

## “Personifications” - Julie MGallery

By Nadja Sayej

Two years ago, Nava Waxman almost gave up painting. There was “no point anymore,” she said, recalling her frustration. She returned to drawing, which has always made her happy, doodling on the backs of leftover business cards. She realized she needed to make work that would stand 20, even 30, years from now. She began to make work beyond painting and that opened up an entire world for her.

“I woke up and realized I’m going to die,” said the artist from her home in Toronto. An epiphany dawned upon her – do or die, now or never. Don’t just follow the dream, hunt it down and beat it into submission. This experience – of being challenged by the process – made Waxman realize she must do “what I really want to do,” she recalls.

Waxman returns to exhibiting painting for the first time after three years. Previously, the Israeli artist, who has been living in Canada since 2003, created an otherworldly, sepia-toned universe filled with trees of knowledge, birds, deserts and bleak cloudy skies that call to mind vintage record covers. Her latest work is an extension of these themes – personal iconography with text and illustrative compositions – and the human form. In her previous work it was more hidden or elusive, while here, the silver lining is exposed, more literally.

Her new work is raw. The body of work is an ongoing study and exploration in discovering and visualizing human forms and behavior in non-human objects. She begins with the idea and philosophy of anthropomorphism, personification and metamorphosis. The work connects to this subject matter in its own visual appearance. Here, there are five paintings of flowers – painted in white chalk, collage, ink – which draw from another dimension. The diptych *Within-Without* (2013) has two tall standing flowers sketched in white chalk. Typically, flowers are weak without the vases holding their water, their lifeblood, even when fresh. But here, Waxman has sketched them out with such strength with her chalk gestures, they are painted to appear stronger than the vases that hold them.

There are six works on paper in the show which compose of lined-up groups of 40-60 hand-painted 3x4’ cards with ink drawings. Read in a comic book sequence, each drawing is composed of smaller drawings within them. With the moon in the background, it looks as though a monthly moon cycle is dawning upon the sketches. “I wanted to invent some sort of polarity in drawing,” said Waxman, “combining stillness and motion. The identical image represents stillness whereas the drawing gesture contains spontaneous movement. Together, they create stylistic polarity between free flowing expression and central balance.”

The paintings were the grand finale, the last pieces created for the show. The five paintings included in this exhibition – one diptych called *Within-Without*, as well as a triptych entitled *The Petals* – are the result of obsessive drawings of petals on her studio tables. “The petals in these

painting ask to be human, each of them hold a very different figure form, with movement, body movements,” said Waxman.

Noted in his book “Whatever Happened to Art Criticism?” the Chicago author James Elkins wrote a chapter entitled ‘How Unified is Art Criticism?’ He offers seven types of art criticism: the ‘academic treatise’, ‘cultural criticism’, ‘conservative harangue’, ‘philosopher’s essay’, ‘descriptive art criticism’, ‘poetic art criticism’ and of course, the ‘catalogue essay.’ Elkins said that art criticism is ‘a hydra, fitted with the traditional seven heads.’ And they all bite.

A famous quote says that nobody has ever erected a public sculpture in the name of a critic. But Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain were critics (and they do have sculptures in their names) – but they were also artists, literary masters in their own right. Artists are very much critical of their own reality and critics, in turn, channel their inner artist. The two are inter-related like a tree that grows with roots and branches on either end.

For Waxman, her latest solo at the Julie M. Gallery on July 25 offers a new series of small clay sculptures, paintings and drawings. The show is called *Personifications*. Many of the sculptures in the show – a new direction for the artist – sit atop of hand-painted wooden boxes with patterns that repeat throughout the show. Each sculpture can each be viewed as their own hero to the hydra.

It started with dried flowers. In her new beginning to continue making art beyond painting, Waxman brought 100 blooms of irises and orchids and brought them into her Toronto studio. She let them sit for three months, watching their shadows and observing the withering process. She began photographing their remains and sketching them on paper, watching the shapes grow into human form and abstraction as the flowers changed and transformed. “The blooms started to break into pieces,” she recalls, noting that human forms started appearing before her eyes.

Out came a series of sculptures made from clay, wood, paint, found object and calligraphy. Alongside the paintings and drawing work, each sculpture is symbolic in its own right, offering insight into the artist’s inner world beyond painting. They are poetic vignettes but also have an abstract narrative that is bridged between the natural world and a fantastical, abstract mythology.

To provide a different one for each hydra of art criticism which Elkins has outlined, Waxman’s sculptures are mystical, and surreal, continuing the intuitive and inspired themes that are strongly influenced by the self-taught assemblage master, American artist Joseph Cornell. When Waxman is asked what the word ‘personify’ means to her, she says the goal is to find human form in abstraction or the everyday non-figurative objects.

Of the 12 new clay sculptures Waxman has created for this show, I’d like to show the superhero side of a selected seven. In every work of art is a hero, the artist’s path is somewhat heroic. Some struggle, others triumph. In a world where we’re all given the same instruments or tools, it comes down to viewpoints, perspective and the drive to continue on, even when you want to give up on everything. Each sculpture holds its own world.

### The Mermaid

It was Christopher Columbus had sightings of mermaids in 1493 - two sightings were reported near Vancouver in the late 18th century. Aquatic humanoids are still rumored to be around - proving the belief that imagination still exists, it has also become controversial knowledge, esoteric. Danish author Hans Christian Andersen wrote a famous novel, *The Little Mermaid*, in 1836. The mermaid is a typical figure in Greek mythology, as well. Here, this clay figure has its head – and its feet – turning into petals or fins. Mirrored by the flower beneath it, the mermaid transitions from flower to half-fish, half-human form. While mermaids are prototypically known to fall in love with humans, Dorothy Dinnerstein's book *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* offers the idea that human-animal hybrids like mermaids offer the ancient belief that humans were once one part of animals, and vice versa.

What happens when a mermaid is removed from water? The floundering is suggested here, perhaps even as one turns into a human form. The evolution awaits us.

### The Twig of Inheritance

One sculpture in Waxman's latest series has a beheaded figure with an open, pregnant stomach. The stomach is filled with twigs, culled from the artist's backyard. The old school symbolism of twigs dates back to the purchase of land in the *turf and twig* ceremony, an English tradition dating back to the feudal (medieval) era. 'Livery of seisin' is an archaic legal ceremony which was practiced in England before common law was placed. Used primarily for contractual bindings, property was held and sought through a ritual where buyers and sellers would use a piece of twig from the property to show contract with the land. Often, a witness was present. One type of ceremony is remembered as dropping two shillings into a hole cut out from the soil and the twig being placed in by an authority, said with a spiel to commence the ownership.

The sculpture suggests, to me, the open-handed generosity of spirit. If one's twig of inheritance – from the artist's backyard – was a participatory piece, would you take one?

### The Bird-Headed Woman

In ancient Egypt, Bird Gods were a common thing. Horus was a falcon who protected pharaohs, Heron was a phoenix, Thoth had the head of an Ibis. Maat, the Goddess of truth and justice, wore an Ostrich feather in her hat. Waxman's bird-headed woman appears with the poise of an Egyptian Goddess. This bust is not unlike a female version of Horus, the Egyptian God with a bird head, here, we have the updated, female version. Painted with a moon-like shape over her torso, the bird-headed woman acts as an earth Goddess with a beak and a body; strangely, no wings. It is in these details that imagination forms the rest of the story, how one might fly without wings or how one might defend and protect without the typical elements.

### The Serpent

A figure with severed arms stands with its head held high, forming from an iris into a human form. Similar to the mermaid, this iris is turning into what appears to be a serpent. Don't be surprised. One of the oldest symbols, the serpent draws back to the Latin word of snake. While often associated negatively, it is dualistic symbolically, representing good and evil. Serpents were fertility symbols and snake dances were public prayers used by many ritualistic cultures to protect good crops. Snakes were also read to be the umbilical cord of mother earth. A rebirth of the past, the Serpent here is an evolution of Waxman's own art history.

### The Mantras

A seated figure on its knees opens up to a cup-like form to read mantras, automatic writing in Hebrew. Very similar to another piece in the series, which features automatic writing on a wooden egg, the ink calligraphy by the artist has text shaped as a finger print. The artist's intention is to create a comparison between the text ("transformative thoughts") and the circular shape of the fingerprint ("unchangeable, solid"). Poetry, affirmations and random thoughts are all spun together by the artist in the shape of a circle, written and arranged as a fingerprint. The detail is calligraphy written in a circle. Reminiscent of cave paintings, mantras are a form of healing. "Just like in elementary school, you are punished in school writing a hundred times for what you did wrong," said Waxman. "Here, it's in a positive light, you can change the way you think." The work resembles Chinese characters in composition and thin ink-brush calligraphic text.

### The Cranberries

According to Courtney Alexander from the department of horticulture at Cornell University, in folklore, a variety of different berries are rooted in different cultures. Berries, in general, have often symbolized the blood of mythical creatures. Blackberries are associated to Wicca, while elderberries were associated with bad omens. Symbolizing the abundance of the earth Goddess at traditionally Thanksgiving, kindness is often associated with the giving and receiving of cranberries. While the artist intended to create apples, seducing the viewers to pick one off the plate, I see them as cranberries. It's true. Kindness is often the best weapon against evil and darkness. It has the ability to disarm. Cranberries are seen as a fruit which is democratic by nature.

Similar to the bodily shape of the Mantras, the Cranberries clay bust here is filled with a bowl, an offering of cranberries. It is planked on a black cube pedestal with a painting of a tree. Possibly where they might have fallen from? The cranberries symbolize random acts of kindness and abundance. In itself, it is a peace offering.

### The Dive

As an extension to the mermaid figure, there is a pair of feet diving into the waters of maybe even Lake Lerna. In Greek mythology, the Lernaean Hydra was a deadly, serpent-like water beast, similar to that of the seven-headed hydra which Elkins describes. But to look even deeper—even below the surface – the hydra was no Marine land dinosaur, no. In fact, it was much like a reptile, guarding the gates of the Underworld. Sitting at the gates of the afterlife at Lake Lerna of Argolis (which is now a region of Greece), the hydra was later killed by Heracles as the second of his Twelve Labour. Just as Hercules warded off the hydra, it draws a parallel to Archangel Michael, who slayed Satan as a dragon. It's funny how the criticism can dive deep into the hero or heroine and back again.

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Nava Waxman is an Israeli-born artist who works in sculpture, painting, collage drawing and multi-media installations. Born in Beer Sheva, Israel, she has shown with Engine Gallery, Blue Dot and the Red Head Gallery in Toronto, and has shown extensively through Europe and the US including Italy, Finland, England as well as New York, California and Berlin. Collected across Canada, she studied at the Open University of Israel and has been based in Canada since 2003. Waxman has been featured in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Canadian Jewish News* and *Woman.ca*, among others. She lives in Toronto.

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