

Personal Bestiariums: Imaginary Creatures of Artistic Mythologies

Traditionally, the function of art was to provide the great mythologies of mankind—religions and ideologies—with visual images, but in the twentieth century it acquired a more independent status, having started to generate new myths of its own. Grand narratives and the modernist mythology of autonomous demiurgic art language were replaced by small postmodern narratives that no longer pretended to universality and had even more myth-like logic: the narratives are syncretistic and ambivalent, and they omit the determinacy of binary oppositions, such as good versus evil, and reality versus fantasy or fiction.

The need for myth, or a supernatural narrative pattern, is a fundamental element of human experience. Contemporary (mass-/pop-) culture suggests alternative realities—such as anime or videogames—asccribed with quasi-magic qualities. Celebrity and sport industries, in producing contemporary icons, also reveal mythological structures. Artist-mythmakers, creating their individual worlds, often borrow motifs from cultural mythologies.

The essential element of mythology is the inclusion of unique imaginary characters, non-existent beings or monsters. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, monsters were regarded not necessarily as evil, but as magical prodigy. Numerous bestiaries contained lists of monstrosities; *Marvels of the East*, an early account of Western encounters with Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, described various fabulous (and imaginary) races. A revival of fascination with weird creatures occurred with the rise of Romanticism, manifesting in literature, visual arts and, later, cinema. Monsters are represented as either dangerous or friendly, and had metaphorical meanings.

Sigga Björg Sigurðardóttir generates her own world, inhabited with little busy monsters, cute and abominable at the same time. Sigga Björg's neo-pagan mythopoetics and "dark Nordic visionism" have a child-like quality that recalls the fantastic characters from children's books by Scandinavian authors such as Tove Jansson and Astrid Lindgren.

Lorraine Sue-Fern Yeung's video shows an "everyday miracle" that seems so natural, that almost doesn't surprise. Human hair in a shower drain becomes alive as three tiny creatures that then combine themselves into one: fussing merrily, they plug the drain and slither off-screen. Yeung's hairy fairies may engage with magical beliefs that parts of the human body (hair, nails, etc.) preserve some of their power even after being removed.

Faceless, mannequin-like characters that embody the myth of "man without qualities"—alienated and anonymous in modern society—has a rich iconography in art of the twentieth century, evident in the work of Giorgio de Chirico, René Magritte, and Mark Kostabi. The protagonist of Erica Eyres' video makes her face resemble the surface of an egg; her belief that this extreme removal of individuality will make her extraordinary reveals a kind of idiotic purism. Plastic surgery has power that could be compared to that of alchemy. Both aspire to create a new human being, but instead of a homunculus appears a clinical monster—an idea developed to an unbearable absurdity by Orlan.

Katinka Simonse's *Popple* recalls the Trickster-Coyote figure from Native American mythologies: Coyote has enormous sexual energy, manifested in his ability to invert himself through his own anus. Cats are usually associated with the feminine and dogs with the masculine, so *Popple* acts as a kind of hermaphrodite that brings together opposites. Simonse's work consists of solely animal parts, making it

chthonic and amorphic. This type of hybrid is unlike creatures that include human elements—such as sphinxes—which are perceived as more rational; *Poppo* is a chimera, dealing only with subconscious fears and desires.

Despite being private, the iconography and individual mythologies invented by the artists are, nevertheless, able to communicate meaning: personal metaphors, symbols and allegories still operate with common codes that are easy to understand. Literal story-cycles and non-narrative dreamscapes are activated by magical atmospheres that make the impossible possible, convincing us to believe in these worlds, at least for a moment.

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Sources

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