'Pagan' Stories: The Situations of Narrative in Recent Art
curated by Janet Kraynak

And what can we possibly think of the artist, armed with a copy of Lewis Carroll’s epic, trotting into the woods with her camera to picture an eccentric portrait of the adventures of Alice? And what of the artist who looks not to the imaginative fantasies of Carroll, but to the authorless myth of femininity-as-reproduction realized in the parable of Persephone? The seeming compulsion to eschew a prohibition on referentiality recasts the artist as reenactor, leaving the critic to stare blankly in the face of literary allusion and constructed fictions, questioning whether we are witnessing a revitalized commitment to ut pictura poesis, where art is the visual handmaiden to a pre-existing text, and criticism is imprisoned by iconography.

Bonnie Calluya
Aki Fujiyoshi
Anna Gaskell
Johanna MacArthur
AlexPearlstein
Georgina Stann
Sergio Vega
Kara Walker

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Such an explanation, however, would require an enormous retreat from the responsibility to history. The hundreds of years since the Renaissance doctrine prevailed notwithstanding, it demands that the critic turn a deaf ear to the most recent past, where the very principles and properties of traditional narrative were deeply implicated. Within visual art’s critique of narration, we can think of the specific objects of Minimalism, the temporalization of performance, the analytical exercises of conceptualism, and the implosion of poststructuralist thinking in the last decade in short, all of current art’s predecessors that battled against the belief that meaning is wholly saturated by a referent, or secured through a transparent relationship to the author. Art, of course, had taken its cues from literature, philosophy and history, whose systematic dismantling of modernism’s grand idea (history as the progress of spirit, the emancipation of the subject, etc.) constituted, in the words of Lyotard, a “crisis of narrative.”

Such was the tautology of modernism, he explained, appealing to meta-discourses in order to legitimate its own ideas. Modernism denied their very status as narratives by naturalizing its codes. What was demanded was a manifold process: an examination of narrative’s operations and cultural functions; and a displacement of epical accounts by the dissenting voice of little narratives.

In face of current artistic practice, it becomes criticism’s imperative to negotiate the historical within the contemporary, to redefine the reproduction of illusionistic devices, folklore and other narrative tropes, through an analysis of the situations of narrative.

So we return to Gaskell’s photographs, where the figure of Alice is multiplied as so many Alices, sporting identical dresses and pictures as limbs, arms, torso, face, and crops of blond hair. Within the space of a single picture is not so much the original and its copies, but an original that is continually deformed, reinforced by the photographic manipulations of framing, cropping, fragmenting and lighting. The Wonder Series does not operate as pure description, but presents the fictional Alice—who grows and shrinks and is never fixed as present—as a process of infinite becoming. It is this instability of identity, marked as a site of projection and fantasy, which intrigued Calluya as she mined the chronicles of Persephone, from her abduction into the mythical underworld to the censoring pen of Walt Disney’s drawing pad, which made her
into the enduring icon of femininity purdy. Refusing to yield to the demands of image-production which would secure its illustrative function, Collura’s sculptural arrangement temporally reiterates the referrent into a mutability of form and color, negotiating its discontinuous fragments—a torso, a tree, corn husk, and a billowy mushroom that doubles as the folds of the skirt—the viewer is thrust into the shifting space of paradox.

The movement of displacement, Loydard emphasizes, constitutes the work of little narratives. He introduces another story to explain this dynamic and give it a proper name—pogonism. He tells us that he was thinking of the lesser Greeks, the Sophists, who were derided by the Aristotelians for foregoing an allegiance to truth in favor of the play of rhetoric. Yet, Loydard argues, “They have always indicated that we are dealing with what they call phonostoi, that is, representations, and that it is not true that a rational knowledge of social and political facts is possible, at least insofar as they imply judgments and decisions.” 3 Pogonism reframes the goal of knowledge, revealing the violence of consensus, which quietly dissents by banishing those who refuse to participate within predetermined rules. His analogy is the realm of language-games, where in every instance the terms must be redefined.”a society of gods that is forced to redraw its code,” he writes.4

With a visual economy of means, Walker’s deceptively simple forms materialize this process. Carefully cut from matte paper, they hybridize conflict—refereences to slave tales are overlaid with those of Romance fictions and nostalgic images of the disserns. Pearlstein’s Still materializes this temporality of repetition, or more precisely, recitation, as a blank white interior becomes the constant backdrop for a shifting series of scenes: a man stares at the corner; a couple enters and has a dispute; a woman lies upon the floor. Recalling Richard Serra’s verb list which redefined ‘sculpture’ as a series of operations (“to roll, to crease, to fold.” on and on), Still places each vajette not in the descriptive but in the transitive plane—pose, embrace, concentrate, play, etc.—creating stories which cannot be constituted outside the enunciatice act. This process of interpellation undergirds the isolated phrases that the hand scratches on the blackboard in MacArthur’s video. A constant metronomic beat, audible in the background, structures the actions of the hand writing its “confession,” covering it with a monochromatic surface of white chalk, wiping it with the slate clean, wetting it with a wash of water and then repeating the entire procedure. Interlining each phrase with the word “I” MacArthur’s video materializes the linguistic shifter, as the “I” reference constantly fluctuates between the pole of narrator and that of the addressee or reader: a single gesture which encapsulates the complexity of narrativity.

Janet Kraynak

5Ibid, p. 17.

What I have provisionally called ‘pagan’ stories claim no universal provocation, hitting the accusers of them being a hermetic retreat from public discourse into the realm of private meaning. So I will end out this story with what might be called the ‘first’ story. It is the ostensible subject of Starr’s and Fujishyć’s ‘self-portraits.’ The story is well-known, Starr’s, the nomadic artist, installed at the Hague to create art, fashioned the alter-ego ‘junior’ from stockings and stuffing, and then proceeded to collect objects and pictures that marked the mundane events of each passing day. The results of her labor crammed into the limited space of her room, were called_The Nine Collections of the Seventh Museum, an epigrammatic aside to the operations of museology and collecting. This depiction of the self enacted in the portrait as a narrative of place and time similarly has driven Fujishyć’s extended project, Self-Portrait or Still Life, executed over several years. In the LA From N.Y. series, everyday objects and collaged imagery cuddled from Hollywood films, serve as indexes of the artist counting down the five days preceding and five days during a trip to Los Angeles where she participated in an exhibition. The photographs operate without securing a transparent relationship to the subject (Fujishyć) but, as in Starr’s Nine Collections, by generating meaning through the execution of their procedures of making. Negotiating autobiography within the performative plane, the words of another critic can be heard, “the ultimate function of transcribes its contents” he wrote. ”Our story will conclude with his proposition.

...it may be significant that it is at the same moment (around the age of three) that the little human invents at once sentence, narrative, and the Oedipus.”

Georgina Starr_The Nine Collections of the Seventh Museum_1994(Mixed media (detail)

Steve Pinto

Kara Walker_Still_1995(Paper and tempera on canvas_107 x 127)