

# Shifting Shapes and Beating Hearts: The Videos of Deborah Oropallo

By Monique Jenkinson

*“She closed the window on the wolves’ threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid.” - Angela Carter, “The Company of Wolves”*

Deborah Oropallo has ceased to be afraid. Or perhaps she has gathered her courage, her heartfelt lifeforce, in the face of fear, to confront the dark forest of her times. The root of “courage” is “coeur,” or “heart,” a quality that, though Oropallo’s work loves to move toward abstraction, remains beating through it.

Oropallo’s video works *White as Snow* (2016), *Wolf* (2019), and *Dirty* (2021) base themselves on fairy tales whose purpose is to warn the young and innocent not to be taken in by shape-shifting tricksters. But Oropallo’s videos are themselves shapeshifters, and they delight in that quality.

Oropallo speaks of her growing body of video work as painting and indeed all of the hallmarks of modern and contemporary painting (visible brushstrokes, evidence of the artist’s hand, palpable layers, reminders of materiality) are present in her video practice. She uses the medium of video (its flaws, glitches, and ghosts) to render the layers and depth inherent in paint. In doing so, she creates a new medium while referencing an old one. I think it is also valuable to see Deborah Oropallo’s video work as choreography, as participating in a form that not only bases itself on time but depends on and glories in it.

*White as Snow* (2016) begins in a whiteout, soon relieved by the introductory notes of Jeremiah Franklin’s soundtrack, culled from the lush, sentimental old Hollywood orchestration of Disney’s 1937 *Snow White*. On the bright, tight “ta-da” of an oboe note, appears a sleeping infant, so new as to appear practically larval. She wears a tiny Snow White costume, her forearms posed perversely on a presumably poisoned apple which obscures her lower body. The apple is nearly

as big as her bald head, which itself is adorned with a banded red bow. As the music skips along, another little baby Snow White appears, layered on top of the first, and then another, and another, each one a little bigger, a little older than the one underneath. We glimpse a trompe l'oeil Mary Jane bootie, a toothless smile. The baby sits up, sturdy and chubby. She stands, a toddler in shoes and knee socks. Then she is a sassy child, posed with arm akimbo. In layer after layer, we watch Snow grow, always accompanied by an apple, her deadly accessory. We remain aware of the image underneath the one that dominates. In this successive accumulation of aggressively-gendered girl children, the costumes become more elaborate, involving more of Snow White's cartoon signifiers: a bigger red bow, black wig, yellow laced-up bodice, and high-collared cape. The apple proliferates, appearing in a new spot with each successive figure, but its form remains unchanged. The Snow Whites pile up: older child, preteen, teenager... *White as Snow* truly renders the acts of magical transformation that parents always witness, watching as babies grow into teens before their very eyes.

Try as they might to avoid them, parents of young children must contend with fairy tales; the magical past encroaches on the quotidian present — morbid, violent parables collide with Disney's commercialized cuteness. The particular era, the early aughts, in which Oropallo was raising her young daughter was the high renaissance of the Disney Princess. Oropallo composts this mess, this pile of faces, feelings, limbs, stories, and costumes, into funny, gutsy abstraction.

Soon our Snow White is an adult woman. The pace of images increases to a double-time cascade, as if Oropallo herself cannot keep up. Franklin's soundtrack grows distorted. Now our heroine is Sexy Snow White. The dresses get shorter, the accessories turn into lingerie, the finale, a fully-covered latex fetish version of the icon, complete with gas mask. Childish games and dress-up have turned into adult kink.

Children play innocently with identity, power, and the limits of their senses and imaginations. Adult play sometimes engages those games in complex ways that can appear sinister but often function to disarm fraught dynamics of power. Writer Dan Savage contextualizes S/M fetish play in the face of moral pearl-clutching as just “cops and robbers for grownups with your pants off.” Oropallo's work manages to hold the innocent goodwill of that statement in the same container as

fear, violence, and misogyny. These videos create a site to confront the story through play, to transform and reclaim power.

At the beginning of the Grimm's version of the tale, Snow White is a seven-year-old. By the time the prince rescues her from her glass coffin five pages later, she is a marriageable maiden. How much actual time passes over the course of the tale? In *White as Snow*, Deborah Oropallo uses her wry visual wit to grapple with this unsettling question. With a sense of edgy, dark humor, and the economy of imagistic discourse, she forces us, and perhaps herself, to contend with the squeamishness of simultaneity: the infantilized adult and the sexualized child, innocence and wariness, the fact that that every sexy lady was once a baby.

Oropallo's videos connect to the body of work in her 2007 show *Guise*. For the pigment prints in *Guise*, Oropallo began with eighteenth and nineteenth-century portraiture: images of kings, presidents, admirals – men of ostensible courage and power. Over these (or under them, it is impossible to tell), she layered photographs of women in cheap sexy costumes. “Sexy” here does not connote a system of value concerning allure, but a type, almost a brand, which anyone who has participated in American Halloween in the last three decades has witnessed – sexy sailor, sexy pirate, sexy Louis XIV.

Oropallo created these works while searching for Halloween costumes for her daughter, finding a world of online cosplay for fantasists of all ages. Halloween is the drag queen's gateway drug, when transformation is the order of the day, a time when fairy tales not only inspire costumes, but also influence the psyche, when we imagine that the veil, between the magical and the real, between the dead and the living, between all binaries, is thin.

In these works, Oropallo puts forth a subtle, elegant gender play. She reveals, through layering, the astonishing similarity between the silhouettes and faces of the anonymous website models and their respectably painted male counterparts. Louis XIV's finely-turned court shoe is almost indistinguishable from the garish platform, the face of Napoleon and that of the model superimposed on it blend almost seamlessly with only a misplaced eyebrow here, a faint mustache or extra nostril there.

In some of the *Guise* works, the male image dominates, making it legible as conventional portraiture, offering only glimpses of the nearly-concealed, stealth femme. In others, the catalog model's stripper platforms, fishnet stockings and décolletage stick out like, well, a whore in church. The works play with legibility and legitimacy, gender and class, contemporaneity and history. Some of the works invite us to engage discernment and imagination to grant visibility to the female figures, others demand that we acknowledge their brash and trashy presence. Oropallo's juxtaposition demotes official masculine uniform to drag and cosplay, and simultaneously elevates the sexy models in their tawdry polyester outfits to the status of the heroic men, positing their labor as equally worthy of commemoration.

Oropallo's acts of layering touch on what drag and burlesque parlance calls "the reveal," an onstage quick costume change that creates a punchline, troubles an identity or shifts a story. Painting and other static media can capture a fragment of a moment, but only time-based media can show the process, the transformation, the reveal in its entirety.

*White as Snow*, *Wolf* and *Dirty* build on the *Guise* works, furthering Oropallo's use of layering and accretion of image by placing it in the time-based medium of video. By limiting her cosplay images to classic, enduring fairy tale iconography, she collides online contemporaneity with myth and archetype, deepening and widening the sense in which these works are time-based. Oropallo makes us watch as the works unfold over time, but also makes us keenly aware of the historic time to which they respond.

*Wolf* (2019) continues the exploration of fairy tale heroines and returns Deborah Oropallo to some of her earliest painterly inspiration, *Little Red Riding Hood*. If *White as Snow* retains a layer of Disney cuteness, *Wolf* deepens the dread, not unlike Angela Carter's dark literary meditations on the same subject. *Wolf* sets up a sinister scene, with a stack of filthy mattresses standing in for the grandmother's bed of the fairy tale but also evoking the abandoned houses — meth dens and torture hideouts — of contemporary horror, where the predators are not lupine, but human. Into this scene, marches our heroine.

Again Oropallo digs up a bonanza of found images of online catalog models in costumes, starting with a crawling baby, to trace the development of an archetype. This time, however, she removes their faces, leaving a void framed by Little Red's iconic hood, which stands in for the character.

Here we also see a refinement of the choreographic qualities of Oropallo's work, an awareness of the body in time and space. The images proliferate into another layered stack, this time in the form of the path through the forest to grandma's cottage. As each faceless, hooded figure appears, this time to the tune of *Peter and the Wolf*, Oropallo's invisible painterly hand swiftly erases all flesh tone, leaving only red and black visible, which has the effect of each figure gobbling up the one that comes next — Little Red gobbled up by the wolf. The arm that carries the basket of goodies and the legs that carry Little Red down the path get snatched out of the frame, leaving nothing but hoods and a trail of Mary Jane shoes traipsing down the stack of mattresses.

As Little Red Riding Hood grows up, she proves unsurprisingly, to be an icon beloved by the sexy cosplay and fetish set. The piece culminates in a cascade of latex Little Reds, a sea of shining crimson, ending with Oropallo's final punctuation, a wolf skin and a spatter of blood. Presumably, Oropallo's Little Red has vanquished the shape-shifting trickster.

In *Dirty* (2021), Oropallo furthers her exploration of iconic fetish cosplay with the *ur*-sexy costume: the French maid. Here she references the tale of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, also co-opted by Walt Disney for the 1940 film *Fantasia*. Both *Dirty* and Disney take the symphonic poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Paul Dukas as their soundtrack. Over a blurred photograph of a well-appointed kitchen, appears a latex French maid costume and the flourish of a white feather duster, and then another, and another. Again, Oropallo has pulled faces and skin tones out of the figures, leaving graphic, shiny black and white. Here, there is no growth or transformation as in *White as Snow and Wolf*, only slight variation on the little black (and white) dress of fetish imagery. The figures assemble into an army, the feather dusters into a flock, and then a riot of white that engulfs the visual field.

In *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, the titular character tries on the sorcerer's magic hat, which gives him the power to animate a broom that he commands to carry buckets of water from a well to a cistern: work assigned to him by his mentor. The broom carries out its task without the human sense to stop, flooding the room. The apprentice splits the broom into bits with an axe and the bits animate into more and more brooms, marching in lockstep, dumping bucket after bucket of water, creating an ocean. Oropallo creates an ocean of images from the magic of online searchability. Use Google's sorcery to conjure "sexy latex fetish French maid" and, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, receive a relentless parade of them, bafflingly similar iterations. Try to vanquish her, and she's in your search history, coming up again to remind you that, as the naughty early aughts musical *Avenue Q* sang, "the internet is for porn." If a thing exists, there's sure to be fetish for it, and the sorcerers and apprentices of contemporary tech have made it possible to find, in seconds, whatever fetish strikes your fancy.

These faceless French maid outfits are a feminine stereotype grown monstrously out of control. Like the animated brooms that take over the scene in the Disney version, here faceless images of the fetishized female body multiply in an overwhelming accumulation, a parody of feminine-coded domestic labor, an unsettling dance that ultimately obliterates itself under an embarrassment of feather dusters.

Oropallo's use of the feather duster in *Dirty* seems to continue her career-long habit of taking quotidian objects (welcome mats, toys, barrels, etc.) as subject matter to ground the work in everyday reality. But *Dirty* is almost an in-joke between Oropallo and this aspect of her own work. True, a feather duster is a household item, but it is mostly a campy, femme costume accessory, a decorative instrument for playing-at-cleaning.

The drowning by feather dusters in *Dirty* references the flood that ensues in the original story, but also looks like the finale of a classic burlesque fan dance. Oropallo acknowledges the relentless and insidious fetishization of the female body that multiplies online. However, just when it seems easy to pin down its feminist critique, the work lets out a giggle. Oropallo allows us to have fun with the feather duster, to feel its tickle, and in doing so, drapes her critique in sensuous, tactile abstraction. A "fetish" object, by its original, non-sexual definition, is a magical talisman. So here,

the French maid outfits are the brooms, but also the wizard's hat, transforming drudgery and a morality tale about its value, into a Busby Berkely burlesque.

What Oropallo's work so deftly renders is that beneath any transformation – of age, gender, species – lies a trace of what came before. And that is often its most fascinating aspect. She is not interested in clean breaks, but the messiness of memory, the lingering ghost. The stacks of images in *White as Snow*, *Wolf* and *Dirty* could also exist as stills, semi-abstracted figures that explore color and shape as much as they engage with gender. In *Dirty*, the feather dusters coalesce into a formal exploration of texture and gradation of white. What could be more painterly, more modern? The drift, or intentional drive, toward the abstract feels like irresistible play for Oropallo. She loves to make shapes, to alchemize into form, and her use of heightened content, be it the growing girl-children and dirty mattresses of *Wolf* or the toppled monuments of her newest video work, does not break the spell. This is what makes her a contemporary-minded, multi-disciplinary master. Throughout this body of work, Oropallo uses her particular sorcery to elevate stereotype to archetype, kitsch to craft, trash to treasure.