

# FAN-LING SUEN: THE BROOD

MARCH 22 – MAY 10, 2014

## THE MONSTER IN THE NURSERY

The devices installed in the child's nursery are replicas of the adult world; the toys, nursery rhymes and tales, even the colour of the walls, together form a dollhouse of that world, housing normative bodies and identities within its interiors. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes laments indoctrination of the bourgeois values in the nursery. "French toys," he argues, "literally prefigure the world of adult functions [that] obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature."<sup>[1]</sup> Modern toys are predetermined without much capacity to be imagined and elevated to something else other than what they mimic whether it be a military man, fire truck or baby doll, thereby confirming preexisting values. Similar features apply to traditional nursery tales, which often aestheticize morals of good and bad while aligning normal identity with good and the deviant with bad. The nursery is a potent institution, as it has been taken as the current stage of Fan-Ling Suen's practice: rooted in children's literature and ideas of domesticity and family, Suen's amorphous sculptures and drawings loom within the nursery as animate and sinister creatures, as nursery monsters.

Suen's *The Brood* (2014) consists of several amorphous silicon forms that replicate human skin in troubling exactitude, with particular detail in tactility that reproduces the texture and warmth of animate flesh. Viewers are able to pick up these forms, hold them close or move them around the gallery space. Seemingly their function is similar to that of a toy, but unlike attractive and hygienic children's toys, these flesh-forms are ambiguous and grotesque in their appearance and identity. They can also be identified as a family with apparent mother-form and a brood of offspring around her. Resisting easy identification, *The Brood's* presence in this "nursery" is on the verge of becoming something else, morphing into monstrosity.

*The Brood* references David Cronenberg's 1979 psychological horror film of the same name. In the movie, the main character Nola Carveth is treated with intensive psychotherapy sessions of releasing pent-up anger and emotions, which results in her giving birth to mutated offspring from her body. This "brood of children," almost human but mindless and genderless, are avatars of Nola's mental state. The brood translates Nola's repressed childhood memories and anger into the murder of her family members, including her abusive mother. This experience traumatizes Nola's own daughter Candice, who at the close of the film begins to develop the same symptoms to potentially — as the audience is left to presume — produce such offspring herself. Suen's *The Brood*, though dissimilar from Cronenberg's brood in appearance, shares the same picture of maternity that is transmogrified into a destructive force. Here, both Nola and the brood are the monsters. Nola's transformation into a monster, not to mention the brood's unyielding violent features is induced not only by active violence of the abusive mothers but also by what is described as "weak tyranny" of by-standing fathers in Cronenberg's film.<sup>[2]</sup> The movie redistributes power in a patriarchal family in which the role of abusive oppression is assigned to the mother while the father's tyranny ensues in a form of passivity. This Oedipal setup pictures a resurgence of the repressed against the patriarch while still struggling within the same family structure. Cronenberg's film thus questions the organization of family that serves to control our bodies and identities and to bury difference and "monstrosity" underground. The family unit and power structure within it are disrupted through these monsters. Both in Cronenberg and Suen's work they release the monstrous as backlash to this smoothed surface of culture.

The monstrosity Suen creates in her "nursery" is configured in a similar way to that which Judith Halberstam describes as the function of monsters in Gothic literature:

Within the history of embodied deviance, monsters always combine the markings of a plurality of differences [...] The fact that monstrosity within contemporary horror seems to have stabilized into an amalgam of sex and gender, demonstrates the need to read a history of otherness into and out of the history of Gothic fiction.<sup>[3]</sup>

Halberstam points out that Gothic monsters further complicate this tradition of otherness including sex and gender, which has already been inserted into a familiar territory in mass culture. The coexistence of troubling binaries — male/female, victim/culprit, self/other, homosexual/heterosexual, positive/negative, normal/paranormal — within the monsters collapse these binaries into an ambiguous relationship. Thus it is possible to make more complex rendering of repressed otherness, and the Gothic tradition treats monstrosity as an effective vehicle to execute this task. Suen's monsters also aggressively reference to the monstrosity of childhood that begins with the oppressive construction of the nursery. *The Brood's* uneasy identification with either toys or a model of Cronenberg's monsters (or something entirely else), opens the work's capacity to a wide scope of meanings. Though these monsters embody the abject and horrific, they are in fact very human.

The artist wishes to thank the following: Benson Musaev, Kevin Murphy, Art Murphy, Judith Murphy, Richard Prince, Carolyn Sullivan, Evan French, Marina Roy and Colette Urban.

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Rather than venerating otherness, monsters allow for a transmutation of difference and plurality. Given a Gothic twist, Suen's nursery roots itself in what might be called a "gothic" current in contemporary art, which "takes the assumed normality of the domestic space elevated into the battlefield of the monstrous."<sup>[4]</sup> And this monster is more specific than merely the abject, the horrific, the grotesque. Bringing together the tensions between "male" and "female" — as well as all other unruly pluralities that are not easily categorized — wakes up the hygienic surface of the nursery. The monsters soil its clear conscience and dishevel its neatly organized ideologies. So let us have the monsters troop the nursery.

- Areum Kim

<sup>[1]</sup> Roland Barthes, "Toys," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 53.

<sup>[2]</sup> William Beard, "The Brood" in *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*, (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2001), 75.

<sup>[3]</sup> Judith Halberstam, "Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity," in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 5.

<sup>[4]</sup> Christoph Grunenberg, *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in the Late Twentieth Century Art*, (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1997), 167.

## BIOGRAPHIES

FAN-LING SUEN'S sculptural practice investigates the complex nature of human relations and how we understand ourselves within the framework of institutions - particularly those that structure childhood experience. Her solo exhibition at Access explores the idea of the nursery as an institutional apparatus, and navigates issues of memory, longing and attachment through a combination of popular, fiction, children's literature and psychoanalytic theory. Both repellent and uncannily attractive, the soft amorphous silicon forms that make up *The Brood* are suggestive of childhood dolls, taxidermy, as well as D.W. Winnicott's seminal writings on the transitional object. Fan-Ling Suen is a graduate of the University of British Columbia's Masters of Fine Arts program. She has exhibited in Vancouver, Toronto and London, Ontario.

MARINA ROY is a Vancouver-based artist who works across a variety of media. Associate Professor of Visual Arts in the Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory at the University of British Columbia, Roy is interested in a material and grotesque art: how human, animal, plant, mineral and microbial life coalesce into new formations. Roy is currently researching and writing a new book about sovereignty, human-animal distinction, biopolitics, nature, and the letter Q, titled *Queuejumping*.

CAROLYN SULLIVAN has been involved with the Vancouver Society of Storytelling as a teller and a volunteer for over twenty years. Having grown up in a place where people tell stories as easily as they breathe, she has gone on to weave her own tales as well as those from folk and literary traditions around the world, in addition to encouraging others to retain the oral tradition. She is based in Vancouver.

AREUM KIM is a Vancouver-based writer and curator who is completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. She is interested in the silence that appears in language, history, and other means of representation, and visual art's poetic possibilities in transcribing this silence. Kim is currently Curatorial Assistant at Access Gallery.

## EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION  
FRIDAY MARCH 21, 2014, 8:00 PM

IN CONVERSATION: FAN-LING SUEN WITH MARINA ROY  
SATURDAY 22 MARCH, 2014, 2:00 PM

Access is interested in propagating dialogue that link artists of different generations to one another and to the wider community. Join Director/Curator Kimberly Phillips as she brings the ideas that underpin Fan-Ling Suen's work into conversation with those of interdisciplinary artist Marina Roy.

IN THE ROUND WITH CAROLYN SULLIVAN: A READING NIGHT WITH ROALD DAHL'S THE LANDLADY AND THE BROOD  
THURSDAY 24 APRIL, 2014, 7:00PM

On this evening in space of the gallery and in the presence of The Brood, storyteller Carolyn Sullivan will orate two tales: one personal and one suggested by exhibiting artist Fan-Ling Suen. "Sometimes what we do and create as adults echoes from stories we heard or read when young," Sullivan states. "To tell in a gallery is inspiring: each piece of art is a story." Join us for a magical evening: come to see, come to listen.



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