

Once Upon a Time

By Maria Porges

These works are meant to be dark, fractured, edgy, sexy and funny. Dangerous and wicked, the girls have turned into women in a post-feminist age, and the wolf is on the run.

-D. Oropallo

Some years ago, Deborah Oropallo was asked to give a talk about her work to a group of students. Trained as a painter, she had enjoyed considerable success in that medium, often combining text or symbols with representational images. Later, she'd begun working intensively with digital processes, creating monumental images of industrial subjects she'd photographed around her neighborhood.

In 2000, she started experimenting with digital layering, superimposing photographs of female figures in various states of saucy undress over classical painted portraits of statesmen and aristocrats. Matching poses and scale, she exploited their peculiar congruencies as a way of commenting about power and control. In a suite of images exploring the role and presence of cowgirls in the hyper-masculine setting of the rodeo, she montaged elements in an increasingly radical and fragmented way.

For her lecture to the group of students, Oropallo made a slide deck, demonstrating the computer-driven processes she used to create her pieces. As she watched the presentation herself, she was enchanted by the gradual transformation as enacted through a succession of images—and, even more importantly, by the way those images looked as projections on a screen, the light coming through them. Soon afterwards, she began experimenting with building longer sequences: essentially, her first time-based works, in which one image fully morphed into another. Sometimes, they gradually filled the screen; sometimes, they disappeared, leaving behind implacable ghosts.

From the beginning, as she has noted, this process has been incredibly time-consuming. In some ways, it resembles the frame-by-frame construction of early hand-drawn animation. Each

successive image is extracted from its source—somewhere on the internet, whether news footage, advertising or various archives—and then manipulated painstakingly in Photoshop. The process of aligning elements is exacting and meticulous, as are the decisions about what to include and what will fade away.

Oropallo's video works have explored a number of topics, including politics, pollution and climate change. Three of them, however, are clearly related to the series of superimposed figures that instigated her shift in medium, as well as to particular themes and subjects she has addressed since the late '80s. In *White as Snow* (2016), *Flatline* (2017) and *Wolf* (2019), Oropallo draws our attention to the strange transformation that costumes have undergone, in part because of the immense market created by internet commerce. Shopping with her daughter for a trick-or-treating Halloween outfit one year, she was astonished to see the 'sexy' version of fairytale figures like Snow White or Red Riding Hood, intended for teens and adults alike. Online, she researched further, discovering that 'sexy' nurse costumes constitute a genre all their own-- one with almost infinite variations, many made of vinyl or rubber. (There were around 200 such 'hot nurse' costumes for sale online when she started working with these images. At this writing, there are thousands.)

Soon after Oropallo began exploring this online marketplace, she was introduced to a different, yet intimately related fantasy realm: costume play, better known as cosplay. As a teenager, her daughter was drawn to this world, in which individuals dress up as characters sourced from movies, TV series, books, comic books, video games, bands, anime, or manga. Cosplayers go to great lengths to replicate the details of a character's appearance, making or buying costumes that sometimes embody an imaginary avatar of a fictional character, such as Snow White transformed into a powerful warrior princess armed with bow or sword.

Accompanying her daughter to conventions, Oropallo was fascinated by the extent to which some cosplayers were essentially taking control of the narrative for themselves, transforming their role-playing into an act of personal power. The R-rated costumes she had discovered online were clearly intended to function as straightforward vehicles for adult fantasies. In contrast, Oropallo's sequencing of Little Red or Snow White get-ups tell a more nuanced, complicated story. Starting

with infant attire, she takes viewers through children's versions of the costumes, familiar in their iconic details: the vivid cape or bright yellow skirt, black MaryJane shoes or red hair ribbon, that segue into startlingly revealing styles meant for teenagers-- and then to adult-sized rubber and vinyl fetish wear. She holds our eyes on the screen long enough to make her intention clear. She means to show us that these symbols of capitalism, desire, sex, and power are both unsettling-- and highly subversive.

Like memories re-pictured and made visible, images stack one on top of another on the screen. They are related, and there is a suggestion of the passage of time, but they change so rapidly from one to the next that there is no time to think your way through the sequence. You can only allow yourself, eyes opened wide, to absorb what you are seeing. A fairytale costume for a baby or little girl suddenly morphs into a sharply-sexualized version of itself, featuring a lowcut front and a short skirt, maybe rubber and latex, high-heeled boots. At the end, white returns, and then the parade of disembodied costumes starts all over again.

It is tempting to believe that people feel always physically the same and that they look different only because the cut of their garments changes—to subscribe to the notion of a universal, unadorned mankind that is universally naturally behaved when naked. But art proves that nakedness is not universally experienced and perceived any more than the clothes are... both the perception and the self-perception of nudity are dependent on a sense of clothing—understood through the medium of a visual convention. – Anne Hollander, Seeing Through Clothes

In “Bell the Cat,” Oropallo’s 2017 exhibition at Catharine Clark Gallery, a series of montaged/collaged images on canvas continued her exploration of the legacies of gender and power, focused through the lens of fairy tales. But these “morality plays, meant to scare girls into being good” (the artist’s words) took on a new potency and a different kind of urgency in the wake of the 2016 election. Attacks on women’s rights and progressive causes began immediately and accelerated as time passed.

In this sociopolitical context, the video *White as Snow*'s debut in this show seems especially significant, signaling Oropallo's desire to expand beyond the boundaries of traditional media and to find a way to voice increasingly-urgent concerns with contemporary issues. As the piece begins, strains of an orchestral arrangement of songs from the 1938 Disney film "Snow White" can be heard. A newborn baby girl, wearing the character's familiar yellow and blue dress, appears on the blank screen-- only to be subsumed beneath another, slightly older baby, who herself immediately disappears beneath another. Each little Snow is accompanied by a Technicolor-red apple: the vehicle used by the evil Queen to poison her rival, here presented as a costume accessory. Soon, a constellation of fruit hovers around the accumulating images of older and older girls. Bits of dialogue from the Disney movie are woven through the music like a sampled bit of song—phrases like "but you don't know what I can do"... and, "what do you do when things go wrong?" Sound effects (twittering birds, the hoots of the train the dwarves used in their mining) repeat, create a confusing aural landscape as full and complicated as the white background to the costumed figures is empty and blank.

As a girlish voice begins to sing the words to "Whistle While you Work," toothsome teenagers in increasingly-brief costumes appear, and then, suddenly, women-- in six inch heels and provocative versions of the (short, tight) yellow skirt and blue bodice. There is still a cloud of floating apples, replete with biblical implications of fallen virtue. These women, with their seductive makeup and vixenish smiles, seem fully capable of flinging the fruit back in the face of any enemy. More ominous than coy, they are unsettling reminders of a world in which beauty has often been a woman's primary source of power—as well as her pleasure. Watching the video cycle, from infant to girl to woman, recalls Naomi Wolf's defiant contention that "the enemy is not lipstick, but guilt itself... we deserve lipstick, if we want it, AND free speech; we deserve to be sexual AND serious--or whatever we please; we are entitled to wear cowboy boots to our own revolution."

In *Flatline*, the succession of images that appear against the white background screen are of 'sexy nurse' outfits, emerging and then fading in a steady, rhythmic flow, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of an amplified heartbeat. The alarmingly brief outfits—digitally separated, this time, from the bodies that might wear them—offer one faintly-medical variation after

another. White bits are elaborated with red and black crosses, straps, belts and binding, each costume different and at the same time immediately recognizable for what it is. Throughout, Oropallo allows the red details to accumulate, becoming a field of vivid bloody scarlet against which, the brief white garments appear and disappear. A shadowy background of sorts slowly accumulates as well—a bit of architecture, a landscape seen out a dirty window.

Near the end, the heartbeat gives way to the sounds of an operating theater, familiar to all of us from countless hours of watching hospital dramas. A succession of ghostly, all white uniforms/costumes gradually covers the red stain, as the sounds fade away. It's an endless loop of sex and death, desire and loss, framed against the ongoing struggle for a woman's right to control her own body.

Wolf, revised and completed in 2019, invokes elements of both of the previous works and goes beyond them. As it begins, we hear the overture from Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, but this time the screen doesn't begin as a blank canvas. Instead, a stack of soiled mattresses fills the foreground—reminders, perhaps, of Grandma's bed, the site of the story's climactic scene. A rapid succession of costumed babies and girls appears, suspended in midair above the pile; they are faceless, their bodies appearing for a split second before sinking back into a mass of accumulating red-riding-hood that grows ever larger. The figures do as well, seemingly advancing toward us across the ground of the dirty mattress ticking on their black Mary Janes.

The outfits are storybook-demure until suddenly they are not—a plangent reminder of the terrifying way daughters morph, seemingly overnight, from little girls to women. The music suddenly becomes ominous, and the sound of adolescent panting becomes audible. Is she running, the wolf in pursuit? Or is something else taking place... something as adult as the garter belts and increasingly-kinky looking rubber and latex bondage wear imply? In the last seconds, the costumes are menacing, masked and booted, entirely red and black.

As the video ends, a flayed wolf skin suddenly appears, superimposed over the last hooded figure. A spatter of red drops spills violently across the screen and the music stops. Repeated

viewing reveals that red-gloved fingers hold the animal's head, as if in triumph. Who, this image asks, needs the woodsman? Not this of Little Red.

In her videos, Oropallo reimagines and refashions our archetypal tales, shaping them to speak to the needs of our time. As the #metoo movement has demonstrated, women can and will demand the justice that they deserve, owning the roles they have been made to play and finding their own power. And for the next generation: the young women shaped by Katniss Everdeen's courage and stamina, or Hermione Grainger's brilliance—maybe the stories they tell their little girls will have a different kind of ending.