

Ruthi Helbitz Cohen's (Female) Transformations

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There are women everywhere you look in Ruthi Helbitz Cohen's work: female figures with black faces and pointed hats, making a hush sign; a woman with a burning dress on a cross; two women exchanging a golden egg or ball between their mouths; a woman spouting a line of gold-and-brown tears that recur in the *Curtain of Tears* (2015). Even death is a woman, portrayed as a skeleton without legs next to the figure of a big-bellied girl with a dark face, or hanging on the cross next to the woman with the burning dress, a large egg at its feet. Most of the women are not recognizable as such – we must take the artist's word for it. The portrayal of these hairless figures with dark faces, generalized features and often undefined clothing turns them into Jungian archetypes, such as the great mother or goddess; the trickster; or animus, the male in the woman, who possesses both a cruel, destructive side and a creative one. Helbitz Cohen's figures seem to unite various archetypes in one. Her more than life-size women are imposing like dark goddesses. They seem to keep changing, like the trickster, from life into death and vice versa; from clown to witch, mother, partner, or sister; from victim to perpetrator. Their creative, magical aspect is accentuated by attributes like a moon or sun, a rabbit, a fish, a bird, a heart. These symbols keep recurring and are as ambivalent as the figures themselves. The fish, for example, is both a well-known symbol of Christianity and of fertility; held by some of Helbitz Cohen's figures like a baby, it carries associations of eroticism and spiritualism at the same time. Helbitz Cohen uses these associations to create an image that is both disturbing and fascinating.

Horror, suffering and shame are themes that run like a red thread through Helbitz Cohen's work, and these themes unite her paintings with Joshua Sobol's theatrical interpretation of Théodore Géricault's 1818–19 painting *Raft of the Medusa*. In the historical event depicted, women played next to no role. Among the people who were left behind on the raft after the French vessel *Méduse* ran aground and was abandoned, there was one woman only and she did not survive long. Perhaps she was swept overboard, perhaps she fell victim to the cannibalism that the survivors resorted to. All we know is that she was not among the fifteen survivors. In his play *The Shipwreck of the Medusa: Or, The Fatal Raft!* (1820), William Moncrieff gives this woman a central role, focusing on the rivalry of two men for her love. One of the men escapes on a lifeboat, thinking his loved one got away on one of the lifeboats and that he has left his rival behind on the raft. When he realizes that the woman he loves has been left behind on the raft, too, it is already too late. Joshua Sobol changed the story, inspired by Helbitz Cohen's figures, and added more women in his play *The Raft of the Medusa*. His figures seem like archetypes, too: Leader, Clown, Priest, Scientist, Believer, Soldier, Pessimist, Optimist, Thinker, and so on. The figures recall typologies popular in 1920s art,



particularly in New Objectivity. However, whereas artists like Otto Dix and George Grosz focused on types like the prostitute, the cleric, the war cripple and the rich bourgeois, Sobol shows us roles that any of us can change into. His characters represent, as it were, different parts of us.

The central themes of the *Raft of the Medusa* as painted by Théodore Géricault were the misery and shame of the survivors on the raft. He depicts some of them as dead or dying, avoiding any clear reference to the cannibalism that helped the rafters survive. Helbitz Cohen has no problem pointing out this part of the story, one of the biggest taboos of mankind. She shows figures with missing limbs, or wearing, almost casually, a head or heart on a cord attached to their wrists, or to the tree they are transforming into. This kind of depiction of women with strong overtones of fear, suffering, and also, in parts, great poetic beauty evoked by the materials she uses, recall certain representations of women in art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the work of artists like Félicien Rops, James Ensor, Alfred Kubin, and Edvard Munch the old vanitas motif was transformed into images of syphilitic prostitutes or horrific “femmes fatales” posing a danger to men, luring them to certain death. In *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857, 1861/68), Charles Baudelaire already consciously transgressed moral boundaries, combining lust, death and disgust in strong verbal images that were to influence many poets and artists over the next few decades. Obscenity was, and is, often associated with ugliness. Artists have employed this correlation since the late nineteenth century to shock the viewer with images that are both sexually charged and not beautiful in the traditional sense of the word, producing what has been named the “aesthetic of ugliness” by philosophers like Karl Rosenkranz (see his book of that title from 1853) and Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche, art should reveal the world’s evil and suffering and, by revealing it, ultimately overcome it. A precondition for art is, in his opinion, intoxication, and the generation of artists who started their career around World War I took this to mean that their art, in order to reflect the world’s suffering, violence, suppressed sexuality and contradictions, should transgress taboos.¹

Helbitz Cohen’s images of women seem to stand in that tradition. *The Sky Fell on Me* (2015, p. 41) shows two skeleton-like women with pointed hats, such as dwarfs or magicians wear. The one on the right seems to be pointing at a tree trunk from which the other one is hanging upside down, a rope around her neck. The standing woman’s arms are stretched out toward the tree, tears or drops of some liquid are falling from her fingertips, while her eyes are empty of compassion. The relationship between the two is unclear, although at first sight they seem to be victim and perpetrator. But then, why the tears and what are those logs doing at the standing woman’s feet, seeming to catch fire?

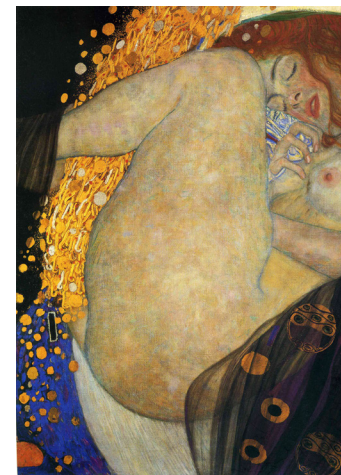
¹ Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the importance of taboos, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, was first published in 1913 and subsequently influenced many artists.



The golden and black-brown tears that appear in several paintings prior to becoming an object in their own right in the *Curtain of Tears* (2015) recall the work of another painter of the early twentieth century, Gustav Klimt. His *Danaë* (1907/08) shows the naked princess curled up in her sleep while Zeus, in the form of golden rain, impregnates her. The image is simplified and abstracted, focusing entirely on the outlines of the woman's body, which fills the entire canvas between the ornamental forms of a veil and the golden rain. Helbitz Cohen's *Curtain of Tears* seems to echo this rain, but also reflects the suffering of her female characters as well as their strength in overcoming it.

More than Klimt's women, Helbitz Cohen's figures recall those painted by his successors, Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele, around 1910. Influenced by theories of the unconscious and a changed perception of the world following the theories of Max Planck and Albert Einstein, these young artists did not aim for an accurate portrayal of people. Instead, they painted their vision of mankind, their imagined view of the psyche, of the person's inner self and his or her "aura," as Kokoschka called it. In Kokoschka's double portrait of *Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat* (1909, Museum of Modern Art, New York) he focused not only on their different energy by showing glowing colors and scratches in the background – often made with the back of his brush or even his fingernails – but also on the relationship between them by letting them "talk" to each other with their very expressive hands. He portrayed the two art historians separately, while they were at work, but nevertheless achieved an extraordinary dialogue between them. The figure of Erica Tietze-Conrat seems slightly out of focus, giving her a ghost-like appearance. Eric Kandel writes about this portrait, "With their eyes looking in different directions, they seem to be caught in a revealing, sexually charged conversation with their hands, a conversation that also involves the viewer."²

² Eric Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 156.



Gustav Klimt, *Danaë*, 1907/08, oil on canvas, 77×83



Oskar Kokoschka, *Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat*, 1909, oil on canvas, 76.5×136.2, Museum of Modern Art, New York





Helbitz Cohen’s work is, as she says, “all about relationships.”³ *Gluttony* (2013) shows a couple standing next to each other but looking at us, the viewers, with bloodshot eyes. The figure on the right, in a white girl’s dress, a pig’s head and a spiral instead of legs, is placed on a circle. The figure next to her is a dark, witch-like creature with a pointed hat, a large insect on her chest and a dress that covers her invisible body from neck to toe; both are floating in an undefined space. One of the first things one notices in this painting is the language of the hands: the girl on the right has her right arm stretched out so that her fingertips are almost touching those of the dark figure on the left, whose wrist is bent strangely in order to reach out for the pig-headed girl’s hand. The dark, witch-like woman holds her other arm at a ninety degree’s angle in front of the girl’s womb, in an almost protective gesture. The pig-headed girl has no left arm and appears to have lost her skin; her flesh and organs seem exposed to the air. In spite of the animal’s mask, referring to *Gluttony* as one of the seven deadly sins, she seems vulnerable. The dark figure to her right could be her partner in crime, reflecting another aspect of the sin which the survivors of the Medusa fell guilty to, but she could also be her strong counterpart – defending, with an action that makes her loose her hat, the pig-headed girl.

The figure of the Clown in Sobol’s play was inspired by Helbitz Cohen’s figures with the magician’s pointed hat. These figures show women as powerful, somewhat scary figures. They recall the witches of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, who function as prophets that predict Macbeth’s ascent to the throne as well as his downfall. In his film *Macbeth* (1948) Orson Welles depicted the witches as voodoo priestesses, playing with the king’s doll. Helbitz Cohen’s witches play with hearts and planets and human body parts. The artist explains the role of her witches as effecting the transformation of trauma into magic, from victim to powerful figure. Transformation is the operative word; it defines her art, which is all about ambivalence, thesis and antithesis, opposites of the same principle, like black and white, Death and the maiden, the victim and the perpetrator. Her *Daphne* (p. 46) recalls Ovid’s myth of the nymph who, persecuted by Apollo, changes into a tree to escape his advances. It also refers to Bernini’s famous representation of the theme. In his depiction of Daphne freezing as she flees, the marble imitates soft flesh and rustling leaves yet remains cold, hard, and white. The effect of the material is important to Helbitz Cohen. Through the use of various materials on a flat surface, she reflects on painting as a moment frozen in time. At the same time, she plays with the idea of two-dimensionality by assembling various materials into a collage and turning her “paintings” into objects suspended in the exhibition space, communicating with each other across it. This method of the collage, of assembling materials and ideas, is reflected in her work process, during which she inserts references to art history, myths, fairytales, movies, the events of the day – like the violence going on in her country – into her art, but ultimately translates all of this into a form that speaks of the depth of human emotions.

³ Ruthi Helbitz Cohen in conversation with the author, November 2015.

Sobol's Clown is in fact an artist. In the play, she exposes the moral downfall of the small group of survivors by singing loudly about the cannibalism that has been taking place. The Leader defends the Clown, saying, "She got carried away. She's only an artist. A poor artist. There wasn't of course even a grain of truth in all that she said. I don't have to tell you that I don't agree with anything she said, but I will defend her right to say what's on her mind." He explains, "She is a brave rafter like all the rest of us rafters. We are all for one – and one for all. Don't forget it." The horror of what has been taking place on the raft becomes a symbol of all humanity, a necessary deed of survival, exposed by the Clown. The artist reveals what humanity is capable of: cruelty, pain, but also intimacy, protectiveness, even love.

When Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* was first presented in London in 1820, it was staged theatrically not only by placing it close to the ground and thus stressing its monumental impact (the figures being painted over-life-size and the entire painting measuring 491x716 cm), but also by its presentation coinciding with two theatrical entertainments based on the events on the raft, which were presented during the exhibition of the painting: the aforementioned play by Moncrieff, performed in 1820 at the Royal Coburg Theatre (now the Old Vic), and Messrs Marshalls' *Grand Marine Peristrephe Panorama of the Shipwreck of the Medusa French Frigate with the Fatal Raft*, first shown in Edinburgh in 1820 and then in Dublin in 1821, during the exhibition of Géricault's painting in that city.⁴

Helbitz Cohen turns the exhibition space into her own theater, as it were, dividing it with the gold-and-black curtain and hanging huge paintings on either side of it. On one side there are women being transformed – or transforming themselves? – into trees. On the other side of the curtain there are two figures on a cross, a scene inspired by a nightmare the artist had, in which she was one of six crucified people, most of whom were injured or dead.⁵ However, the figures on the cross are also those of Death and the Maiden, and the burning girl recalls the burning of women accused of being witches in the Early Modern period. Witches can be victims as well as powerful figures. In seventeenth-century Europe, people believed that witches participated in wild Satanic ritual parties with much naked dancing and cannibalistic infanticide. Taboos of various kinds keep appearing in this exhibition, with all their transformative power and suggestions as to human nature. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "It is true, there may be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it can scarcely be disputed. We see all things through the medium of the human head and we cannot well cut off this head: although there remains the question what part of the world would be left after it had been cut off."⁶ Ruthi Helbitz Cohen has the answer to that question.

⁴ See Christine Riding, "Staging The Raft of the Medusa," *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Winter 2004), pp. 1–26.

⁵ Helbitz Cohen in conversation with the author, November 2015.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), p. 28.

