

## **To Be Many Things At Once.**

*by Josephine Mead*

*To have too many irons in the fire.*

*You can't walk and chew gum at the same time.*

*To juggle too many balls in the air.*

*You are spreading yourself too thin.*

*To chase two rabbits and catch none.*

*You are putting too many eggs in one basket.*

***You are too big for your boots.***

Just after Tai Snaith had finished art school an older male peer questioned if she was “too big for her boots.” This judgment is one that has followed women throughout history, particularly when they are good artists. Likewise, the misconception that a busy mother is a bad mother is often laid on the shoulders of artist-mothers. A lot of pressure when artists are naturally ever-curious beings. A lot of pressure when artists that make critical work often need to have “many irons in the fire.”

As I walk through the dilapidated old worker's cottage that is currently Snaith's studio, themes from her research overlap with the lived history of the house. Snaith coincidentally came upon the possibility to use this house as a studio a year ago. It's marked for partial demolition and has had a laboured history as a boarding house and brothel, always held in the hands of women. Peeling paint and wallpaper meet pastel threadbare floral carpet. It's a perfect setting for Snaith's new body of work, which considers the horrid, the mythic, the rebel, and the artist, from feminist perspectives and through women's lived experiences. This is work that considers many things at once. One of the first works I see is a small painting of a white clover-like flower. On the petals, in capital letters reads the word “MOTHER”. It looked like the painting had been done reasonably quickly. Perhaps like a sketch – a sketch that turned into a work, that turned into an anchor, that could sum up many things. And so, my introduction to the work and my framing of the paintings that are to come, is through notions of the maternal.

Preceding working in the house, Snaith started this series while undertaking a residency at Bundanon, on the property of painter Arthur Boyd in New South Wales. The initial paintings from this period are imbued with a sense of this time and space—the floral and fauna of the landscape, echoes of the moody depths of Boyd's oil paintings, and the mourning that often exists within this field of Australiana landscapes. The history of white male painters of this time, generally a period that has received too much airtime, has been taken over by the hands of a female artist. Through painting these landscapes and objects from Boyd's property, Snaith reframes these histories.

I described much of the work to Snaith as “forlorn”. I was careful not to use the word “sad”. There is a whimsy to the work, exaggerated by mythical images of snakes entwined on female figures, anthropomorphic objects, wistful horses and ceramic vessels as looking glasses into Snaith's dream-worlds. But the whimsy has a sense of tragedy that is never far away—whether this tragedy resides in the past or present is unclear. *Cut adrift in deep water* shows a horse submerged in a sea of snakes, face above the water and out of view. Snaith tells me that she found a photograph of a girl entering the water on a horse at Bundanon and felt compelled to paint it. Later she was told that the girl in the picture had lost her sister, father and two horses in

a tragic drowning accident. Horses, as visual motif in paintings and as real-life companions, have been an ongoing symbol of comfort for Snaith, carrying her through stages of youth. A white horse accompanied her through her formative years and passed away as her first child was born. White horses are symbols of hope, fertility and divinity across cultures. It is not a coincidence that Snaith intuitively draws on this. There is an overarching prophetic historical knowledge, crossing histories and geographies, that comes through her work, often carried by her animal counterparts.

As we walked through the rooms, Snaith noted that, “there are already too many paintings for the show to include these small sketches, but they are perfect for a book.” I recently heard artist Carmen Winant state that the “artist-book is the consummate feminist object.” This is Snaith’s process. To ask many questions and to listen deeply to the thoughts, images, experiences and histories around her. The challenge then comes through distilling many influences to create cohesive and concise bodies of work. To find homes for things. As we enter the second room of the ad-hoc cottage I comment on liking a section of the linen canvas that has been left bare in *She Who Loves Silence*. We agree that there is great value in knowing when to “leave the linen bare” in both art and life.

There is a sense of rebellion that runs through Snaith’s bloodline. Her great, great grandmother was a Suffragette in London, and, as family folklore has it, she was arrested for chaining herself to the Downing Street fence. *Hope dies last* bears a tentatively drawn border of black and orange lines that replicates the border of a suffragette movement flyer designed by Bertha M. Boyé in 1913. Suffragettes at the time hand delivered these fliers to women’s homes, knowing that they might not reach the right hands if left to the postal system. This sense of activism and rebellion is echoed in the inclusion of artists Clara Tice and Mina Loy in Snaith’s research. Tice and Loy crossed paths in 1915 in New York. Tice, famous for her erotic illustrations; and Loy, a multifaced artist and writer who rebelled against the societal pressures on motherhood of that time. Both women with many irons in the fire, who were ridiculed for their insatiable curiosity.

The notion of fliers being hand delivered, coupled with a scattering of white painted butterflies in *Hope dies last*, made me think of the current paper drops over Gaza. Notes with information for how to flee Israeli attacks scattered from the skies—tactically dropped in the wrong locations so that messages were not received. White flags, falling the wrong way down. Life is being swiftly taken from the hands of Palestinian women by Israeli forces. The sense of “forlorn” in the work quickly gives way to deep tragedy. Paintings of watermelons lining Snaith’s hallway show that this terror is not far from her mind. Butterflies are a recurring motif for Snaith. After her beloved horse died, hundreds of monarch butterflies flew out of the trees and sat motionless on his still warm body before he was buried. When butterflies and moths die, they turn to dust. Likewise, parts of this house, which has served many, will soon be dust. Butterflies, white flags and white paper can all be allegories for ends that are coming. The worker’s cottage has served as a birthing ground for this body of work, and its story is now ready to come to a close.

The discomfort one feels when told they are too big for their boots is echoed through images of snakes in the paintings; and rebelled against through Snaith’s reclamation of the image of the boot. Series of snakes have infiltrated many of the paintings. They slither around bodies and through water courses. Snaith notes that they “represent the push and pull—the fear of not being enough, coupled with a movement into grace.” At once deadly and beautiful. Through several of the paintings Snaith has incorporated riding boots. They reference her equine experience, and—never able to move far from the role of artist—they reference the female

artistic lineages she draws upon. We talk about furry boots and I immediately think of Meret Oppenheim's *Object* of 1936—a teacup, saucer and spoon encased in fur. Snaith's work enables one to constantly search for these connections. She notes that, "riding boots are long and made of leather to protect a rider's calves from chaffing. I see them as a type of empowerment and armour." Snaith's power comes through her ability to care deeply about many things at once, to create without apology, and to forge into each new project with passion. During a recent studio visit with painter (and long-time friend of Snaith's) Betra Fraval, we agreed that she inspires us to seek opportunity through having the courage to "just ask." For the record, I think the busiest mums are often the best mums and the busiest artists are always the most interesting.