

Lady into Fox

“The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed.”

– Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*

“I ought to tell you that she has changed her shape. She is a fox.”

– David Garnett, *Lady into Fox*

The fox is a liminal creature. Throughout history it has adapted fluidly to wild forests, cultivated farmland and dense cities, thriving alongside humans and finding its place in the night.

In mythology, the fox flits between the animal, human and spiritual world. In Western folklore, it is marked as a cunning trickster, expert at evading huntsmen and outsmarting (or, in fact, outfoxing) other animals. Aesop invoked the fox in his fables repeatedly, painting it as egotistical, deceitful and sly. In Indigenous American cultures, the fox bears more spiritual significance, appearing repeatedly in creation myths and revered for its subterranean knowledge and utility as a guide. In Japanese mythology, the kitsune, or “fox spirits”, are quasi god-like creatures, capable of assuming human form and reaching near immortality. These mercurial beings embody a dual nature, sometimes as beneficent messengers of Inari (deities of agriculture, prosperity, sake) and other times as dangerous fiends, starting forest fires with their tails and transforming themselves into beautiful women, who steal the semen of unsuspecting men.

It is the archetype of the fox that Natalia Gonzalez Martin interrogates for her latest exhibition, *Lady into Fox*. Drawing its title from David Garnett’s eponymous 1922 novella, the show riffs upon the book’s narrative of a man whose new bride, Sylvia, unexpectedly transforms into a fox. Garnett’s text opens with Sylvia retaining her human consciousness: she is ashamed of her nudity and fearful of the outside world, but as winter approaches, she yields to an increasing wildness. Sylvia escapes the home. She catches prey and grinds its bones between her teeth. She breeds and births a litter of kits.

Lady into Fox, strange and rich in symbols, opens up a generous space in which Gonzalez Martin can reapproach and rework ideas she has previously explored—metamorphosis, spirituality, religion and the feminine—as well as confront new themes: human-animal relations, societal conventions and primal instincts.

But where is the fox in Gonzalez Martin's paintings?

There is a rabbit, plump and white against a Prussian blue sky. There is the conical head of a long-haired dog, who gazes upwards as if to the hand of an invisible owner, inquisitive and searching. There are muscular, glistening horse rumps. But the fox is never quite present, appearing only as an allusion whilst supporting characters—animals from the hunt, and prey—take centre stage.

In *Can It Be She?* (2023), the fox is implicated twice. She skulks in the far distance, eyes fire bright, and rests on the chest of a female nude, recast as a golden pendant. In *Monsters of All Sorts* (2023), she re-enters as a brown, long, luxurious fur coat. The imagery implies one of the central concerns within both Garnett's text and Gonzalez Martin's exhibition: transformation and the conclusive metamorphosis, death.

At the time of *Lady into Fox*'s publication, European culture exhibited an increasing interest in the ways society repressed natural instincts. In 1915, Kafka had published his seminal novella *The Metamorphosis*, which – though heavier with themes of existentialism, alienation and inhumanity – similarly wielded the metaphor of transformation as a means to discern the weight of societal expectations. In 1930, Freud published *Civilisation and its Discontents*, which dissected tensions between base desires and societal constraints. These works collectively reflected a growing anxiety about the artificial, increasingly capitalist world that had regrettably taken hold.

Concurrently, psychoanalysis found itself graduated to an established position within mainstream culture. Freud had formulated his structural model of the psyche, comprising the *ego*, the *superego* and the *id*. In this context, Sylvia, driven by impulse, effectively embodies the *id*, personifying the segment of the mind that operates according to our unconscious and primal desires.

There's a turning point in *Lady into Fox* when Sylvia abandons her human clothes, signifying her definitive crossing of the threshold into the animal world. In this body of paintings too, Gonzalez Martin's nude emerges more eminently; the modest hand which may have previously lingered over a crotch has disappeared, affording us – in its absence – an unguarded, potentially affronting view of fleshy, pink vulva and sparse, tenderly rendered pubic hairs.

Hair, in fact, recurs again and again in this body of work: on animal bodies, both alive and dead, their fur surging with subtle shifts in tone; on human bodies, glossy, seductive and falling against colourful jewels. It occupies the entire frame in both *Extraordinary Devotion* and *Extraordinary Devotion (variant)* (both 2023). Hair here is used as a symbol of beauty, of sensuality, the feminine, the untamed and the animal.

Vixen, foxy. There's so much within the English language that ties the fox to the female, as well as to sex. The linguistic link between these terminologies and the archetypal "sly fox" label serve as a rather obvious iteration of female sexuality as nothing more than an act of manipulation, a trick. Like the Kitsune of Japanese folklore, the assumed intent is to inveigle and steal. Gonzalez Martin's women, too, are guilty of suitably alluring forms of trickery, her figures recalling the deftly rendered nudes of the Renaissance, their flesh luminous, round and alive.

Gonzalez Martin doesn't often paint men. But this time the masculine does appear, albeit hidden—much like the fox—in metaphor. He's present in a dewy, phallic plant that reaches towards the night sky. He's present in the dog, as gentle as it may seem. He's present in the tightly constructed crops of the tensile rears of stallions, an animal evocative of virility, status, sexuality, the warrior. In the placement of these images—the hunting animals, in particular—alongside sorrowful, passive female faces, one can find allusions to the brutal conclusion of Garnett's text, as well as a wider context of gendered power dynamics.

Gonzalez Martin's decision to structure her world at night further speaks to the archetypal notions of the feminine. Greek mythology casts the night as a shadowy goddess, Nix, and the moon has been universally associated with the female, its waxing and waning emulating the cyclical nature of female menstrual patterns. In Chinese philosophy, the night and the feminine are bound together, represented by the yin in the concept of *yinyang*, a white circle surrounded by darkness. But whilst the *yinyang* depends on a generative, symbiotic relationship - a cohesion between the binaries of female/male, night/day, soft/hard etc. - to thrive, Gonzalez Martin's perpetual, self-contained night suggests a more hostile relationship between the opposing forces. What results is an uneasiness that is inescapably linked to gender.

The fox is a similarly nocturnal creature. Although, its relegation to the night isn't inherently biological, but rather a necessity of its environment; as the day belongs to man, others must carve out space elsewhere. So, where once there were wafts of white cumulus, now dark velvet backdrops hang, slithers of moon, flecked stars. The shift in time heightens these works' oneiric associations, and offers a more plausible landscape for strange happenings and transformations.

Gonzalez Martin's dark skies amplify a more formal aspect of her work too, as the dramatic contrast allows the geometry of these articulate compositions to take precedence. Her dedication to the sphere becomes more evident; the circular grapes repeat the shoulders, the tears, the breasts, the jewels, the blood droplets. Something which may have begun as a visual preoccupation now reinforces the centrality of the female form.

Gonzalez Martin has spoken about how German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder proved a particularly vital influence for this new body of work, his odd, milky bodies so graciously composed against dark backgrounds. In fact, Gonzalez Martin is constantly borrowing from art history, reworking motifs and sampling sections from historical paintings. The cerulean blue forget-me-nots that spring from her grass are pilfered from Raphael's work, the crawling insects in *This Spell of Fine Weather* (2023) lifted from the vanitas of the Dutch Golden age.

Images of religious and spiritual significance recur: thin, red scars on shins and swarming blood droplets gathered at knees reference the stigmata (bodily wounds which appear in locations corresponding to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ). There are fruits of temptation—the wet, red apple—and there are succulent grapes which hold manifold symbolism: associations with the wine of the eucharist and Christ's blood; mythology, pleasure and Dionysus; and with the fox, as its favourite fruit

In Aescop's fable, *The Fox and the Grapes*, we meet a fox riddled with cognitive dissonance, who dismisses the grapes he yearns for as sour when he fails to reach them. It's from here we derive that expression "sour grapes", which we use to convey the bitterness felt when we don't attain that which we deeply desire.

Though Garnett refuses to divulge confirming details, there is a point in *Lady into Fox* when Sylvia, in fox form, and her husband, Richard – so drunk he finds himself "down on all fours", "a beast too like his wife" – are suggested to have sex with one another. The act drives the husband to melancholia, a man who can't do anything but repent to God. The relationship between sex and God is an established trope, and when these two entities meet in Garnett's text – as so often in other contexts – shame is also present.

Yet, in Natalia Gonzalez Martin's paintings, the synergy between these two is allowed to exist clean-handed. As boundaries slip, lust and spirituality are embedded in the same image, and desire exists concurrently across multiple spheres. Much like the fox, desire itself becomes the trickster: a shapeshifter, roaming freely, seducing us, and always just out of reach.

– Sophie Ruigrok