

Little Stories, Little Threads

Through images in print and paint, I make observations about people, power and relationships in the personal and social sphere of our culture. I express my observations and what I learn from them in narrative form. I borrow, re-tell and alter existing narratives. From those old stories, I make new ones that are a result and expression of postmodern culture, as I see it.

Philosophically, as much as I can categorize my way of thinking, I would put my point of view within the framework of postmodern feminism. Visually, my images are magic-realist in nature. I include feminism in my description because very many of my images concern the struggles and condition of women and their relationships and position in society. Part of my project is to express what happens to women as they strive to develop as humans and be heard and treated as equals in a patriarchal world. I use the word postmodern because my work doesn't embrace any one answer or path as the correct one in the form that development will take. What I present as far as content in my work are possibilities of choices; illustrations of bits of the story of human culture told from a postmodern feminine point of view.

I am a visual thinker; I think in pictures. The way I process my experience is through images that are very much like illustrations of the connections my mind makes between new experiences and what I've observed before. I can't remember a time when this hasn't been so.

My observations tend to seek out and borrow from narratives that were meaningful to me in some way in the past. Much like the experience of finding an article of clothing in a resale shop that is the perfect fit and color, I often re-use old stories and tailor them for contemporary

use. Sometimes the stories are only meaningful on a visceral level; they provoke a feeling for me, but I do not immediately identify why. Later, as new experiences arise, an old narrative will seem to fit a new experience. The changes the old narratives undergo as they are blended with new experiences create new stories that grow out of my personal and social cultural viewpoint.

In literature as well as in art, I embrace narratives of many kinds, from many different cultures. My work is a synthesis of my own cultural background and that of other cultures I've studied, told from my personal perspective.

Starting with my study of the comparative work of Carl Jung (1959) and continuing with my reading in world folk and fairy tales, I've become aware that the stories speak to me because they provide me with a framework with which to compare my thoughts, feelings and experiences. Perhaps they do this for me because, as Jung thought, there are basic common human experiences that are expressed in art, no matter which culture creates them. There are many possible interpretations of every story. This is true no matter who conceives of it. Sometimes I think of what I do as creating "literary stations" that are like stage settings for the possible interpretations of the narratives. Those narratives are often metaphors for the conditions we face as human beings. The stories serve as a framework for ways to examine our lives. As Maria Tatar explains, "When it comes to folktales, there is no authoritative, original version. We have only variants, "multiple" and "untrue," each unfaithful to the previous telling and inflecting the plot in a slightly different way. And yet all these variants—oral, literary, or a hybrid of the two—can lay claim to unwavering fidelity to their own time and place." (Tatar 2004, 15)

The content of my work draws heavily on the myths and fables of Western culture as well as those from other parts of the world. By retelling and reshaping these stories to express contemporary culture and women's roles within it, it is my project to make narratives that depict

women's power over their own lives, rather than succumb to the traps laid for them by traditional patriarchic social structures.

My work presents little moments, or little stories that together, present possible narratives that help me in understanding my place and my potential in society and culture, as well as in my personal sphere. It is my hope that my experiences and images will speak to others as well.

Hayao Miyazaki, filmmaker and founder of Studio Ghibli, talks about how a culture needs myths and fables to help it stay on track, to focus its identity. (Boyd 2004) He is correct in the sense that in our postmodern era, stories, especially those that are based upon our cultural roots, can serve as buoys for our collective spirit. They are a way for us to culturally center ourselves within an atmosphere that is swirling with information and meaning. The traditionally fluid nature of fables and myths makes them a good vehicle for expressing and understanding postmodern culture. Through them, we can recognize meaningful threads in the stories that exist and take up their threads to add our own parts of the stories to the cultural quilt of which we are part.

Just as Miyazaki said, I believe it is important to keep the building blocks of our culture alive for everyone's use. The old stories provide the grafting material for new ones to grow in a swiftly shifting global culture, which in turn, helps our culture to keep growing and changing as its members change. I like the idea of reciprocity between the old stories and the new ones, the old giving birth to the new and the new giving relevance to the old. The framework of the old story is like a stage set for accessing and creating an individual cultural viewpoint.

Some of the stories that this exhibition references are *Little Red Riding Hood* (Barchilon 1960), *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 1996), *Thomas the Tank Engine* (Awdry 1998), *The Old Woman in the Shoe* (Glori 2000) and *Bluebeard* (Barchilon 1960). The many variations of *Bluebeard* is a good example of a tale that has been told many times and adapted by many artists, even

though it isn't a very well known tale in our culture. It is a story about desire, power, fidelity and trust. It can also be a story of self-control (Atwood 1986 and Carter 2011).

In all of its imagery, the *Bluebeard* triptych is unresolved in its meaning. There is a tension inherent in the work; the wistful look of the young girl as she seeks the counsel of the crone, the clockworks up above their heads that symbolize the systems of our culture as well as the complexity with which our lives are built. On the inside is the family, with *Bluebeard's Last Wife*. Last, because she controls her desire to open the forbidden door, and thus avoids her husband's judgment and enjoys a life of comfort and security. But she herself is a tightly coiled spring, ready to leap out of the comfort of this nest. The two doors flanking the center image are both containers for another set of doors, which, after making the decision to open them, the viewer is invited to fill with an image of their choosing. The interpretation of this part of the piece will be firmly in the viewer's hands.

In *Mrs. Swift Learns to Speak Boy*, I imagined the author's wife, Mrs. Swift, left behind to raise her children, just as Gulliver's wife had been left behind, and as many women still are left behind on a daily basis. In the image, she is held captive by toys, but like Gulliver, she could have stood up and left any time she wanted to. Instead, Mrs. Swift also stays put, and chooses to take the opportunity to study the culture and behavior of her captors. In her role as a mother and a wife, part of Mrs. Swift's job is to understand and address the desires of her children. It is this duty, plus the love she feels for her children, that keeps her tied up and captive.

In a narrative sense, the image presents an ambiguous setting for the characters involved. It is both a bed and a landscape story setting. The toys are both playthings and real boys, both captors and charges. The material of the quilt lends itself to this ambiguity; quilts are traditionally made of fabric and have the function of creating warmth and security. This quilt, made of paper, denies both of those functions.

Fabric quilts are quite durable, and are made to stand up to washing and wear and tear. Although this quilt is surprisingly strong in its construction and materials, being made of paper, it is still quite fragile. It does, however fulfill another traditional function of the quilt, that of expressing narratives. Quilts have a long narrative history and have been a creative medium for women for centuries (Roberts 2007). This quilt continues that tradition by addressing the condition of postmodern motherhood, specifically the issue of freedom within the context of motherhood. The fragility of this paper quilt speaks to the topic of the conflict that can arise between a woman's duty to her children and to herself.

Rendering functional objects to make them useless in their primary functions is not a new idea. In 1936, Meret Oppenheim created *Object* (1936) with a fur lined cup, saucer and spoon. The text of these objects was changed with the addition of fur. While picture quilts are not new, changing from fabric to paper as the primary medium changes the text of the quilt in a similar way. Just as the use of fur on *Object* rendered the cup, saucer and spoon useless for their normal function, the use of paper renders this piece useless as a comfort object. The text of the quilt is changed because instead of comforting, it presents an uncomfortable situation in which the main character embraces discomfort for the sake of others. In this piece, in a sense, the woman becomes the quilt, or the comfort object.

Even though Mrs. Swift is big and strong enough to get up and leave if she wants to, she chooses to stay. But still, she is bound and in a vulnerable position. The birds in the tessellated border, usually free creatures, are also bound in their interlocked pattern.

Because of her size, Mrs. Swift could be seen as a representation of the monstrous feminine (Creed 1993). But in this case, she has allowed herself to be subdued for the sake of understanding the Lego (Lego Group 2013) men, or the young male perspective. Instead, she represents a mix of the powerful primal force of the feminine and the cultural mother; she

controls her power so that she can perform her duties by accepting confinement in order to gain access to understanding the young male perspective.

Dreamer in Training, another narrative paper quilt, examines another side of the mother-child relationship. The origin of this story comes out of my own active dream life, and the desire to pass that on to my son. When he was small, I used to ask him about his dreams, and one day, he told me he dreamed about the train in the story, *Thomas the Tank Engine* (Awdry 1998). I imagined teaching him how to fly in the dream world, over the same ‘land of counterpane’ (Werner 1950) in which Mrs. Swift was imprisoned. This is an image of freedom instead of the confinement of Mrs. Swift; it is a tender narrative, of the kinds of things mothers teach their children.

Red Riding Hood, an acrylic painting on canvas board, is a coming of age story in which a young girl comes to terms with her own sexual power and the danger and excitement the hungry wolf represents. An underlying theme of the work is her thin connection to the safety of her mother’s world, which is represented by the food basket and its tether, and threatened by the presence and her entertainment of the wolf. In this image, it is Red who is in control. She has her apple and eats it, too. I would like for this balance of power to be true for women, even though I know that in many ways in our culture, it is not. In many cultures, including our own, women are not encouraged to entertain their desires, much less satisfy them. Often in stories, women who choose to please themselves can be viewed as threatening, or even evil (Tatar 2004). Red’s free choice is represented by the three crows (three for a key) (Opie and Tatum 1989) in the upper right corner of the painting. Together, they carry her tether safely into her future. The three crows are a reference to the counting rhyme that goes:

One is for sorrow
Two is for joy
Three for a key
Four for a toy

Five for silver
Six for gold;
Seven for a secret, ne'er to be told
Eight is for heaven,
Nine is for hell,
And ten for the devil's own sell. (Opie and Tatum 1989, 235-6)

This rhyme is also represented in another coming of age story, in the painting *The Annunciation*. It references, of course, the story of Mary being told that she will give birth to baby Jesus. In my version of the annunciation, the girl is visited by three witches, instead of an angel. I see the witches as powerful, self-actualized women who are telling her about her choices in life. What they tell her is both exciting and scary, and she will soon have to make a choice whether to leave the safety of the place she comes from and accept the risks that come with seeking self-actualization, or stay in that secure little nest. The witches in this painting were inspired by the Crow Girls featured in the stories of Charles DeLint (2005). They are free spirits, and create their lives according to their own code. It is that individuality and authenticity that they are presenting as a valid option to the young girl.

The Old Woman in the Shoe's Younger Daughter is also a self-actualization story. Traditionally, *The Old Woman in the Shoe* (Glori 2000) is about fecundity and, in my opinion, women's plight at being slave to it. This young woman is determined to escape the shoe and the pattern of duty that is set for women in their traditional roles as wives and mothers. She will seek what is outside of her home and the traditional patterns and refuse to be confined to the expectations that would keep her bound by house and children. This can also be a birth image, in which the daughter emerges from the safety of her mother's womb.

Each of these narrative works present women in self-actualizing moments. We see them at ordinary and extraordinary points in their lives, each making choices about who and what they want to be. Just like the human experience, these images can fit many interpretive models. Which one is true at the moment depends on the viewpoint and background of the viewer. For

example, while I see *Dreamer in Training* from the maternal viewpoint, a male viewer may see it through the memory of his own childhood as a boy struggling to give up on the day and go to sleep. I enjoy the idea that the narratives I present remain fluid in their interpretations. I feel that that fluidity can contribute to the health and growth of a culture, especially during our time, in which culture can be viewed in a global context where no single interpretation could possibly suffice. Art that creates opportunities for many interpretations helps to clarify personal and cultural landmarks in a many-layered and quickly changing environment.

Visually, I can trace my development from the work of Rembrandt and Caravaggio for their handling of paint and light, through Manet, Matisse and Picasso for their form and line, to Remedios Varo and the surrealist painters of the 20th century for their narrative styles, and contemporary artist Paula Rego for her narrative approach and her frank subject matter. Of all of these, Varo has had the most prominent place in my development, both in composition and in idea. Her magical realist work is painted with a vocabulary of alchemy, science and religion. She creates alternate worlds that have their own laws of physics while examining aspects of her own experience. Her example has given me the freedom to invent worlds, which serve my own versions of the narratives I am exploring. In addition to being a narrativist, she was also a fine draughtsman. The background structure in the painting *The Annunciation* was inspired by one of her paintings titled *Bankers in Action*, circa 1957 (Chadwick 1991).

I also admire the work of Mexican artists Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orrozco. The substantial forms of some of my human figures stem their work. Varo, along with Leonora Carrington and Leonor Fini are artists associated with the Surrealist movement of the 1920's. The magical, or fantastic elements in my work are descended from theirs. A later addition to my library of references is the work of Paula Rego. I am particularly interested in her

contemporary treatments of traditional fairy tales. These artists have been my teachers in the area of visual narrative.

The narrative paper quilts were a direct result of my viewing a wall-sized drawing called *Sanctuary Dreams* by artist Aya Uekawa (2009). This drawing was composed of 49 (seven rows of seven) drawings, each framed and placed in a grid so that it formed a complete picture. It seemed to me that I was looking at this giant scene through a window frame. Instead of framing each of my prints, I combined this device with a quilting pattern that resembles a window frame, and sewed the papers to create one large image, just as Ms. Uekawa did in *Sanctuary Dreams*, in my pieces called *Mrs. Swift Learns to Speak Boy* and *Dreamer in Training*.

In my most recent work, which consists of drawings translated into printed images, my influences are from the field of illustration. I admire Garth Williams, Hayao Miyazaki and Chris Van Allsburg and Charles Rackham for their illustrative style of drawing. In a literary sense, *Mrs. Swift* has roots in *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathon Swift (1996), and also in a poem (illustrated by Garth Williams) by Robert Louis Stevenson, called *The Land of Counterpane*. (Werner 1950). I have also drawn heavily from the stories of *Bluebeard* and *Mother Goose* (Barchilon 1960). As I develop as an artist and cultural interpreter, I rely on these artists to provide me with a continual visual and contextual heritage for my work.

In a technical sense, I work mainly from my imagination, meaning I rarely use models or visual references. I like to do that because it makes my renderings more illustrative, rather than photographically correct. The irregularities in the drawings contribute to the aura of my images. There is a concept in Japanese aesthetics called *wabi sabi*. In *wabi sabi*, it is said that “nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect” (Powell 2004). It is the concept that the imperfection and impermanence that result from the making of an object are part of its beauty and contribute to its aura and meaning. Because my work comes from my imagination and is

imperfect in a realist sense, there is a distance of disbelief created that helps to frame my subject as an interpretive or illustrative image, rather than just a depiction of a factual situation. My images are very much like visual fairy tales. Like those old stories, they address the viewer from a liminal standpoint. That liminality serves to prepare the way for many interpretive possibilities. The imperfections in the images contribute to their interpretative flexibility.

There is a saying among sculptors that the “clay is the life, the plaster is the death and the bronze is the resurrection”. This can apply to my process as well. The drawings are the birth and life of the idea. The pencil is like a fluid texture than can be very much like clay, rendering the stuff of life. Often, out of the corner of my eye, I think I can see an image move. When that happens, something I refer to as the “quickenings”, I know that what I am working on is on the right path to becoming a piece of art. I think that when this happens, it is what aestheticians refer to as “aesthetic emotion” aroused by “significant form” (Bell 1914). I don’t know if I achieve it as far as every viewer is concerned, but sometimes, I achieve it for myself, and that movement that I sense, (even though I know it isn’t real) is evidence of that form.

The death of the drawing comes in the form of the scanning and refining that takes place between the drawing and the scan. The scanner “sees” differently than my human eyes do, and since it will print exactly what it senses, I have to alter the drawing according to what I want to show up in the print. There is a kind of reciprocity that exists between the old kind of skill like drawing and the technological aspects of scanning and printing the transparency of the scan. I bounce back and forth between those two techniques until I find a balance that will produce a good intaglio print.

When I first learned this process, I had a very difficult time with my prints turning out to be too light. My response was to darken the darks. Through the back and forth process between drawings and scans, I eventually learned that the reason the images were too light was that the

mid tones needed strengthening, not the darks. This process has helped me to develop my skills in representing a fuller range of values in a drawing. I've also become more careful about mark making as a result of this process. The scanner is very sensitive to differences in value, so a mark made with an inadvertent pressure of the pencil that seems to blend in a drawing will look out of place in its scanned state. I look for interruptions of value and change the drawing to make the scan work better.

The resurrection comes when the plate is finally processed and printed. The transformation from scan to print adds further information to the image, (or sometimes takes away information) resulting from paper choice, ink color and the wiping process. In being resurrected into a print, the image produces a different kind of aura than it did as a drawing.

The specific printing process that I use is intaglio printing from photogravure plates. In short, I make a drawing, scan and adjust it for value, print the scan on an inkjet printer onto a transparency. I use the transparency of the drawing to burn the image onto a solar plate that has been prepared with an exposure of an aquatint sheet. This sheet intensifies the darks in the image by adding a subtle texture to the plate. The standard ultraviolet exposure for all of the plates in the *Bluebeard* triptych is 1 minute for the aquatint sheet, and fifteen seconds for the image. The plate is processed by rinsing in distilled water, spraying with vinegar, rinsing again and then set by heat and more ultraviolet light (Welden 2001).

The plate is printed using the very old process of wiping and printing as it is done in intaglio printmaking. I like this process because it embraces old and new techniques, just like the stories I am telling are both old and new.

The three major print pieces in this exhibition were printed on Okawara paper, and hand colored using Prismacolor pencils and, in the case of *Bluebeard*, pastel. The relationship between the pencils and pastels and the printed ink on the paper is very much like the technique of glazing

color over a value structure in the panel paintings of the Northern Renaissance (Constable 1979). The print provides the modeling of the image and the colors deepen and enliven those values. The biggest difference, besides the medium itself, is that the pencil/pastel remains transparent and the ink remains visible. The underlying value structure in panel painting usually disappears under the layers of paint.

The quilts were constructed as a traditional quilt is constructed. They were sewn in blocks and have a batting and a backing. In medium, though, the entire quilt is made of paper. The prints are printed on Okawara, a handmade Japanese paper. The dark value paper is backed Unryu, the medium value is Metallic Butterflies (I used the non-printed plain back side), and the light value and the tessellation are printed on handmade Bagesse-text. The papers are surprisingly strong and were easy to sew. The biggest problem I encountered with sewing on paper is that it is much less forgiving than fabric. It doesn't self heal like fabric does, so places where seams were torn out and re-sewn are visible in the form of visible needle holes.

Quilting has a long cooperative tradition among women. Much like the community events of barn raising, in which groups would cooperate to complete a huge task like building barns and houses, throughout history, women have often engaged in "quilting bees" that shortened the time it takes to complete a quilt by sharing the work (Roberts 2007). Women also found support and companionship within the quilting circle, as the patterns of their lives were shared and passed on. I employed the quilting bee experience with *Mrs. Swift*. I constructed the blocks and quilt face, and then held a community art event to quilt the work. At the end of the event, the quilt was nearly complete, and the shared experience of quilting and conversation reached back to the sewing tradition of women and community that quilting bees help create. I like the fact that the personalities of the people who participated in the quilting bee are evident in

the stitches. They each brought different levels of skill to the quilt, and the stitches bring a quality of handicraft to the work. It would be lovely if this tradition could be continued.

I quilted the second quilt myself. For *Dreamer in Training*, I constructed all of the quilt blocks and quilted them as I went. Both methods have their advantages; one communal, one solitary, just like parts of life.

The *Bluebeard* triptych is a combination of print and paint. I made the drawings and prints and glued them to mat boards. I then cut them out and added color using chalk pastel. The mat boards were then adhered to acrylic painted canvas covered panels. This piece also has an element of wood. It has an extensive walnut frame, and also an interactive element that involves carpentry work. In its open position, the two side panels on the right and left of the center Bluebeard panel are painted like doors, and within these doors are two tiny doors made out of wood that can be opened by the viewer. Behind the small doors, there are small background images; on the right, it is painted like a sky, and on the left, it is painted like an empty shelf. These images have small magnets embedded within them. Under the triptych will be placed a shelf that will hold several small printed images, also mounted on board. These images have a small metal plate attached to the back of them. The viewer will participate in the meaning of the piece by choosing which images will be placed behind the small doors. A further choice to be made by the viewer is to decide whether to open the door on the right at all. This door has a tiny lock and key, and, just like Bluebeard's wife, the viewer will decide to unlock it or not. Their choices to fill the spaces will be an egg, a stand of trees, a key, a sleeping bear, a wolf, a woman rowing a scull, a girl carrying a heavy burden and another door.

The woodworking is an integral part of this work. I chose the heavy, dark walnut to convey the substantial nature of women that is often overlooked when considering the strength women can exhibit. The cabinet itself reflects the doors, an element in the narrative of

Bluebeard. The window frames on the front serve as an introduction to the piece, inviting the viewer to come inside and hear the story.

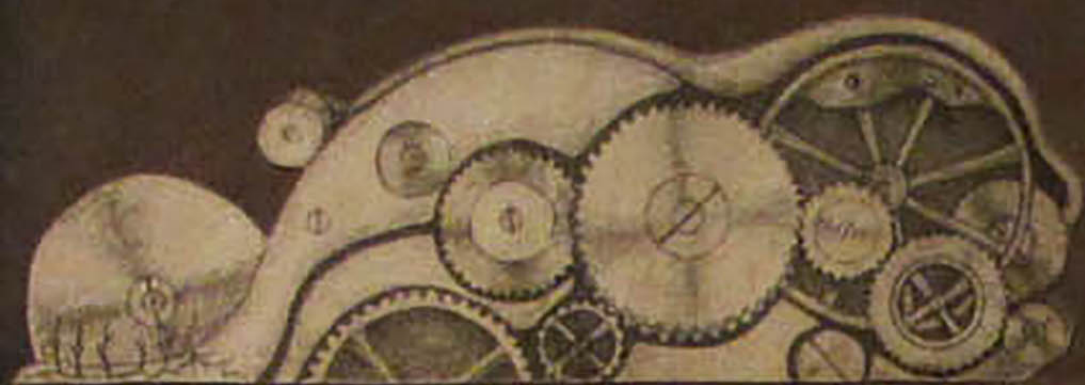
The other pieces in my exhibition are acrylic on canvas or canvas board paintings. I make my own canvas boards by stretching and gluing canvas onto birch plywood sheets, followed by a layer of gesso. I paint from dark to light in a very dry fashion. I use the texture of the un-sanded canvas to build of layers of thin dry paint. I used this process in the painted portions of the *Bluebeard* panels as well.

The techniques used to create this exhibition are a combination of all of my skills as an artist, from drawing and sculpture, to paint and finally, print. All of my lessons and teacher's words guided me throughout this process, informing and reinforcing my own inner artist's voice.

As a narrative artist in the postmodern era, I am interested in creating and selecting the many threads that make up the "quilt" of human culture without committing to any single grand narrative. Those threads are the little stories that describe our contemporary culture. In this postmodern era, in which we find it difficult to accept grand narratives, "little stories" are more accessible and lend themselves to interpretation in our varied global culture. My work is an acknowledgement of the postmodern condition. This exhibition offers new responses to the problems of desire, duty and freedom that women face within the context of traditional patriarchal culture by creating new story threads from the old fabric of traditional narratives that address the self-actualization process of contemporary women.



Lynette Krieger
Catalina Pimentel







Small text on the left wall, likely a museum label or informational text.











