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The Ghosts Shed Tears

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THE GHOSTS SHED TEARS

By

Sarah Jentsch

A THESIS

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THE GHOSTS SHED TEARS

Sarah Jentsch, M.F.A

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Advisor: Aaron Holz

Before I was taught what made us different, I thought my brother and I were the same. The only difference between a doe and a buck was the antlers. As I grew, I noticed differences—in the way people spoke to us, in what was expected of us, in the questions we were asked. In what our futures were supposed to look like. The difference between the doe and the buck was still the antlers, but those antlers made one a trophy and the other venison.

Many of my formative experiences I came to understand through animals. My family home, cradled in the piney woods of East Texas, offered more interaction with deer, packs of dogs, birds, and scavengers than it did people. I knew what to expect from these species, I read about them every day in my books. It was much easier to understand people by comparing them to animals and the archetypes derived from them: the sly fox, the loyal dog, the devious snake. Fables took the experiences that confused me and extrapolated them into a world I could comprehend--one with more magic but a clearer view of reality than my daily life.

The Ghosts Shed Tears is a series of paintings and drawings that explore narratives of personal and universal emotion. These works center on my experiences of womanhood; the frustration of interaction, the fear of physical and psychological harm, and the tension of inhabiting a body capable of creating life with or without my permission. Using a variety of symbols derived from the traditions of mythologies and fables, these works exist in an uncanny

universe where reality is filtered through a lens of magic realism. They often take the form of dreamscapes: vivid imagery of animals, objects, and figures. Often my symbols are animal or vegetal, drawing on a cache of mythological references. Dogs, deer, corn: these things are familiar, known entities with immediate associations that allow me to convey information quickly and easily. By repeating these motifs, I can create a rapport across my body of work.

World building is vital to my practice—in many ways, I consider myself an author and a painter. For a viewer to suspend their disbelief, the universe they are asked to enter must have a clear set of rules. These rules give the viewer a system with which to navigate their new world, making associations and meaning through the cues they are given. In *The Ghosts Shed Tears*, this system is a shared language of symbols and visuals that invite the viewer in, transporting them from the context of their daily lives to a place where reality and emotion are malleable.

In my paintings, the figures and objects are stripped bare of context, surrounded by the ambiguity of negative space. The sparse compositions create a visual hierarchy, emphasizing the important players in each piece. By removing the specificity of place and time, each subject functions more symbolically, pushing the viewer to analyze the connections and meanings of the few elements given to them. In *Procession From the Willow Tree*, a watercolor depicting a woman on a palette of branches carried by dogs, what could be a detailed environment is instead paired down to the essentials—yellow grass, cold body, frantic dogs, soft fabric, woven branches. The landscape of soft, yellow hills highlight the river of dogs receding far into the distance, seemingly never ending. By literally giving the viewer space to sit with these few elements, the relationship between them is called into focus, creating an intimate space where the viewer can contemplate their story.

In all of my paintings, the animals and figures are female. Too often are the stories of women told through men. I am interested in making visible the forces of patriarchy by purposefully leaving those figures out. There is a literary convention in which the most frightening monster is the unseen monster; what we can imagine will always be more sinister than that which is given a face. Therefore, the antagonist in my paintings is offscreen—we see the effects of them in the reactions of the subjects, or remnants in objects they have left behind, but we do not see the antagonist themselves. The oil painting “Long Walk Home Alone in the Dark” shows a doe who’s been spooked by an unseen force. By leaving space for that unknown, the threat can be abstracted: the villain in this painting isn’t whoever has spooked this deer—it isn’t a man jumping out at a girl at night—it’s the fear women carry every time we walk home in the dark. It is the insidious effects of living in a world where you are fundamentally unsafe.

I create my imagery using a variety of media: watercolor, ink, graphite drawing, and oil on canvas. The material I use responds to the intent of the piece. Sometimes an image requires precise graphite drawing and the crisp transparencies of watercolor to mimic dry branches; sometimes they require the glow of oil paint to create a wet eye that seems to course with blood beneath the skin. I use whatever means necessary to mold the intended feeling of my image.

Central to my work is the idea that “things” have real meaning; a dog, a deer—these things have universal meanings, both consciously and subconsciously. In *The Ghosts Shed Tears*, I tap into this current of subconscious emotion to convey experiences and feelings which cannot be put into words. In creating this work, I make sense of my experiences in the only way I have ever known how, by dissecting and analyzing it in a world of my own creation: a world of animals, myth, and magic.

Images:













