

Claire Stigliani cracks open fairy tales to expose their darkness



Drawing, 2015. Acrylic, colored pencil, and wax on rice paper, 19 x 25 inches. Credit: Courtesy of Claire Stigliani

By Rafael Francisco Salas, *Special to the Journal Sentinel*

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Madison— Doomed love and fractured fairy tales dominate Claire Stigliani’s vision. Her artwork is an imaginative reflection on longing and transgression.

The title of her solo show at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, “Half Sick of Shadows,” is drawn from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shalott,” with its heroine weaving a tapestry from visions seen in a mirror.

Stigliani sees herself as an artist doomed to indirectly reflect her world, too, and her visions are mediated through layers of objects and mediums in the show. The exhibit features five distinct cycles, or series, each presented through a group of drawings, paintings, video and three-dimensional puppet sets.

Her narratives run deep with myth and folklore but are also autobiographical. Each of the stories begins with a work on paper, which is expanded into a video using puppetry and model stage sets. The videos, in turn, become inspiration for further two-dimensional works. Stigliani, Eve and the Lady of Shalott are all present as characters, serenaded by the likes of the von Trapp family, The Muppets, Miley Cyrus, and folk singer and poet Jewel.

In one of Stigliani’s videos, the Lady of Shalott, as a puppet inspired by a Pre-Raphaelite painting, must leave her loom and float inexorably down the river to her death. Stigliani has riffed on the mythology around the character before, and the themes of longing, the artistic muse, objectification and desire become anchors for the exhibit.

“The Snow Child,” a short story by Angela Carter, and a deconstruction of male desire and female revenge, is another fairy tale refashioned by Stigliani. On a puppet show stage, pillow-stuffing snow and chalky birch trees create a magically frozen landscape. A count and his wife play out their basest desires on the pristine snow. Violence and lust stain it with blood in this unadulterated vision, unflinchingly describing the psychology and bald sexuality that bubbles beneath the surface of some old stories.

Similarly, Stigliani, as puppeteer, takes on the story of Genesis, exploring the character and culpability of Eve. What struck me as I watched the video and navigated the minutiae of the sets and drawings was the richness of imagination that Stigliani has achieved. All the works are constructed down to the smallest moments. The puppet dramas have a filmic sensitivity, the camera lingering on small gestures and meaningful stillnesses. The detail of Eve chomping on a certain apple or of her eyes being gently closed by two strings pulled from off screen are disarming and inventive. The cavorting of the animals in the garden deserve their own spinoff. There is no end of detail and surprise.

Some of the characters begin to meld with the artist herself. Indeed, some of them draw and paint their plights within their video dramas.

Stigliani’s own centrality to the project becomes most evident, though, in “The Studio” and “The Apartment.” In these videos, a form of self-portraiture, Stigliani is a character shown making art for this very exhibition. She is busy in her studio and miniature copies of the New Yorker and tiny drawing pads are strewn about. Her apartment is also rendered complete with a puppet dog and a tiny reproduction of a painting by her former professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, T.L. Solien. In both of these narratives, Stigliani pulls the strings and manipulates an even more petite self-portrait acting out her work in the studio with even tinier puppets. It gets complicated, and very small.

In “The Apartment,” the puppet version of Stigliani quietly sits on her bed and draws while surfing the web. We soon find that she is improbably attached to a female marionette that is bound and gagged in the corner. When Stigliani draws, the woman’s bonds twitch and seem to tighten. But when the woman struggles to free herself, Stigliani’s drawing goes haywire. The act of creation is an act of torture. They are bound together, and both artist and captive appear to suffer. The work is a haunting allegory of the artistic process and what the creative mind struggles against.

Conceptually, Stigliani is laying bare the struggles of her heroines in order to understand herself as an artist and woman. She has created an epic, raw reflection, a masterful palimpsest of identity.

“Claire Stigliani: Half Sick of Shadows” is on view through Sept. 4 at The Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St., Madison. For more information visit mmoca.org.

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The Apartment, 2015. Acrylic, colored pencil, and wax on rice paper, 31 x 38 inches. Courtesy of Claire Stigliani