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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week



Natalie Frank

Through June 16. Half Gallery, 43 East 78th Street, Manhattan; 212-744-0151, halfgallery.com.

Some cultural works spark controversy when they first appear but then comfortably enter the canon. Others remain contentious for decades. “Story of O” is in the second category. French censors banned publicity for this erotic novel after its 1954 release in Paris; the following year it won a major literary prize. Its author, Anne Desclos, who published the book under the name Pauline Réage but was best known as Dominique Aury, confessed to writing it in 1994.

The controversy surrounding “Story of O” concerns its plot: A woman named O becomes a submissive and slave to her male lover and the members of his sadomasochistic club. Some feminists see in this a reinforcement of the patriarchy. The artist Natalie Frank interprets the book, which she reads annually, as an empowering narrative of a woman’s choices and interior life — “a story of freedom,” she says in the publication accompanying her current exhibition at Half Gallery.

Titled “O,” the show features 15 drawings based on passages from the novel. In keeping with Ms. Frank’s reading, there is, in fact, little sex on display, though there is plenty of erotic charge. The focal point of nearly every image is O’s face — specifically her big, round eyes, which seem to march through a parade of emotions: fear, wonder, lust, sadness, satisfaction. Those eyes and the body to which they’re attached, often clad in a little pink nightgown, are the anchor of the series. Around them swirls a carnival of riotous color and grotesque creatures, rendered in a dynamic mix of blocky pastel marks and smooth gouache strokes.

In her previous series, Ms. Frank interpreted the original Grimms’ fairy tales. Here she turns “Story of O” into a fairy tale of its own, replete with oddities and violence and transformation. By the look on her face, it often seems like O might be dreaming. That, Ms. Frank’s work suggests, is entirely the point.