Interview with Stacey Steers by Amy Ingrid Schlegel, director, Tufts University Art Gallery and exhibition curator

Stacey Steers: Night Hunter on view from January 17 to April 21, 2013

Q (Amy Schlegel): In your ‘hand-made film” Night Hunter, your female character (silent film-era star Lillian Gish) is trapped by and eventually escapes from her Victorian domestic environment, which becomes animated and monstrous in proportion. Why are you so interested in Lillian Gish?

A (Stacey Steers): I had seen Lillian Gish in D. W. Griffith’s Broken Blossoms and was deeply moved by her fearless performance as a teenage girl with an abusive father. Her emotional presence is quite startling. After I finished my film Phantom Canyon I was looking for a new way to incorporate antique photographic materials into my collages and it occurred to me she would make an excellent subject to experiment with.

Q (A.S.): Night Hunter is named after the 1955 cult classic thriller Night of the Hunter, starring Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, and Lillian Gish. Could you tell me what you found so inspiring about the film, which tells the perverse story of a reverend-turned-serial-killer who tries to con a widow’s children into handing over money hidden by their dead father?

A (S.S.): Night of the Hunter is a stunning film and very much about the loss of innocence, which could also be read as a theme in Night Hunter. Honestly, the title was chosen at the end of the project, so I wasn’t driven by connections throughout the making of the film, but I did feel that besides the critical role Lillian Gish plays in the film, there was a sense of maternal obligation in her character to strive to care for children who randomly appear in her life that was not unlike the way her character in Night Hunter tends to the giant eggs who make their uninvited appearance. In Night of the Hunter Lillian’s character responds fiercely to the threat Robert Mitchum poses toward her wards, which could also be seen as paralleling in some ways the later scenes in Night Hunter.
Q (A.S.): Your film’s plot seems to resonate with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a feminist classic, in which the female protagonist, confined by her husband to the house, slowly goes mad, or escapes into her own fantasy world. The dollhouse sculpture in which the film is projected onto small HD screens throughout the interior of the house transforms it into an animate being. Your imagery here is very resonant with the *Femme Maison* (Woman House) paintings from the late 1940s by French-American artist Louise Bourgeois and her later “cell” sculptures, both of which speak abstractly about patriarchal power, the confinement of women’s social roles to the domestic sphere, and the control of men over women’s bodies. Could you elaborate on the literary and visual art influences on your work, and specifically *Night Hunter*?

A (S.S.): I have never read *The Yellow Wallpaper*, but my literary influences would include Angela Carter, whose collected re-working of fairy tales, *Burning Your Boats*, held strong appeal for me. I love to read, and the 19th century classics have always been a strong draw. I adore Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James, all of whom explore women’s roles in particular power relationships. Moving forward, I’m also an ardent fan of Clarice Lispector, particularly *Near to the Wild Heart*, her early masterpiece. It’s hard to know what informs us ultimately, but I would like to add that I treasure the work of Maurice Sendak, whose books are always infused with a sense of the dark underside of reality, even though he never abandons the pure presence of unfettered innocence. I try to do the same. I think it’s fair to say I haven’t consciously sought out feminist inspiration, though I see my work as rooted in the feminine. I just try to follow deep intuitive impulses and they seem to carry me in that direction. Of course I do feel lucky to have forebears who have opened these doors before me.

My background is more as a filmmaker than a fine artist, so most of my influences come from that discipline. I am a big fan of the films of the Brother’s Quay and Jan Svankmejer, both of whose work has strong associations with surrealism, as well as collage animators Larry Jordan and Janie Geiser (among many others), and the experimental filmmakers Gunvor Nelson and Phil Solomon. That being said, I have also always loved the work of Joseph Cornell and William Kentridge. I believe my working process of allowing intuition and association to drive my creative choices is a technique I share with both of these artists. I hadn’t known about those specific projects by Louise Bourgeois, although I love her work, but other people have mentioned them to me. I also owe an enormous debt to my former teacher Stan Brakhage, who encouraged me to pursue a uniquely personal vision and paved the way for many of us.

Q (A.S.): Could you speak about your aesthetic choice and narrative style to use black-and-white with fleeting flashes of red, and music instead of voice narration? I see connections with William Kentridge’s monochromatic stop-motion drawn animations as well as with German Expressionist prints, the latter being more
emotive and less narrative and seemingly closer to your storytelling mode, in which a musical composition (created by Dartmouth College Professor of Music Larry Polansky) takes the place of words.

**A (S.S.):** The monochromatic aspect of the work is largely a result of incorporating the images I use, 19th century engravings, illustrations and photographs as well as early silent films, all originally black and white materials. I started to add some color because I realized I could alter the texture of the image in interesting ways with colored pencil. There are actually a number of colors in *Night Hunter*, but the red pops out. I also wanted to connect the Lillian Gish images from several films fluidly, so I decided to try to always give her dress a red collar, as a source of continuity. I am deeply attracted to both of the sources you mention there, Kentridge and the German Expressionists, particularly Kathe Kollwitz and Max Beckmann. I love the saturation of space and brooding atmosphere you can create with lots of dark, shaded areas. Only one of my films has a narrative voice-over, the first one, *Watunna*, where Stan Brakhage provided the narration. There is a long tradition in animation of music and effects-only sound tracks, and I find it challenging to work with images as the primary unit of meaning and imaginative consideration. Larry Polansky created a sound track that follows the film in minute detail, generating another level of quite specific intention, while still allowing for broad interpretation.

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