

BLOODY MARY

I have developed a healthy passion for the anatomy museum at Glasgow University, and its muddled display techniques. My favourite to date has been a beautiful petite bean of a clitoris, complete with little pink hood (a fleshy nun) next to an almost equally sized, and seemingly flayed, rabbit's cock. I started calling them the twins. Both so similar in size and shape, floating in the middle of their own specimen jar, suspended in fluid that is definitely not clear and hints at a terrible smell.

It wasn't until a vigorous obsession with the Special Collections department (also at Glasgow University) kicked in a little later that I realised the frighteningly divine design (must be) that had brought these two little jars to sit next to each other. Here in Special Collections was the statement of Mary Toft, otherwise known as "the Rabbit Woman of Godalming," a woman who, in 1726, claimed to give birth to rabbits. Now, there is some terrible gore in the idea of the half-human. It makes me think of weird patches of skin and fur, a nakedness as ridiculous as that of being naked only from the waist down. But worse still is the idea of how it came about. I say worse, but in actual fact I mean preposterous, maybe also intriguing, repulsive and not entirely unexciting. Alas, in this case Mary did not couple with a rabbit; the explanation for this miracle was that it was a severe case of maternal impression. Ah, of course! It was believed, by those high-flying surgeons (including London physician Sir Richard Manningham) that attended her many bouts of labor, that her strong craving for rabbit meat, dreams of rabbits, and much time spent trying to catch rabbits in the garden during her pregnancy had meant that Mary bore rabbits rather than a human child.

Her statement starts with the wonderfully defiant, "I was delivered of a monstrous birth." It isn't until page five that Mary lets us in on the fact that a visit from the butcher's wife resulted in the woman trying to push a whole, dead, adult rabbit into poor Mary's vagina, ignoring her misgivings of course. This was to prove unsuccessful and it was decided that the rabbit should be chopped up first. She then went through the rigmarole of many little bloodless faux deliveries of feet, legs, pelts and heads until a total of fifteen whole rabbits had been born. Turns out bits and pieces of stone-dead rabbit bodies were furtively delivered to Mary throughout the whole dirty scam and she would whip them out and whip them up whilst no-one was looking. Some well-brained medic, smelling a rat, eventually called for Mary's constant supervision and the fraud was swiftly exposed. Following the threat that she herself would be carved up in the name of science so her extraordinary uterus could be examined, she confessed to her mucky trickery and was flung in the slammer -- naturally. The duped surgeons tried, fruitlessly, to salvage their doomed careers. But, alas, no dice, for whom in their right mind would believe in such a furry tale...?

Mairi Lafferty

Mairi Lafferty has studied at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee and will complete a master's degree at the Glasgow School of Art in 2008. She has shown her work throughout the UK and taken part in a number of collaborative projects both visual and musical. Currently Lafferty is a co-ordinator of MFA presents... a video art screening at the CCA (Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow).