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Natalie Frank's Fairy Tale for Adults Only

Her drawings of animals and people in costume give insight into the darker side of human lust and longing.



A few years ago, I reviewed an exhibition of pastels, *Natalie Frank: The Brothers Grimm* at The Drawing Center (April 10–June 28, 2015), curated by Claire Gilman. Viewers did not need to know which story Frank was drawing inspiration from to be struck by what they saw: uncanny scenes that approached the creepiness flooding through these fairy tales like a full moon on a cloudless night. Her attention to detail animated each of the 25 works in the exhibition. There was something to see everywhere you looked.

In her current exhibition, *Natalie Frank: O*, at Half Gallery (May 16 – June 18, 2018), Frank's inspiration is *The Story of O* (1954), a controversial erotic novel written by Anne Desclos and published under the pseudonym Pauline Réage. For those who have not read *The Story of O*, it begins when the lovers, René and O, the latter a French fashion photographer, are sitting in a park they have never visited before. René orders O to get in the back seat of a car seemingly waiting for them near the park. This begins her journey into an alternate reality, just as Alice's began when she fell down the rabbit hole.

The first work the viewer encounters is on the landing at the top of the stairs leading to the gallery. We see a wide-eyed young woman with a pink, scrubbed face and long brown hair seated in the back seat of a car. A man, whose exaggerated features are highlighted in green, electric blue, and salmon-colored pastel, looks at her as he holds a white strip from her unbuttoned blouse in his hand, like a leash. Although they sit beside each other and she seems to be at his mercy, Frank's deeper point is that they exist in separate worlds. She suggests this through her use of color (the woman is wearing white while the man is wearing black highlighted in blue) and her attention to gesture and expression. There is a look of longing on his face, while hers conveys a glimmer of apprehension.



Working in gouache and pastel, Frank is especially masterful at composing scenes that seem to reveal themselves immediately, but slowly unveil further layers of complexity to the scrutinizing viewer. Why is O wearing long red gloves? What made her decide to wear them with a white blouse and a plain blue and white skirt? What else does her expression say? What do the green and blue tints on the man's face signify? We are looking at representations, not realism. The incongruities pull us further into the drawing. We are witnessing an intense erotic dream, but whose is it? The men in the drawings wear masks or have their faces painted. A woman, also with her face painted, kisses O, who is looking elsewhere. Wherever O is, and whatever others are doing to her, she always seems to exist in another domain that we cannot see. The alternative world O has entered is defined by bondage and discipline; it is devoted to ecstasy achieved through domination and submission. According to the author, Desclos, "O is looking for deliverance, to thrust off this mortal coil, as Shakespeare says."

Frank uses pastel to create all sorts of dramatic effects. It conveys an aura or evokes facial powder; it adds a weird light to a scene or emphasizes the artificiality of it; it invites us to wonder what is going on under the bed. Each drawing usually has multiple focal points, conveying the ubiquity of debauchery in this world. In drawings that contain animals and people in costume, you feel like you are looking at a fairy tale uncovering its true purpose — to give insight into the darker side of human lust and longing. There are scenes within scenes that suggest everything in this world is guided by the logic of a fevered dream.

Although viewers might expect to see pornography disguised as art, or vice-versa, there is nothing salacious about Frank's images, which focus more on the face than the body. (We almost always get a full view of O's face, but not always her body.)



Frank's interest seems to lie in the individual imagination and the question of our fantasies. She depicts situations in which social conventions have broken down and been replaced by more extreme interactions between adults. And yet, they are consensual.

In another image, O lies in bed with a sleeping, white-faced, corpse-like male figure. O's eyes are wide open. The arrangement recalls Yasunari Kawabata's novella, *The House of Sleeping Beauties* (1961), where impotent old men pay to sleep beside young narcotized women, without touching them. The difference in Frank's drawing is that the woman is awake and the man is asleep. O is the one remembering — behind and above her are images of items often associated with childhood: a rocking horse, a ball, a trumpet, and a block with a letter on it. Over part of what is likely wallpaper, the artist has drawn a series of curving parallel lines, partially obscuring the childhood images.

This is what Frank does so well. Whatever her inspiration — be it a fairy tale or an intensely descriptive erotic novel — her work stands on its own. More importantly, the work seems to contain multiple meanings. Is O thinking about childhood? Or are these images printed on the wallpaper? Frank seems to have deliberately dissolved the membrane between dream and reality.

She further complicates this by creating a sense of ambiguity in her scenes. In one image, O's position on a prominent rectangle invites speculation as to her role within the larger work. Are we looking at O's reflection in the mirror, which would place us approximately where she is lying in bed, partially covered by a coverlet and looking at a green-faced man in a hat, approaching, waving a whip? What are we to make of a distended, bulging eye or a head from which the outline of a body is drawn, but the body is not filled-in? Are we guests at an orgy, eager participants, or inadvertent witnesses? Is it even possible to be the latter?

In the gallery's second-floor room — and climbing the winding interior staircase adds to the viewing experience, as I am sure Frank recognized — are three drawings on wallpaper, which she drew and designed with Canadian artist and designer, Marian Bentjes, and were produced by Flavorpaper. The pattern includes cats, butterflies, and young women involved in various solitary activities. On the opposite wall, two drawings flank the ornate fireplace.

The juxtaposition of the wallpaper — with clichéd images of innocence and growth — and the drawings of *O* is really what Frank does masterfully. She transports the viewer to an alternative reality that is unsettling, theatrical, dream-like, seductive, weird, and disembodied. Looking at her work, we go down the rabbit hole.

Natalie Frank: *O* continues at Half Gallery (43 E. 78th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through June 16.