing in space. The possibility for change or motion is still present. The actual body of what I am making with the wire is not concrete.

**Scale**

My attraction for intimacy and preciousness drew me towards making small work that required the viewer to look closely. A series of tiny porcelain dolls assembled with sheer fabric bodies, were filled with different types of material. Each filling, brown sugar,
rice, ashes, etc., was chosen according to the facial expression and the character I imagined a piece to have. But the differences were subtle, and one was forced to bring the small objects up very close in order to examine and to begin to connect with them. As my interests shifted towards the actual narrative that I felt these objects contained, I began to want to put the viewer in an environment with the elements of the story. With the figures and objects closer to life-size, and adult viewer can be made to feel as if they are a small part of what is going on. An intimate experience can be created by establishing a space for the pieces to exist within: a wall painted blue, a lowered ceiling strung with teacups. Walking up to a wallpapered wall with animal heads hung at or above eye-level for instance, the viewer interacts with the pieces in quite a different way. It can seem as if they have stepped into a scene from someone’s imagination or memory. In life-size, the pieces are much more confrontational.
CLOSING

By combining different figures and objects I can create an atmosphere and provide elements that suggest the presence of a story. I want to draw the viewer in, and to entice them to build a narrative of their own by using one’s own knowledge, history, and imagination to fill in the blanks that have been left open. Like a half-remembered dream or a fading recollection, a framework exists to which one must apply his own bits and pieces in order to begin to understand the puzzle.

The imagery that I choose has a particular significance for me, although the story from which I am working may change and evolve. The stories at the bottom of what I make come from my own life, imagination and observations of the people around me. The personal lives of strangers, a comment overheard in part at the bus stop, family members and the gossip passed on about them over tea all stir my imagination.

This work gives me a way to represent my own collection of stories, memories and imaginings without telling my secrets. It is as if I am creating a sort of three-dimensional book, whose contents can be read by many different voices, but whose author is undeniably me.
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