

‘This is the fluid in which we meet each other ...’¹

On Alice Maher’s Recent Drawings — *The Glorious Maids of the Charnel House* (2016)

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Much has already been written about Alice Maher’s forays into and excavations of myth, folklore and phantasy. And yet these recent large-scale drawings — immaculately figurative, executed in a combination of fine, sinuous and webbed lines — whilst returning us to such familiar ground, also journey through mythic, folkloric and phantasmatic themes to instantiate a provocation between line and symbol, vision and representation. Usually found near churches, a Charnel House is a depository for unearthed ossified human remains that, within our Western inheritance, signifies death, decay, destruction, horror: the literal, human-oriented separation between our living, mortal life and an imagined heavenly life hereafter. Yet within indigenous Native American societies, the Charnel House was a place of care which served the needs of the dead: a temporary spatial housing of souls where flesh was stripped from bone whilst the spirit passaged from the material world to the realm of revered ancestors. However, the bones that sometimes abound in Maher’s drawings, such as ‘Nereid’ and ‘The Gardener’, are fluid, flexible outcrops of still live bodies that, like Darwin’s earthworms, are in a process of continual becoming as world-making, as re-making of ever-earthly, corporeal materiality. In *The Glorious Maids of the Charnel House* drawings the artist’s gesture explores the Charnel House as ‘a given space’ and organizes it ‘according to its own possibilities ... into image and into representation’ to evoke what can be described as an *inscriptive* process that initiates a *transformation* of the physical and psychical space of the Charnel House as a possibility that already exists in our collective imaginaries.² Something beyond the becoming-metamorphic transformations of many of Maher’s earlier works is at stake here; a circle completing its arc to stitch a uniquely feminine imaginary into extant codes of representation.

Forensic in their detail, these shape shifting, antler sprouting, organ bearing, smoke breathing *glorious* maids irreverently call down and mischievously intervene with the often problematic history of visual representations of the feminine. Re-weaving this visual history into our contemporary moment, ‘The Great Virgin’ is a re-encounter with the *Mater Dolorosa*, the Virgin of the Sorrows. But Maher’s Virgin-icon, removed from her sacred trappings, weeps rosy-hued, tears into a globulous, fleshy, carnate pool of lungs that are breathing *life* into life, open and seemingly suspended in air. Anything but the celestial androgyne of typical angelic visual depictions, the curved lines and eye-filled flesh of Maher’s ‘Seraph’ seem to connect us to Carolee Schneeman’s *Eye Body* (1963). In her personal notes, written the year that she made this work, Schneeman writes: ‘That the body is in the eye; sensations received visually take hold on the total organism’ with a ‘vital necessity drawn by the senses to the fingers of the eye ... a mobile, tactile event into which the eye leads the body’³ In ‘Eye and Mind’ (1961) Maurice Merleau-Ponty

proposed that the painter lends his body to the world and changes the world into paintings through the intertwining of vision and movement.⁴ Yet as Schneeman reported, she used her *body* to extend her paintings so as to ‘challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like men.’⁵ Rather than emitting light, Maher’s woman-angel boldly absorbs it in a bodily block of solid black and retransmits *light as seeing, as feeling*, through eye-bodies drawn out and etched into the fine pencilled, not painted, strokes of line whereby the artist’s gestural flourish is at once an act of playful disobedience and creative transgression that cooks a snook at the visual and textual histories of the feminine that inform and contain us.

Glorious maids they are indeed; Maher’s drawings remind us that whilst all of our bodies are a ‘Body without end’, this does not mean that the female body is condemned to be inscribed as a site of unending openness or infinite assailability.⁶ Rather Maher’s maids attest to bodies as fields and horizons of possibility in the sense that Jean Luc Nancy describes:

Bodies aren’t some kind of fullness or filled space... they are an open space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly spacious than spatial, what could be called a place. Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a there, a “here”, a “here is”, for a this. The body-place isn’t full or empty, since it doesn’t have an outside or an inside, any more than it has parts, a totality, functions, or finality ... it is a skin, variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated orificed, evasive, invaded, stretched, relaxed, excited, distressed, tied, untied. In these and thousands of other ways, the body makes room for existence.⁷

This here and this-ness of the body that Nancy proposes is a chiasmic crossing-over between inside and outside; like skin, the body is at once porous, permeable, resistant and resisting in its exigencies and eventings in the world. Calling upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s exposition of the grotesque, these works of Maher elicit a particularly feminine carnivalesque by making an unholy, magnificent and delightfully profane spectacle of themselves. As Mary Russo observes:

There is a phrase that still resonates from childhood. Who says it? The mother’s voice—not my own mother’s, perhaps, but the voice of an aunt, an older sister, or the mother of a friend. It is a harsh, matronizing phrase, directed towards the behaviour of other women:

“she [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself.”

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure ... For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries.⁸

But these gloriously defiant maids simply do not care to heed that matronizing tone. Extorting, distilling and braiding a representational web between Hieronymus Bosch and Leonora

Carrington's fantastical subject-object-animal-vegetal transfigurations, Maher's mutating maids are excessively, incongruently and defiantly *within* processes of becoming and change. Nowhere is this intertwining, this mixing up between subject and object, inside and outside, more apparent than in the work chosen as emblematic of this exhibition, 'The Diviner', in which an enigmatically attentive squatting surgeon-midwife inserts her hand into the entrails, belly, and/or womb of a hybrid half-human, half-animal creature in ecstatic throws of rapture. Impropriety and in-betweenness abounds, and are devilishly celebrated. Through a disturbance of boundaries, of divisions, a net is stitched between the proper and improper, between culture and nature. As Hélène Cixous asserts 'What are we trying to grasp between the lines, in between the strokes, in the net that we're weaving' is:

Not the person, but the precious in that person, not the Virgin, not the child, but what is between them in this very moment, linking them—a secret, that which mysteriously renders those two unforgettable. I sense: it's not divinity, it's whim ... it's not a question of drawing the contours, *but of what escapes the contour*, the secret movement, the breaking, the torment, the unexpected.⁹

What kind of secret, what kind of enigmatic knowledge is being transmitted here in this linking between animal and human, inside and outside that is not the divinity of 'The Diviner', that is not the celestial of the 'Seraph'? Meditating on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), Walter Benjamin remarks upon the angel's face that is turned toward the past and perceiving a chain of events that is a singular catastrophe. The angel would 'like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise' and so the wind catches the angel's wings, irresistibly propelling him into the future.¹⁰ As Klee's angel cannot intervene in the past but is caught in the storm of progress that hurtles him ever-forward into the future, so the diviner, by magical and intuitive attunement to the natural world, is understood to have the power to predict future events; that is, to soothsay or name the future. Maher's rather queer diviner and angel somehow question the legitimacy of any division between past, future and present: her seraph and diviner are both of our time and of no earthly time. Here, there is the moment of linking time through these two figures that escape their conceptual and representational framings. What is at stake, I think, is an investigation into the source of creativity. Or, rather, what power legitimates the source of creativity?

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, claimed that the womb as a point of origin *must* be denied so that the child may entertain the phantasy of a bisexual birth: birth as the prerogative of both the male and female parent. Artist and psychoanalytic theorist, Bracha L. Ettinger draws our attention to how, with this erasure, woman/mother is evacuated from any contribution to individual creativity. Referencing Otto Rank's 'The Myth of the Birth of the Hero' (1914), Ettinger reminds us that the role of the mother, and of woman more generally, in this Genius-Hero complex is relegated to 'either an attractive object of father-son rivalry or a nursing object: either a copulating animal or a nourishing animal ... But between copulating and nursing it seems that there is a void that holds' the Genius-Hero-Artist together.¹¹ Ettinger suggests the

archaic mother/womb as the void holding this complex together and she proposes that the phantasy of having been born from no womb allows the male subject to hold 'the power of creation' himself.¹² To my mind, Maher's *Glorious Maids of the Charnel House* resist this secession of creativity to the Male-Hero-Genius complex that Rank outlines and Ettinger reinterprets. These maids arbitrate and negotiate visual and textual histories of the feminine, to reinsert the feminine as source of creativity. Nicole Loraux argues that 'power is first a matter of naming. And myth says that in very ancient times the feminine was the giver of names.'¹³ Loraux, no more than Ettinger, is not indexing the feminine as the figure of woman or indeed mother. What is at stake here is the archaic feminine which is not the infernally enigmatic and psychotic-inducing *Thing* of Jacques Lacan but rather an originary feminine sexual difference that Ettinger rotates to name *Woman-m/Other* as a primary subjectivising agency. This originary feminine specificity from which we all, regardless of sex or gender, first differentiate opens us onto the space of 'extimacy' that cuts across the binary between inside and outside, intimacy and exteriority, by linking us to the corporeality of the archaic maternal body. To insert the inside/outside space/place of the late intrauterine encounter between archaic mother and becoming-infant into a signifying chain, Ettinger borrows the Latin word 'Matrix' to signal the womb as both a space/place and a symbolic construct that 'is not dependent on the cleft between the signifier and the signified.'¹⁴ Ettinger writes:

Feminine-matrixial sexual difference is primary and originary. It is in no way dependent on phallic difference and bears no comparison to it, except by way of compromise and approximation of meaning. Feminine-matrixial difference is an impregnation of a borderline that is not the disconnection and separation in front of an erasing and displacement that lies behind it.¹⁵

Maher's *Glorious Maids*, whilst calling upon a history of the grotesque and abject female body, at the same time re-insert this archaic and originary aspect of the feminine into the visual histories from which it has been erased and displaced. Refusing abjection, Maher's maids perform a certain kind of female grotesquerie as carnival, as spectacle, but which is yet an observance, a ceremony, an errant celebration of fluidity, of the crossings of borders: a refusal to comply with the division of the sexes, the parsing up of subject-object, human-animal, exterior-interior, proper-improper, pure and impure.

One work in particular, 'Matrix', indexes this refusal of division. The writhing diadem of the 'Matrix' maid connects to the serpentine coils of snakes on the head of Medusa: a figure that contains contradiction and paradox by being both mesmerising and terrifying. This wormly, Gordian halo balanced so artfully and yet so very precariously upon this maid's crown also recalls us to Maher's previous works such as 'Andromeda' (1999), 'Coma Berenices' (1999), 'The Snail Chronicles (Sleep of Ecstasy)' (2004) and even 'Cell' (1991). In this way, the history of the feminine is recalibrated, both through the knotty and knotted latticed "matrix"-like connections and refusals between the artist's extant works and her current drawings but also because we are reminded that the Gordian Knot is a cipher that references contradiction and paradox, acting as a metaphoric

analogue for a seemingly intractable, unsolvable problem. Creating a *fluid space*, in a spirit of world-making, Maher's maids hold such webs of anomaly and ambiguity in play. These *Glorious Maids* refuse the corralling of a certain kind of archaic knowing into subsequent authoritative and hierarchical disciplinary knowledges founded on separation and division, whether those knowledges be textual or visual. Borrowing words of consignment and representative tropes from our lexical and visual histories, these maids are re-named, re-presented and redeployed to subversive, impish and witty purpose. In this way, these works solicit us to reconsider the histories that bind us and continue to separate us. We are invited into a time/space of exchange with the provocation being to delight in transgression: to countenance, even if perhaps only for a short while, this opportunity to inhabit a fluid space in which we may, just, meet each other.

¹ Sylvia Plath (1962), *By Candlelight*.

² Serge Tisseron (1994) 'All Writing is Drawing: The Spatial Development of the Manuscript' in *Yale French Studies*, No. 84, *Boundaries: Writing & Drawing* (1994), pp. 29-41; pp. 41-2.

³ Quoted in Amelia Jones (1998) *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. vvi-vi.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1961) 'Eye and Mind' translated by Carleton Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception* ed. by James Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press (1964), pp. 159-190.

⁵ Carolee Schneeman (1963) 'Eye Body' in *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* edited by Bruce McPherson. New Paltz, New York: Documentext (1979), p. 52.

⁶ Hélène Cixous (1976) 'The Laugh of the Medusa' translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen in *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, p. 889.

⁷ Jean Luc Nancy (2008) *Corpus* translated by Richard A. Rand. New York: Fordham University Press, p. 15.

⁸ Mary Russo (1995) *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*. New York and London: Routledge, p. 54.

⁹ Hélène Cixous (1998) *Stigmata*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 19.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin (1940) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' translated by Harry Zohn in *Illuminations* (1969). New York: Schocken Books, p. 249.

¹¹ Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event' in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 172.

¹² Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event' in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 172.

¹³ Nicole Loraux (1996) *The Experiences of Tiresias: The Feminine in the Greek Man*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Legacy Library, p. 186.

¹⁴ Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event' in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 183.

¹⁵ Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event' in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 183.