

Hybrid Pictures - on Julie Nord's drawings

Eyes stare unmovingly out into space. Not fixing us, the picture's viewers, but directing their slightly off-centre gaze towards something else. Almost catatonically blank, the doll's-eye sidelong gaze which stares out of the picture is a recurrent motif in Julie Nord's work. In *Illustration for a Lost Tale* (p.15) it is the gaze we encounter in the girl clutching a vanitas-style bouquet between her small chubby fingers. As though already in thrall to that finitude whose emblems swarm about her, she stares stonily ahead – unless of course she's stoned, vacant and withdrawn, as in a Valium stupor. The wind plays with her hair but her face is expressionless, her gaze wordless. Unseeing, she stares blindly. As though she no longer sees, as though she sees without seeing. As though her gaze is as unseeing as the picture's pivotal blind eye: the empty white oval at its centre which provides both the drawing's ground and the image's dizzying gulf of endless sky. In *Silence in the Snow* (p.33), a compact cabinet housing animal figures and a girl outlined in silhouette all stare in shared bewilderment into the picture's central oval of white vacuity, which like a visual maelstrom seems to pull all attention towards itself. In *Afternoon at the Fringe* (p.30), a girl with a sleep-drugged, drunken gaze peers out of the picture while in the background a rabbit is in the process of being engulfed in a dark hole, a voracious cosmophagic pupil. In *Nowhere* (p.26), the picture's large vacant centre area is bordered by a grotesque and gallimaufrous decoration comprised of fungi, voluptuous lilies and grinning skulls, wreathed with petals – a kind of sombre burgeoning prelude to the endlessly enigmatic nature of void. In *The Little Ida's Flowers* (p.22) a girl stares out at us, wreathed in a decoration of dense, unruly flowers, butterflies and wormy skulls which, again, open onto an oval of pristine white, the blind eye of the picture, a mesmerizing vanishing point.

Nord's pictures teem with staring eyes, empty eye sockets and blind pictorial planes. But while the gawking eyes seem not to be taking anything in, the skulls' dark sockets appear intensely focused. And the blind pictorial surfaces are no less ambiguous. They too seem at once voided of content and yet pregnant with meaning. Throughout, the multiple ocular metaphors act as transition zones, thresholds where strange segues and metamorphoses take place, where one understanding slides imperceptibly into another, where the familiar and obvious is transformed into strange otherness and enigmatic meanings. Insight is abruptly displaced by obscurity, transparency by opacity. Ambivalence reigns, for one meaning does not expunge another, even though both cannot be apprehended simultaneously. The various meanings co-exist as in regular optical illusion images where the eye oscillates between picking out one form or the other in a single image while incapable of fixing two recognizable forms at once. It is in the nature of eyes to be transition zones – while subject to the other's gaze one accesses a glimpse into that same other. Eyes are the mirrors of the soul, revealing the other's interior climate. But they are also instruments themselves, actively gleaning new knowledge about the world – they scope out, peer into, anticipate and explore. Finally, eyes are also potentially magical, may be possessed of evil, occult or hypnotic powers. In her pictures, Julie Nord plays on all these properties of eyes, with everything seemingly resolved into a bewildered stare, and even inanimate objects appearing to be possessed of a gaze. For all the apparent realism, we are 'behind the mirror' here, deep down in the rabbit hole. Things are not what they seem but are continually in flux rather – transforming, morphing into something else, investing themselves with different meanings. And to grasp what's going on, we need to look hard, to stare intently at the

pictures, ponder the enigmas, the picture puzzles they present us with, even as they return our stare.

The orchestration of complex ocular imagery, a logic of transitions, is axiomatic to the large-scale, ambitious work *From Wonderland with Love* (p.40-47) from 2003, comprising a total 50 drawings. The title itself flags up the fact that the work is a species of paraphrase that draws on Lewis Carroll's Victorian classic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* from 1865, in which quite fantastical but wide-awake metamorphoses provide the main theme. Here, Julie Nord treats us to the full panoply of drawing's capabilities as a medium, which she brilliantly, humorously and playfully deploys in quasi-narrative structures. The close interweave between words and drawings allows us to glimpse links and associations without their ever being made fully explicit. From the outset, we are left in some doubt as to where the pictures begin and where they end, how the various elements interrelate, when the words are conforming to the images or when they themselves actually begin – both literally and in a figurative sense – to form ideograms; when a foreground and a background swap roles, when a vacuum is to be perceived as being 'inside' or 'outside' the space of the subject, and so on. Shifts of scale, visual homophonies and the gradual transmutations of figures cause doubts to creep in about what the picture conveys, enmeshing us in the plays on meaning that are at work throughout. Many of these latter are patently drawn from Carroll's adventures about Alice, but there are other – and farther-reaching – elements in play in Julie Nord's work. She draws inspiration from Victorian children's literature, which was similarly charged with latent, sinister and angst-provoking elements but that she updates too, applying a dash of contemporary culture in the form of gothic horror, cartoon aesthetics, tattoo art and abstract Rorschach patterns, which, set in the context of the intricately wrought and graceful Victorian vignettes, create a historical palimpsest, a dual perspective that grafts together two eras and two life stages: the latter half of the nineteenth century is fused with the first part of the twenty-first – and the universe of the child melds with the adult world.

Several of the motif constituents in *From Wonderland with Love* are also instrumental in anchoring the work to a contemporary perspective – objects such as the lorry, television, fridge, tower block and not least the helicopter, a recurring emblem of modernity in Nord's drawings and a constant brooding presence in her output ever since the Exit exhibition in 2000. The wingless beast that ascends vertically into the sky provides an ominous symbol of modernity, surveillance, war – a menacing metallic contemporary counterpart to the cutesie soft rabbits which also – with a clear reference to Carroll – populate Nord's pictures, and by the same token, to their descent to the underworld through the rabbit hole. Whereas Carroll's magical universe of transformations was confined to a subterranean dream world bearing clear references to the unconscious, Nord's tales play themselves out above ground in the sober light of day. The bizarre morphings, which in the nineteenth century appeared outlandish and chimerical have, in the twenty-first century, become prosaic reality. Again, this diagnosis of our times is clear already in Nord's Exit works, as in, for instance *One evening* (p.62) from 1999, where from the laid-back viewpoint of a first person narrator, ensconced in the floral sofa, cigarette in one hand and a helicopter-decorated coffee cup in the other, we look at a television screen showing an image of a bald mouse with a human ear growing out of its back staring out at us. In other words, an image of the type of xeno-transplantative experiments that the medical industry performs with a view to cultivating organs in animals for use in humans – experiments that give rise to a host of ethical issues about the boundary between animal and human as well as that between life and death. The

image is accompanied by a caption: "That evening I realised that I really had changed..." In the work, changes in technology, biomedicine and consciousness are integrally interfused, the personal becoming irrevocably interwoven with culture in a way that anticipates Nord's later works. Not least the many drawings where the Alice figure sports rabbit ears and is consequently already a living materialization of the hybrid, the human-cum-animal, which has long since transcended the boundaries between one thing and another. Relentlessly multiplied and repeated, it becomes itself a type of motif-cloning which like the helicopter, the exquisitely spiral-shaped pile of excrement and the rictus-grinning skull, is disseminated out into a wide array of works – intrinsically unchanging but forever occupying new contexts.

Nord's drawings consistently orchestrate fusions and encounters between different planes of reality, different styles or indeed different genres. Her use, for example of the vignette and the miniature – the entire legacy of illuminated manuscripts with their elaborate, fluid and luxuriant calligraphy – in its exquisite combination of formal and semantic features testifies to this. The richly intricate, almost over-expansive vignettes which often graced the penny dreadful magazines and novels of the nineteenth century are imported and brought up to date by Nord who raises them from the status of decorative add-on to that of independent artwork, enrolling them into a modern idiom in which a kitsch gothic horror aesthetics is intertwined with the graceful tendrils of flowers and leaves that typified the original vignette. Thus does marginal decoration come to occupy centre stage, the detail becoming an event in itself in a process that typically involves a major scaling up, the drawing's intimate and immediate character blown up to monstrously grandiose formats. The autonomy of the vignette is most apparent in ideograms such as, say, *Success* (p.38-39) from 2004, where Nord confers upon a classic vignette an interlacing pattern of motifs, which closely entwined, semi-legibly delineate the letters, delivering an arresting and wry counterpoint to the meaning of the word.

In *Success*, it is thus the work title's sequence of seven letters that are assiduously decorated with a meticulously executed gallery of morbid motifs such as skulls, gravestones, bats, vultures and snakes that seem scrupulously to have conspired to gainsay the very word that they conjure on the surface of the paper. The positive meaning of the word is inextricably interwoven with the picture's negative import, just as are the vanitas motifs of baroque art, where earthly prosperity and happiness go hand in hand with a more or less discernible *memento mori*, discreet reminders of life's transience, the ephemerality of the senses, the inevitability of death. In Nord, however, we find an unsparingly graphic depiction of death, a fascinated and virtually life-affirmingly vibrant application of death's macabre iconography as manifested in popular culture, in the music scene's 'death metal' for example, or in literature's gothic novels. The scheme is inverted in the work *Demon* (p.31) from 2005, where the letters are formed from fabulous arabesques of cute trees, plants, flowers, berries, birds and animals, which, sharing a tranquil and idyllic coexistence, would seem to constitute an outright antithesis to the demonic power which the decorated word spells out. In these works, Nord has words and images fuse to form a kind of allegorical puzzle picture where semantic opposites require to be perceived through the prism of each other rather than individually: paradisiacal idyll through demonic power, death's victory through our conceptions of success. And vice versa. Rather than exhibiting complementarity, the pictorial and verbal elements are each other's foundation, even while paradoxically contradicting each other.

Such impossible hybridizations are conjured by Nord in almost all her works, either by juxtaposing words and images, superposing disparate perspectival spaces, different

scales and various angles, or by letting independent and incompatible figures merge seamlessly.

In *Somewhere Not That Far Away* (p.29) from 2004, large portions of Nord's established iconography are incorporated into a teeming dreamscape which seems to distil the metamorphic theme into a charged and ominous image. In the foreground to the right, the picture is dominated by the dark outline of a spider whose web, fat body and thick hairy legs stand out against the sky. On the left of the picture we see the elfin figure of a young girl with flowing Shirley Temple curls and a swarm of exotic butterflies which appear to be burgeoning forth from her head and then fading away into the sky, flying in a chain-like formation before gradually, the farther away they get, transmuting into bats. A thick undergrowth of flowers, fungi and plants cover the lower edge of the foreground, including multiple "flowers of death", the characteristic skulls fringed with petals. In the background a horizon line is visible, traced upon which in silhouette is a skyline of emblematic Nord elements including helicopters, piles of excrement, castle turrets and cactuses. The little girl figure stands with her arms folded, her dark eyes fastened on a large butterfly immediately in front of her face. She is wearing a dress whose pattern is fashioned from the same spider's web as that which fills the right half of the picture. In an eloquent gesture, she points with her plump, square-ended index finger to the empty space. The fairytale universe comes across as a strange prison – a battlefield where everything appears camouflaged and disguised, literally veiled and unrecognizable, in a state of pupation and change, bizarre exuviations. It is a place which while not distant remains infinitely remote. The young girl who stands transfixed at the edge of adult life, poised for womanhood, at once innocent and eroticised, is a quintessential image of the paradoxical state of transformation-cum-stasis that informs the entire picture. Nothing is happening and yet everything is upended in this place not far from where we are – the beauty of the flowers seems to spring from the corpses whose skulls form their centres, the young girl's succulent body is already thoroughly enmeshed in the menacing spider's lubricous thread, high piles of excrement on the horizon provide spongy landing pads for the dark helicopters. As in all Nord's drawings, the ground is shaky – the fascinating delectability of the richly detailed landscape is informed by an undertow, hallucinations of delirious clarity which inflect the work with an edgy eeriness.

A raft of more or less drastic interventions are deployed to defamiliarize familiar motifs, making them at once recognizable and unrecognizable, and thereby investing them with complex dual identities. The tales are hinted at but never fully told. The rules of perspective are both complied with and violated. The text interacts with and transmutes into images, and vice versa. The transformations and destabilizations in Nord's pictorial universe take place, in other words, on several levels at once: at the formal level, where the limits of illusionary space while preserved are also relentlessly challenged; at the level of content where fairy-tale iconography dominates but is updated and supplemented by elements from the visual culture of our day; on the narrative level where acts, twists and transmutations are the sustaining element, but always in fragmented form, leaving more questions than answers.

The fairytale aspect of Nord's works is anything but synonymous with a secure imaginary universe definitively and unproblematically distinguishable from the real world. Instead it blends the everyday with the fantastical. Disturbingly, the fluidity of the subjects is hallucinatory and delirious. Rather than serving imaginative and moral purposes, they would seem to be the result of psychosis or intoxication. In that regard too, the works are situated in our own times, flagging up an extreme complexity and the entrenched sense of disorientation and insecurity experienced by the late modern individual. But Nord's works don't just reflect complexity and ontological insecurity, they create it, in that far

from admitting authoritative interpretations they resist them, cutting the ground from under any putative definitive solution to the work's puzzle. Should it be categorized as a strip cartoon, satire, decoration, tattoo aesthetic, fairytale, art? None of these and yet all of them: the high and the popular, fairytale, kitsch and art in one glorious amalgam which never allows us the convenience of thinking that it is just one of these things. On this plane too, Nord works with the hybrid, the composite and the 'impure'. The world of innocence from which Nord borrows so profusely is shamelessly undercut by the more brutal conflicts of an insistent contemporaneity. The recurrent 'little girl' resembles less the indomitable and rational Alice of Lewis Carroll's stories than one who has already seen too much, a traumatized silent figure who has known unspeakable things, left numbed to appear as the poster child of corrupted innocence. For all that, Nord's drawings do not make excruciating viewing because the brutalities are offset not just by the cutesy images of childhood but also – and to an even greater extent – by a wryly mischievous humour which, achieving its effects through exaggeration, gives us ghosts, monsters, and howling wolves juxtaposed with soft bunnies and twee armadillos. In brief, there is an element of grotesquerie in Nord's drawings which prevents their being cast as purely dystopian depictions of a contemporaneity in which the loss of innocence is all-pervasive. And there is an intense fascination with the purely decorative and structural which subsumes all the motifs to an overarching logic, that of patterns. The grotesque and the decorative are facets of Nord's drawings which mitigate the harshness of their subject matter, rendering these fairy tales for adults at a single stroke diverting, morbid and macabre. But most crucially: the pervasive innocence that is evoked does not eliminate the capacity to enthrall. As languid as things look in the drawings, so also do they strike the viewer as deeply intriguing. And precisely the link between the curious and the viewer's *curiosity*, the interrogation of what eludes the understanding, is the key source of the life that Nord's drawings are nurtured by and which they emanate. They are pictures that reveal themselves to us as we see and re-see them: first as surfaces that hold us fascinated in their thrall, subjecting us to their logic; but then, as generous apertures that allow us to trace our own paths into new uncharted territories. Nord's drawings describe and offer transformations in virtue of the fact that through their intricate perspectivist, historical and symbolic spaces, they entice viewers to reflect upon that in which the images and meanings are grounded, before penetrating deeper into the metamorphic universes they depict.

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