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Emily G Harrison

***Wicked Game***

March 1 – 30, 2019

**Pastiche, Play, Process: Emily Harrison's *Wicked Game***

Upon entering the project space, *Wicked Game* by Emily Harrison confronts the viewer with a gaudy, dramatic landscape, teeming with mysterious creatures reminiscent of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*; lurid gargoyles, mysterious figures and strange animals. Rife with art-historical references mediated by thick Plasticine, Harrison's multi-panel work playfully employs tenets of the Western painting canon as collage materials. Harrison's layered series addresses the status of image-making practices today, while critiquing notions of the "original," the "academic," and the "painterly." The artist's installation does more than contrast a "low-art" medium with "high-art" references; the primacy of the canonical is destabilized in favor of laterality, play and irreverence.

In his essay "The Word Remix is Corny," artist Brad Troemel states that "Remixing is no longer a stand against normative ideas of authorship; it's the embodiment of it."<sup>1</sup> In our twenty-first century image-economy, where the collision of "high" and "low" culture is the ground-zero of the Internet Age, art historical references are ubiquitous. Many of these kinds of references, while often purely aesthetic, still serve to "embolden the legitimacy of

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<sup>1</sup> Troemel, Brad, "The Word 'Remix' is Corny" *Dis Magazine*, 17<sup>th</sup> Oct, 2012,

the original”<sup>2</sup> and thus perpetuate Western art’s legacy existing atop the cultural pyramid. Harrison’s series of Plasticine paintings, however, present us with a different kind of pastiche, one that Troemel refers to as *progressive versioning*, which is “not about the valorization of the original but about losing all ties to it, about adding to and switching out variables until none of the results bare any resemblance to where they started.”<sup>3</sup> The figures in Harrison’s work make playful references to popular paintings by artists such as Botticelli, Bosch, and Goya, but as a side-note, instead of being reliant on these canonical references to validate her work. Harrison’s figures feel like reproductions of reproductions; she is not bemoaning the loss of the “original” in a sea of clones, but rather reveling in her ability to use all of canonical imagery in conjunction with contemporary motifs, as equal-opportunity materials.

Harrison states that it is not important if the viewer recognizes her nods to art history, as she is against dictating a singular reading to the viewer.<sup>4</sup> She employs art-historical motifs as materials to address personal, intuitive narratives. Harrison is more interested in these references for their dramatic, nightmarish qualities and their relationships to emotional states. The artist cites the first panel of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* as an inspiration; while it is supposed to be the most utopian of the three panels, the scene still hints at the debauchery to come.<sup>5</sup> That is the realm she is most interested in addressing within her work; the tilting edge of collapse.

Unlike the idealized portrayals of women by male artists throughout art history, Harrison presents the viewer with multi-faceted female figures that complicate the canonical. In the largest, mural-sized panel dominating an entire wall of the project space, mysterious amphibian women composed of blues, greens and purples crawl through a murky foreground. Far in the background, camouflaged against waves and seafoam is a reclining female nude that Harrison refers to as a Botticelli-esque Venus.<sup>6</sup> Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* from 1486 depicts the highly idealized goddess of love floating atop a shell

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<sup>2</sup> Troemel, Brad, “The Word ‘Remix’ is Corny” *Dis Magazine*, 17<sup>th</sup> Oct, 2012, <http://dismagazine.com/blog/37255/the-word-remix-is-corny/> .

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Emily G Harrison, in conversation with the Sophia Opper, February, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> I Emily G Harrison, in conversation with the Sophia Opper, February, 2019

as the central focus of the composition.<sup>7</sup> While Botticelli's work is considered by many to be a "shorthand for Western high art,"<sup>8</sup> she is rendered a side note in Harrison's composition. In this panel, Harrison presents a destabilized art historical reference, where the Venus figure is not upheld as more legitimate than the rest of the composition. Mirroring the Pagan nature of Botticelli's Venus, the women in the foreground morph into the landscape, their limbs interwoven with the boughs of trees. In contrast to one's immediate associations with Venus, goddess of love and beauty, the figures in the foreground feel distinctly other, but simultaneously more complex and human. Perhaps these women house a critique of Western humanist notions of beauty, personifying the complicated reality of the female-identifying body in relation to the idealized, canonical Venus. For Harrison, these figures also embody the anxiety and suffering that accompany love and romance, presenting the viewer with the less desirable side of Botticelli's immaculate goddess of love.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the amphibian women who crawl curiously through the underbrush, another panel features hypersexualized gargoyle figures. Acting as an ornate frame for one of Harrison's panels, these female gargoyles offer yet another playful critique of hyper-masculinity throughout art history. Their rotund buttocks literally pop off the surfaces of their panels, irreverently mocking the male gaze of the Western art canon while proudly reclaiming their fetishized status. The gargoyles frame a massive face enveloped in shadow, tongue hanging out of its mouth garishly, further mirroring the consumption of the female form.

Harrison's use of Plasticine as the primary medium also enters into this conversation of pastiche and mimicry. Plasticine is very much a tool for play, and is marketed primarily towards children and amateurs. Harrison's rich application of the Plasticine simulates impasto oil painting without valorizing oil as a medium so much as problematizing its primacy. Plasticine's status as a craft material further drives home Harrison's democratic use of historical iconography, decontextualizing its academic status. The bright palette that we associate with both Plasticine and Harrison's practice to date is largely abandoned in favor of a nocturnal chiaroscuro. The resulting synthesis of playful subject matter and

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<sup>7</sup> Sandro Botticelli *The Birth of Venus*, ca. 1486 Uffizi Gallery, Florence

<sup>8</sup> Evans, Mark, and Stefan Weppelmann. *Botticelli Reimagined*. London: V & A, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

playful material is made somber by Harrison's choice of palette, hinting at a more sinister reality beneath this lively landscape: the anxiety that exists alongside love, the inevitable collapse of utopia.

Plasticine's oil-based and non-hardening nature means that this series is in a constant state of metamorphosis. During a studio visit, Harrison showed me the way she will slice off a segment from one panel and adhere it to another; the affect is a symbiotic churning; figures, plants and animals are all composed of pieces of one-another. The way Harrison works on the whole series at once mirrors the lateral way she deploys imagery, furthering her criticism of a static, finished "original" artwork. Integrated within the work, one can also notice segments of old paintings that Harrison has cut-up and stuck into the Plasticine. This re-use and re-integration of old work seems to be tenet of Harrison's practice, and is very in line with the work's heavy use of pastiche, iconography and symbolic imagery.

The non-archival quality of Plasticine is yet another element of the work that differentiates it from its canonical references; these images will likely soon melt, crumble and find themselves thrown back into the recycled volley of Harrison's invigorated practice. These mural-sized works could not feasibly adorn the walls of a church, or be sold to a museum's permanent collection; they will, like the material composition of the figures they depict, find their way into other bodies and across other surfaces.

- Sophia Opper

*Wicked Game* presents a new series of large format paintings embracing the low-art materiality of plasticine, pairing its playful tactility with creatures, figures and motifs that are hyper-saturated and frenzied.

Over the last year, Emily Harrison has been researching European art historical movements such as Rococo, Baroque and religious allegorical paintings alongside popular Western fairy tales and folklore. Delving into her own thought patterns and anxieties as a starting point for content, *Wicked Game* looks both inward and outward, confronting the psychological and the mythical. Materially, this exhibition exists in a realm between painting and sculpture, with imagery caught between the dream and the disquieted.

Artworks (from left to right)

1. *Toad's Dream*, 2019. Plasticine, collaged paintings.
2. *Sweet, sweet, sublime*, 2019. Plasticine, jean skirt, collaged painting.
3. *Tongue Puller*, 2018 – 2019. Plasticine.
4. *Birth of Venus & Beached Anxieties*, 2018 – 2019. Plasticine, seashells, jean skirt, cloth, collaged painting.