

## **They Come Bearing Cake: Carnival and Ecofeminist Play in Dana Sherwood's *Horses for the Trees*.**

By Chelsea Kinchin-Smith, November 2019.

Until very recently in her practice, artist Dana Sherwood was a “plan person.” “I kept finding that I would go in with a plan, and then because I was working with animals, the plan was always upended,” she says of her 2017 video project *Feral Cakes*. “The films that were much more interesting to me were the ones that went wrong.”<sup>1</sup> Over a period of months, Sherwood set out elaborate feasts for her nonhuman neighbors—raccoons and possums, mostly—in a South Florida suburb. She filmed each night’s excesses with infrared cameras, later exhibiting the edited footage.

These feasts, in equal part absurd and sincere and which Sherwood prepares for local animal populations, have formed a core part of her practice and situate her within a milieu of artists creating work in response to the Anthropocene and its attendant ecological crises. Sherwood’s approach is distinctive in its embrace of play: in *Feral Cakes*, for instance, the banquets are presented on a children’s dining table, complete with a tablecloth, teacups, and chairs. With raccoons and housecats sharing at the same table, the imagery that the work facilitates is reminiscent of a mad tea party in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a recurring touchpoint for Sherwood, both visually and philosophically. She is willing to fall down the rabbit-hole. “Being an artist, I have a lot more freedom to experiment without adhering to the scientific method,” she said in 2016. “I allow my curiosity to take the lead.”<sup>2</sup>

Her whimsical aesthetic, which emphasizes the eccentricities of her subjects and the strangeness of the way humans relate to them, may reveal different kinds of truths than scientific methodology might, but this playful position offers a valuable counterbalance within ecophilosophical discussion and action. As noted ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway writes, “Perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible.”<sup>3</sup> That is, certain kinds of connection within the natural world require humans to give up control in order to make space for improvisation. It is in this spirit of disruption, experimentation, and play that Sherwood has created the body of work exhibited in *Horses for the Trees*.

Comprised of watercolors, the film-cum-installation *Sight Equus Mongolia* [figs. 1-5], and, for the first time on public view, oil paintings, Sherwood’s new oeuvre is populated by horses, raccoons, and a series of women, sometimes nameless and universal, other times identifiable as Alice of Wonderland, the mythological Persephone or Medusa, or some combination of the three. Sherwood has spoken about her work in terms of ecofeminism, citing Haraway and Carolyn Merchant as particular influences around the critical questions that animate it: “How do we create a bond with the natural world so that we see ourselves as part of it and invested in it? How do we recognize the intelligence of nature and

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Sherwood in discussion with the author, October 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Sherwood to Danielle Kalamaras in “Straight Talk with Dana Sherwood,” *SciArt Magazine*, February 2016, 18. This is not to say that science does not have its place in Sherwood’s work. She is careful to work in areas where human and nonhumans already live in close proximity, and she bases her menus on the diets of the animals she is likely to encounter in each particular location.

<sup>3</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016), 23-24.

other species, rather than seeing something that we can dominate and control?”<sup>4</sup> With these questions in mind, ecofeminism is a productive lens through which to view works like *Sea of Cakes* [fig. 16] and *Alice/Persephone* [fig. 8]. Each depicts a woman mounted on horseback and holding aloft a confectionary-laden cake stand. These images recall and subvert traditional equestrian portraits, the oversized statues and paintings that memorialize the power, with very few exceptions, of male monarchs and military leaders. Visually mirroring these precedents, the heroines in Sherwood’s art are similarly empowered by their poses and central placement within their respective picture planes. Through Sherwood’s ecofeminist looking-glass, however, they have not come to dominate. Rather than wielding weapons, they come bearing cake.

By adopting, then undermining the pageantry of hierarchical structure in this way, Sherwood’s paintings evoke the carnivalesque, an inversion of the established order as theorized by the twentieth-century philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Stemming from the carnival tradition of religious feasts and festivities, the carnivalesque is a creative mode characterized by its contrasts: the triumph of the profane over the sacred, excess over abstinence, and the upending of “hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it.”<sup>5</sup> Especially when put in conversation with Sherwood’s sense of play, the carnivalesque is a natural companion to ecofeminism and other, complementary liberation models (to use Val Plumwood’s term) that are used to critique the oppressive power structures of patriarchy, colonialism, anthropocentrism, and the like.<sup>6</sup>

The carnivalistic overtones in Sherwood’s work are most visible in the role played by food. One thinks of the raccoons in *Feral Cakes*, ecstatically digging into jellies with their paws, or the mice in the 2012 installation *Bacchanal*, eating their way out of a cake in a gluttonous dream or nightmare come true. In their repetition and extravagance, Sherwood’s banquets are suggestive of religious feast days, and in *Horses for the Trees*, there is a reverence for cake. As Sherwood writes in “Eating in the Dark (Raised by Raccoons),” “cake is... powerful, with an alchemy of its own. Cake is eaten in celebration, in ceremony, it marks a liminal space of enticement, pleasure and magic... It is a place where abstinence is exchanged for decadence and hedonism.”<sup>7</sup> Across Sherwood’s practice, cakes are like beacons held before her, as they are for the heroines in *Sea of Cakes* and *Alice/Persephone*. They are Sherwood’s way of paying courtesy to her fellow creatures and of inviting them to engage with her, as suggested by the act of provision depicted in *Horses for the Trees* [fig. 9] and in the welcoming posture of the woman in *Equestrian Confection* [fig. 11].

Cake also features in some of the exhibition’s most striking and original imagery. In *Inside the Belly of a Horse* [figs. 6-7] and *Girl in the Belly of a Horse* [fig. 14], female nudes, surrounded by confectionary, recline inside horses’ bodies. The result is both gestational and sensual. Enveloped by the horses and hidden from view, the women are safe to indulge their desires, to eat, and to embody their

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<sup>4</sup> Sherwood in discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Carly Emerson, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Val Plumwood, “Androcentricism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. by Karen J. Warren, (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1997), 227-238.

<sup>7</sup> Sherwood, “Eating in the Dark (Raised by Raccoons),” danasherwoodstudio.com, February 2019, <http://d3zr9vspdnjxi.cloudfront.net/artistInfo/danasher/biblio/15.pdf?1549904719>.

sexuality without being ensnared by the male gaze. *Inside the Belly of a Horse*, particularly, is reminiscent of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which presents two women, one nude and one nearly so, for visual consumption alongside a picnic luncheon. In Sherwood's painting, on the other hand, the nude revels in privacy and pleasure. There is an implication of self-gratification in this otherworldly greenspace where the woman's body is no longer on the menu, except, perhaps, to a small snail, brazenly sneaking up her leg. The image induces a free flow of associations with the carnal, the carnivorous, and the carnival: all from the Latin "carne," relating to flesh, eaten ("vorare") on Shrove Tuesday or given up ("levare") for Lent.

The horses' bodies thus become complicated by these contradictory impulses for sanctuary and debauchery in the dark, which Sherwood appropriately describes in gourmand-esque terms:

Feeding the animal, our nature, our dark, shadow-self. Feeding the wild animals in this way creates a ritual space, the dark makes it sacred as well as secretive. Like that piece of cake, gobbled at the sink when no one was looking. It is an offering to the gods of the wilderness, those feral beings who have no truck with shame or guilt. Feeding the beast(s) offers safety, they won't reveal my secret; my silent companions devouring, unashamed and without judgment.<sup>8</sup>

Alice and Persephone, the heroines in *Horses for the Trees*, both disappear underground and, freed in carnivalistic fashion from the ordinary conditions of their lives, accept their invitations to "EAT ME," or to experiment and indulge in their new surrounds. Alice's protean body shrinks and expands with every bite of mushroom and cake, while Persephone seals the duality of her fate, split between the world of the living and the dead, when she consumes six kernels from a pomegranate.

Sherwood, too, in a marked shift in her practice, gives in to pleasure: in the case of *Horses for the Trees*, by painting with oils. While her fieldwork and videos have for many years been complemented by watercolors, this is the first time that she has exhibited oil paintings. As Sherwood explains, "I wanted to return to painting with oils because it was always this medium I appreciated and really enjoyed. I was a little nervous about doing it, but this project, for me, was about letting go of fear... and allowing this desire."<sup>9</sup> The resulting five paintings—including *Alice/Medusa* [fig. 8] and *White Rabbit* [fig. 10] in addition to *Inside the Belly of a Horse*, *Horses for the Trees*, and *Equestrian Confection*—are sumptuously rendered in candy-colored hues of blue, orange, pink, and yellow. The paint has been applied to panel in vibrant but translucent layers, like glazes on a pastry. The finished effect is as visually pleasurable for the viewer to take in as it likely was for the artist to create.

In this way, the strain of carnivalistic play that I have highlighted in Sherwood's work not only functions as a mode of critique with regard to external hierarchical structures, such as anthropocentrism and patriarchy. It is also directed internally, as Sherwood disrupts her own authority as the artist in order to make space for desire, intuition, and the unconscious. As she says of her recent artmaking, "I thought about it as going into this darkness, going into the underworld, going into the spirit realm, the place where you can't see, and you can only act instinctually and intuitively.... So [the allusions to *Alice in*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Sherwood in discussion.

*Wonderland* and Persephone in the paintings] are referencing this idea of being close to nature—your instinctual self, your intuitive self—and giving that some authority.”<sup>10</sup>

Viewers are invited to accompany Sherwood on this journey inward via the film at the heart of the exhibition. Housed in the darkness of a pink canvas yurt [*Tent*, figs. 1-3], *Sight Equus Mongolia* is a hypnotic, stream-of-consciousness meditation on the relationship between humans and non-humans vis-à-vis Mongolian herdsman/shamanistic culture and Sherwood’s relationship with her own horse. Much like previous exhibitions, the paintings in *Horses for the Trees* document her process around making the central film. Unlike previous exhibitions, these preparatory and responsive images take place in a much more interior landscape with Alice, Medusa, and Persephone acting as spirit guides to Sherwood’s imaginary terrain. In this world, Medusa’s stony gaze is repurposed as an evil eye motif embellishing her shamanistic garments and the exterior of the *Tent*. This imagery foregrounds the idea of vision in the dark that is explored in *Sight Equus Mongolia*. Shot during the day in infrared, a spectrum invisible to the human eye, the film overlays the Mongolian topography with footage of horses, the artist, and her young son.<sup>11</sup> The result is gauzy, surreal, and both visually and auditorily distinct from her previous films. Although, as before, she shot the film with an infrared camera, she took the lessons from her past experiences of working with animals and from the shamanism she encountered in the course of her research, and moved away from her old approach as a “plan person.”<sup>12</sup> *Sight Equus Mongolia* is instead an embrace of walking blindly and following a kind of natural intelligence that is impossible to articulate.

Because of the film’s double exposures, there are many moments of contrasts and pairings. In one of the most remarkable instances, Sherwood’s son and a horse, filmed separately but appearing together in-frame, approach the camera, bringing their faces close to the lens [fig. 4]. This moment collapses the visual and behavioral distance between the human and nonhuman, underscoring our shared environments and characteristics. To return to Haraway and ecofeminism, we are reminded that “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combination, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all.”<sup>13</sup> Haraway’s entreaty for humans to “become-with,” “think-with,” and “feel-with” nonhumans is a central idea to her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble*, a text that has informed Sherwood’s practice: “I make my work to depict my truth,” Sherwood says, “but specifically, my intention is to send a message of the importance and power of nature, that it is accessible and inclusive, but most importantly to see ourselves as part of it, not distinct or separate.”<sup>14</sup>

Such a message is profoundly entwined in Sherwood’s work, which has always been critical of the anthropocentric impulse to separate and stratify the human over the nonhuman and culture over nature. Through her practice of “making-with” animals, Sherwood ensures her contributions to culture are interwoven with nature. It is, as she says, “like having a conversation with [the animals] via these banquets, and whether they decid[e] to participate or not... I wanted them not to be actors, but to act as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> As Sherwood says, “I didn’t know what it [the film] was going to be until I started editing in the spring [2019].” Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Haraway, *Staying*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Sherwood, email message to the author, October 27, 2019.

themselves and be collaborators with me.”<sup>15</sup> This collaborative approach is perhaps the most deeply carnivalistic facet of Sherwood’s practice, especially as she has increasingly eschewed her artistic control to more fully integrate the contributions of her nonhuman colleagues. As Bakhtin writes, “Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it.”<sup>16</sup> The so-called Anthropocene discloses the ordinary, hierarchical conditions of our epoch, but perhaps in time humans, like Sherwood, will learn to “live-with” nature. In the meantime, *Horses for the Trees* offers a compelling vision of the world turned upside down.

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<sup>15</sup> Sherwood in discussion.

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems*, 122.