

Fall 2010

The Art of Camille Rose Garcia: An Existential Fairy Tale

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.dpv5-36sb>
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THE ART OF CAMILLE ROSE GARCIA:
AN EXISTENTIAL FAIRY TALE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art History and Visual Culture

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jennifer Leigh De La Cruz

December 2010

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

THE ART OF CAMILLE ROSE GARCIA:
AN EXISTENTIAL FAIRY TALE

by

Jennifer Leigh De La Cruz

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY AND
VISUAL CULTURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2010

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ABSTRACT

THE ART OF CAMILLE ROSE GARCIA: AN EXISTENTIAL FAIRY TALE

By Jennifer Leigh De La Cruz

Camille Rose Garcia is part of a contemporary underground art movement known as Pop Surrealism. An apparent dream-like and unexpected nature borrows from the oeuvre of Surrealism, while an allusion to the familiar and popular denotes similarities to the comic culture of the 1930s and Pop Art of the 1960s. Garcia's paintings are laced with the personal remnants of childhood memories that recall frequent trips to Disneyland and visits to her grandparent's cabin tucked away in the redwood forests of Northern California. Her artwork, a haunting recipe of sweet and sour, beautiful and grotesque, ominous and nostalgic, travels through Los Angeles's counterculture to paint the story of a machine-driven, violence-ridden, pill-popping society that has seemingly turned its back on the good, the human, and the existential.

The twentieth century was marked by an invasion of tract homes, multi-national corporations, rising government intervention into everyday life, mass production, and an unending stream of consumer goods. Popular products and age old stories were hollowed out and embedded with myths to help increase sales. Therefore, it is not surprising that postmodern thinkers proclaimed the demise of the human subject. The twenty-first century must now try to make sense of this phenomenon. Adopting the definition of myth presented by Roland Barthes in his essay *Myth Today*, this thesis posits that through its appropriation of Disney imagery and use of narrative motifs from classic fairy tales, the art of Camille Rose Garcia forces the viewer to compare, interpret, and choose.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis is the result of the efforts of many individuals.

First, thank you to my thesis committee Dr. Dore Bowen, Dr. Beverly Grindstaff, and Dr. Anthony Raynsford for all of your thoughtful guidance during the thesis process and throughout my graduate education.

Secondly, I would like to thank my mom and dad for their endless amount of support and encouragement, and for always keeping my spirits high. I could not have done this without you.

And finally, to Camille Rose Garcia, thank you for the art.

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I

INTRODUCTION

After the twentieth century concluded with the pessimistic declaration of the death of the human subject by postmodern theorists, the twenty-first century is left to deal with the aftershock, struggling to find steady footing on rocky terrain. The effects of postmodernism continue to linger in the twenty-first century through the myths embedded within our current capitalist and consumer driven culture. At the end of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, he presents readers with the following question, "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic."¹ In his essay *Myth Today*, Roland Barthes proposes that, "[...] the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology."² Seeming to take her queue directly from Barthes, contemporary artist Camille Rose Garcia creates her own mythologies to battle the deceiving myths produced by and embedded within a capitalist driven society. Garcia asserts her own response to Jameson's question with her dystopic paintings and her use of imagery from consumer culture. Following the study of myth as it is outlined by Barthes, my central thesis posits that through its appropriation and modification of Disney imagery and use of

¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 2002), 125.

² Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, trans., Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 135.

narrative motifs from classic fairy tales, the art of Camille Rose Garcia forces the viewer to compare, interpret, and choose.

To begin, it is necessary to introduce several key terms which will be referenced throughout this thesis and whose definitions can vary drastically depending on context. The human subject is a loaded term and is surrounded by both ambiguity and controversy. For this thesis, I will adopt an existential model following Jean-Paul Sartre. I have chosen to use the phrase “human subject” rather than “man,” because “man” alone ignores the relationship one has with the world. “Human subject” fully denotes one’s relationship to the world and others. Because of this relationship, we can say that the existential human subject is relational as it is inextricably linked to all others who inhabit the world. Sartre writes of the freedom inherent in the human subject in that, by first existing in the world, one has the capability to become active through choice, and as a result creates one’s essence. This fundamental principle of existentialism therefore acknowledges that “existence precedes essence.”³ Sartre expands on this point by writing, “Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.”⁴

The freedom to choose also defines the existential human subject as being situational, meaning that choice is a conscious act which is based upon circumstance. As

³ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is Humanism*, trans., Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

⁴ Ibid.

a result, consciousness allows for the human subject to assess a situation and weigh the various consequences of possible choices. The thought process and evaluation that occur before and the outcome that comes after a choice is made, are what define the essence of the human subject. While choice is considered to be an existential freedom, the situational aspect of existentialism is more than anything a responsibility to all who can be and/or will be affected by the outcome of one's choice, and as a result is noted to cause angst, anxiety, anguish, and despair. We can say that the existential human subject is responsible, not only for his individual essence, but the essence of the world for better or for worse.

The next term I wish to clarify is postmodernism, which gained prominence during the 1950s and continued as a vessel for critical theory throughout the 1980s and 1990s. I will refer to postmodernism as an era that opposes, or rather contradicts, the definition of the existential human subject described above. For our purposes postmodernism can be characterized by several factors, which include the onset of late capitalism, an increase in the production and incorporation of technology into everyday life, and advances in media communications. These events have changed the way people exist within the world, shifting the focus of a human subject who chooses to be a consumer subject who is conditioned to remain within the socioeconomic confines of a capitalist culture. As a result, this has caused theorists such as Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard to declare the death of the human subject. According to these theories, a self-governing human subject is impossible because consciousness is compromised by the

bombardment of an overwhelming flux of information and images that are disseminated from countless media sources, packaged to sell everything from products to propaganda.

The overpowering torrent of images has prompted Richard Kearney to write that, “The contemporary eye is no longer innocent. What we see is almost invariably informed by pre-fabricated images. There is, of course, a fundamental difference between the image of today and of former times: now the image *precedes* the reality it is supposed to represent.”⁵ In other words, reality has become a mindless imitation of the media images seen everyday in advertisements and on television. Kearney’s thoughts are preceded by Walter Benjamin in his visionary essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin raises concern about the mechanically reproduced image, asserting that with each replica, with each copy of a copy, the authenticity of the original image is lost. He writes, “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”⁶ Benjamin refers to the image’s authenticity as its “aura.” When aura is diminished, an image’s original roots become untraceable and refer only to its current use, obliterating its historical roots and essence. With consciousness now controlled by the image, Jameson has gone on to describe the symptoms that have led him and others to posit the death of the human subject which include a state of mind that he likens to schizophrenia and experiences of disorientation and fragmentation.

⁵ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 221.

These characteristics of postmodernism are also evident in the changing trends in art during the second half of the twentieth century, seen in everything from the shift in imagery and style to medium and technique. The use of appropriation, pastiche and nostalgia, and a move towards mechanical reproduction and digital media over traditional painting and sculpture, reinforced the postmodern age of technology, information, and late capitalism. This is perhaps most prominent with artists associated with the mid-twentieth century art movement, Pop. Artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein capitalized on the growing fascination with popular culture as a result of the mass distribution of images, ranging from advertisements, movie posters, books, product labels, and commercials, through various media agents. Ordinary, everyday images were transformed into fetish objects for a society addicted to consumption. Moreover, Warhol and Lichtenstein not only adopted pop images as their subject matter, but also the methods in which mass media packaged or reproduced such images for consumers. For example, Warhol's flattened silkscreen prints of popular movie stars such as Marilyn Monroe, political figures such as Ronald Reagan, and household products such as Brillo soap pads, and Lichtenstein's use of benday dots and speech bubbles in his comic strip inspired paintings, blurred the lines between high and low art, further emphasizing the postmodern takeover of the image. As a result of these trends and factors, theorists including Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard grew skeptical and laid claim that, not only was the human subject dead, but that the human subject was never anything more than a cruel capitalist myth.

Another component of postmodernism I wish to discuss is myth. French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes introduced the study of myth in the late twentieth century, examining how myth is formed and understood as it relates to popular culture. Barthes postulates that myth is a message, but a message which “[. . .] is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message.”⁷ The ways in which myths are uttered are through a calculated or, to use Barthes’ word, a “motivated” form. A form can be anything from a magazine image, to a news report, to a television advertisement, to a type of behavior or rite of passage that has become “part of our culture” or naturalized such as lavish weddings or backpacking through Europe. For example, marriage was once a sacred rite of passage and is now nothing more than a corporate revenue stream for those who grew up with the fairy tale image of a fantasy wedding and a handsome prince. These forms have been hollowed out and filled with the cultural and political ideologies that contain a message, a myth.

The final term I would like to frame is fairy tales. Fairy tales in Garcia’s work are not only a source of familiar imagery and narrative, but communication as well. At first glance, fairy tales teach lessons to children and heed warning in the face of danger. Historically, however, fairy tales have offered the possibility of transformation and hope through imagination. Throughout history, fairy tales have served as commensurate reflections of the human subject through their use and experience of creativity and magic. Garcia’s paintings take on similar traits to literary fairy tales in that her work is a cultural expression “written” in the vernacular language of pop culture imagery while exhibiting a

⁷ Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies*, 109.

range of social and political commentaries. As Robert Darton notes in his classic essay *Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose*, fairy tales are stories packed with cultural symbols and motifs that give insight into a particular historical moment and its people.⁸ Similarly, German professor and author of numerous books concerning the social relevance of fairy tales, Jack Zipes, further describes the value and power of fairy tales in that they, “. . . are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch, and as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of the people, either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them.”⁹

In the twentieth century, fairy tales left their traditional written form for the silver screen, bundling the writings of Charles Perrault, Hans Christen Anderson, and the Brother’s Grimm into a series of animated images due in large part to Walt Disney. Disney’s films, first popularized from the 1930s to 1960s, prescribe a fabricated or colonized consciousness with their easily recognizable and non-threatening imagery turning what were once active readers and listeners into dormant viewers, recipients of myths from an era known in America for its conservative politics and utopic aspirations. Of this new form, Zipes notes, “Animation is trickery – trick films – for still images are made to seem as if they move through automatization [. . .] The pictures conceal controls and machinery. They deprive the audience of viewing the production and manipulation, and in the end audiences can no longer envision a fairy tale for themselves as they can

⁸ See Robert Darton, “Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose” in *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 9-74.

⁹ Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 5.

when they read it.”¹⁰ Animation has therefore affected the way that viewers relate to fairy tales, recognizing fairy tales not just by their narratives, but also by the imagery that has become associated with those narratives. For example, the imagery from Disney films has turned into a multi-billion dollar franchise, a global brand found not only in movies but also on an extensive number of toys, clothes, furniture, jewelry, and candy; all consistent with the myth that the magic in fairy tale can be bought.

Garcia appropriates imagery that has become synonymous with the commodification of the fairy tale aesthetic, such as princesses, magic potions, poison apples, and castles, which in turn evokes new significations and meanings about the myths of today’s world through her modification of these motifs. Her media-inspired cartoon images and metaphorical landscapes symbolize what the human subject has become as a result of the myths embedded in the masses of cultural images, such as fairy tales. The qualities that distinguish Garcia’s characters from their dominant commercialized, sugary, sweet Disney counterparts are their grotesque appearances and display of human-like emotions such as fear, sadness, frustration, and depression, as they react to an unstable and fearsome world. Following Barthes, in order for the fairy tale to be an effective means of demystification in Garcia’s paintings, we must acknowledge that the satires presented by her imagery are also myth. With this acknowledgment, Garcia’s paintings are able to mythify the animated fairy tale, which as we know has already been converted to myth by Disney when he altered the literary form to film, in order to demystify viewers from today’s cultural myths. As art critic Carlo McCormick writes,

¹⁰ Jack Zipes, *Fairy tale as Myth*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1994, 84.

“Garcia does not succumb to her unlikely mythologies for the sake of escapism; she cajoles us into making a leap of faith with her precisely so that we can see – through her alternate reality – how very grim and ultimately misguided is the consensus reality we so easily accept.”¹¹

With this, it should be noted that Garcia’s paintings are also related to myth in another way. Garcia’s growing popularity as an artist, whose paintings have become highly coveted among Pop Surrealism collectors because of their signature style and imagery, brings to the table another facet of myth. Like Disney, Garcia creates characters that are instantly recognizable and repeat throughout many of her works. If you have seen one Disney movie, you can most likely identify other movies by Disney based on the style and narrative alone. The same is true for Garcia’s paintings. She has claimed writers such as William Burroughs and Philip K. Dick as inspirations to her work, as they too rebelled against the literary and social norms of their time just as she aims to do today. Burroughs and Dick were, like Garcia, part of the avant-garde. Avant-garde, as it is posited by Barthes, is a classification that actually positions Garcia as a part of the very systems that her works aims to protest.¹² The avant-garde is a social revolt among a small facet of intellectuals found within the bourgeoisie. Garcia’s work is also tied to the avant-garde in another way in that it is these groups of avid art enthusiasts and politically aware collectors who buy her paintings. It can be said that while Garcia’s paintings

¹¹ Carlo McCormick, “Camille Rose Garcia in Oblivion’s Playground,” in *The Tragic Kingdom: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2007), 12.

¹² See Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies*, 139.

create an artificial myth by using a myth-on-myth technique, her work is also bound to a similar capitalist myth.

In the next chapter, I will begin by addressing the sources from which Garcia takes her imagery, her formal style, biography, and connection to the underground art movement Pop Surrealism. In the third chapter, I will apply Barthes essay *Myth Today* as a structure for analyzing Garcia's paintings and demonstrate how her art demystifies viewers through satire and her creation of artificial myths, while also exploring the myth that resides within her own work as it relates to the avant-garde.

II

LOWBROW, POP SURREALISM, AND CAMILLE ROSE GARCIA

Camille Rose Garcia is part of a contemporary underground art movement known as Pop Surrealism. This band of artists including Mark Ryden, Todd Schorr, and the Clayton Brothers, have been integral in representing and acknowledging the prevailing mood of the twenty-first century by creating large scale narrative paintings fraught with chaos, angst, and uncertainty. With goals of hope and awareness, these artists aim to expose the myths embedded within the pop culture imagery they appropriate. The imagery found in Pop Surrealism is seeped in a long tradition of talented artists who have rebelled against mainstream art traditions. The first portion of this chapter will serve as a brief outline of the history of Pop Surrealism. In the second portion, I will introduce Garcia's biography as well as key works from her oeuvre, major themes, techniques, and stylistic inspirations in order to later show how her paintings serve as a means of demystification against myth.

During the mid to late twentieth century, before Camille Rose Garcia had become the internationally acclaimed artist she is today, a small but devoted group of car and surf enthusiasts began challenging the east coast's unyielding perception of high art with their souped-up hot rods, psychedelic colors and motifs, and unconventional comics and cartoon graphics in Los Angeles, California. Surfer, comics illustrator, and psychedelic poster master Rick Griffin, along with legendary "Finish Fetish" artist Robert Irwin, and hot rod giants VonDutch, Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, and the then emerging artist Robert

Williams, laid the foundation for what Williams would later sarcastically term "Lowbrow."¹³

Lowbrow artists such as Robert Williams, Gary Panter, Gary Baseman, Georgeann Deen, Tim Biskup, and Manuel Ocampo took their inspiration from Los Angeles's notoriously kitschy landscape, and happily departed from the coinciding mainstream art genres of the time, namely Pop and Conceptualism, preferring painting over silkscreen reproductions and figurative and narrative over rigid sensibility and intellectual philosophies. Instead the focus was put back into the joy and pleasure of making art that appealed to the senses regardless of the art world's prevailing notions and critical standards. In *Rubberneck Manifesto*, Robert Williams's questions the power and the use of visual observation, quoting the likes of Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde as they muse over the philosophical relationship between art, man, and life. While acknowledging their thoughtful contributions to this long historical debate, Williams posits that there, "exists another facet and [. . .] this is the act of simply being attracted to something visually, base curiosity!"¹⁴

In addition to its undeniable west coast connection, Lowbrow was also in tune with the popular fads of American culture during the 1950s-1970s. Advertising agencies capitalized on America's new economic growth during the postwar years. *Populuxe* is a term coined by Thomas Hine to describe the decade from 1954 to 1964 when the

¹³ In a 1979 interview, Robert Williams was asked what genre he thought his work was a part of, and sarcastically replied with "Lowbrow." It was an unintentional pun that immediately juxtaposed Lowbrow artists with New York's "high" brow Pop artists.

¹⁴ Robert Williams, "Rubberneck Manifesto," in *The Land of Retinal Delights: The Juxtapoz Factor*, ed. Bolton Colburn (San Francisco: Last Gasp Books, in association with the Laguna Art Museum, 2008), 15.

America Dream could be packaged, bought, and sold. He writes, “*Populuxe* is a way of referring to the moment when America found a way of turning out fantasy on an assembly line.”¹⁵ This was a period characterized by materialism, overindulgence, and instant gratification. There was no doubt that Americans were cashing in on the consumer luxuries they had missed out on during the war. After 1945, America’s economy was on the uprise due to the automation of factories and industrial plants which increased productivity. Well paying jobs were created for the upkeep of this new machinery and budding new corporations developed to keep up with the new demand for consumer goods. The middle class grew unexpectedly due to the new job market and increased salaries. Hine writes, “The biggest increase [of the nation’s total annual income] came in the number of families in the \$4,000–\$7,000 salary range, which was understood to be solidly middle class. There were 5.5 million families in the category in 1929, 17.9 million in 1953.”¹⁶ By the early 1950s, the population was also expanding spawning what is commonly referred to as the “baby boom.” Because the population had slowed down during the war years, a steady income now allowed for families to not only buy a home and a car, but also to support and raise a family. Advertisers welcomed their new demographic by strategically marketing to both children and their parents a variety of breakfast cereals, toys, and kid friendly furniture.¹⁷

Despite this new wave of consumer imagery sweeping the nation via advertisements and commercials during the fifties and sixties, the art world was still

¹⁵ Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

entranced by the large drip canvases of Abstract Expressionism, and was only just beginning to grapple with ideas such as appropriation and photographic reproduction showcased by Pop art. With the attention of the mainstream art world otherwise occupied, Lowbrow artists were largely reliant on galleries such as Zero One in Los Angeles, known for their *Western Exterminators* group shows, and Psychedelic Solutions in New York's Greenwich Village. These galleries began exhibiting artists who used popular imagery as well as narrative and figurative elements, but who were clearly not stereotypical Pop in the New York and Andy Warhol sense. In 1986, Robert Williams and Ed "Big Daddy" Roth organized a show that was curated by Brad Benedict, entitled *The Images of American Pop Culture Today* at the Laforet Museum in Tokyo, which showcased works by a number of Lowbrow artists including Todd Schorr, Georganne Deen, and Lynn Coleman.

In addition to galleries, Lowbrow has also been indebted to countless underground art magazines for the dissemination of their work. In 1994, Robert Williams founded *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine* with his wife Suzanne, Greg Escalante, and Craig Stecyk. *Juxtapoz* gave a new generation of artists working in the tradition of Lowbrow, including Camille Rose Garcia whose work has appeared on the cover and in the magazine numerous times, a venue in which to exhibit their art after having initially been shunned from the mainstream art world. Of starting the magazine, Williams writes, "There was a tremendous need for it. The outsider thing had the stigma of art being done by people that didn't know about art or the art world. We're dealing with artists that are articulate and intelligent and will stand up to the art world and say

‘This is what I’ve done, and this is just as fucking valid as anything you can put on a pedestal in a big white building.’¹⁸ From here, a younger generation of artists such as Victor Castillo, Esao Andrews, Tara McPherson, and Sam Gibbons found a home in Lowbrow’s quirky and cynical works adopting its seductive figurative and narrative style, confident application of color, and its unapologetic bad-ass attitude. These characteristics were further employed by this new band of artists to address various social and political issues plaguing western society and thus forming the contemporary art movement with which Garcia is associated, Pop Surrealism.

In what is one of the first attempts at a survey of Pop Surrealism, Kirsten Anderson, owner of Seattle’s Roq La Rue Gallery, writes, “When discussing this art movement, and especially when compiling this book, one of the greatest challenges was figuring out what the hell to call it.”¹⁹ And, she is not alone in this sentiment. Others who have taken on the feat of writing about this genre, which has also been termed Nobrow, Newbrow, Cartoon Realism, Underground, the Juxtapoz School, Street Art, and Edgy Cute, have experienced a similar sort of dismayed confusion. For example, Carlo McCormick writes, “Given the cumulative evidence here of so many visionary, iconoclastic, subversive and pictorially perverse artists mining a similar topography of popular cultural detritus, why is it that, after so many years, we still lack a definitive rubric for this genre?”²⁰ Another attempt to record the number of emerging

¹⁸ Meg Linton, introduction to *Through Prehensile Eyes: Seeing the Art of Robert Williams*, by Robert Williams (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2005), 11.

¹⁹ Kirsten Anderson, “Viva La Resistance: A Brief Word from the Editor,” in *Pop Surrealism: The Rise of Underground Art* (San Francisco: Last Gasp and Glendale: Ignition Publishing, 2004), 5.

²⁰ Carlo McCormick, “Notes on the Underground,” in *Pop Surrealism: The Rise of Underground Art*, ed. Kirsten Anderson (San Francisco: Last Gasp and Glendale: Ignition Publishing, 2004), 10.

contemporary artists around the world experimenting with narrative and figurative elements in their work, can be found in the beautifully illustrated book *The Upset*, which refuses to designate one overarching term and instead further breaks artists into subcategories based on a similarity of style and imagery such as Urban Art and Character. In *The Upset's* introduction, curator Pedro Alonzo observes that, "It would be impossible to place all of these artists under one banner. The work is too diverse, fed by too many sources and going in too many directions."²¹ Chon A. Noriega, a professor at UCLA, writes in his essay entitled "The Dark Weird Stuff" that, "While various names haven't been used to define this work, 'lowbrow art' and 'pop surrealism' have had perhaps the widest currency, although neither quite captures the range of work included in this category, let alone its fissures and divergent tendencies."²²

The history of Pop Surrealism is far from complete because it is still being created. Museums such as the Laguna Art Museum and galleries, especially the Merry Karnowsky Gallery and La Luz de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles, the Jonathan Levine Gallery in New York, and the Roq La Rue Gallery in Seattle have been seminal in jumpstarting the recognition of Pop Surrealism as a legitimate art genre. Camille Rose Garcia is perhaps one of the best known artists of this genre due to her charming and haunting creations which captivate viewers from all backgrounds with their pop-inspired imagery and allusion to fairy tale narratives. Susan Landauer, curator of Garcia's first retrospective show at the San Jose Museum of Art in 2007, was otherwise unfamiliar

²¹ Pedro Alonzo, introduction to *The Upset: Young Contemporary Art*, ed. Robert Klanten, Sven Ehmann, Hendrik Hellige, and Pedro Alonzo (Berlin: Gestalten, 2008), 2.

²² Chon A. Noriega, "The Dark Weird Stuff," in *The Saddest Place on Earth: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia*, ed. Sue Henger (San Francisco: Last Gasp, Santa Ana: Grand Central Press, 2005), 13.

with Pop Surrealism, let alone the artist herself. Landauer's initial reaction is one that she notes is very common upon encountering Garcia's art, writing, "When I first saw one of Camille Rose Garcia's artworks I knew I was on to something. It was a modest piece, just hand-painted Gliceé (with the customary glitter), but I *wanted it*. Not for the museum, but for myself!"²³ This ability to intrigue viewers is of course owed to her talent as an artist, but also equally to the themes and issues in which she addresses within her visual narratives. These themes and issues include a collective feeling of disenfranchisement from the machine-like control of today's profit-driven corporate culture, the growing number of environmental disasters (such as the 2004 tsunami which demolished portions of southeast Asia thought to be spawned from the worsening effects of global warming), military upheavals (such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), and the mounting feelings of anxiety and fear spawned by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Garcia's first solo show at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in 2000 addresses her personal experience growing up in Orange County and Los Angeles, and wrestles with the very contradiction of living in a place that is seemingly perfect on the outside, but when given a closer look is ridden with ". . . drugs, abuse, broken families, and the general relentless boredom of living in suburbia . . . a fairytale world that is actually an evil, narcissistic wasteland."²⁴ Garcia was born in Los Angeles in 1970. Her parents divorced a year later, and in 1975 her mother moved the family a few short miles south to

²³ Susan Landauer, introduction to *Tragic Kingdom: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia* (San Francisco: Last Gasp in association with the San Jose Museum of Art, 2007), 1.

²⁴ Camille Rose Garcia, "The Happiest Place on Earth," in *The Saddest Place on Earth: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia* (San Francisco: Last Gasp Books in association with Fullerton: Grad Central Press, 2006), 18.

Huntington Beach. Garcia was born into a family of talented and politically aware artists. Her parents, Rosemary Niesen Garcia and David Garcia, met in art school in San Francisco during the 1960s, joined the Peace Corps during the Vietnam War, and were active participants in Los Angeles during the Chicano Movement in the 60s and 70s. Her late father was a filmmaker who studied at UCLA and her mother is a muralist who continues to paint. Garcia's first year in Orange County proved to be fundamental to the formation of the viewpoints and opinions she would later adopt as it was at this time she made the first of many trips to nearby Disneyland. She began noticing at an early age the juxtaposition of the natural beauty that surrounded her grandparent's northern California cabin (which she greatly admired) and the synthetic landscapes fabricated by Disney's fantasy theme park. This apparent tension between nature and man-made, as well as the dramatic differences in the demographics that make up the likes of Orange County and LA, remains an integral aspect in her art in terms of subject matter and aesthetic. She recalls that "the contrast between trees and concrete, happiness and depression, rich and poor, and also the feeling of being disenfranchised has always resonated with me. The work I do tries to bring to light how humans try to control and combat nature."²⁵

In this first show entitled *The Happiest Place on Earth*, a tag on the famous Disneyland motto, Garcia interprets the greed and corruption she saw in Orange County as a result of the capitalist machine into a series of acrylic paintings that look more like the saddest place on earth rather than the happiest. In a painting from this series entitled *Cherrygirls vs. Contamination* (Figure 1), a gang of ghostlike Cherrygirls are detailed

²⁵ Marisa Solis, "Army of Darkness: Camille Rose Garcia Fights the Forces of Evil," in *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine*, No. 62, March 2006, 46.

with black decaying cavities for eyes and mouths, and possess an uncanny resemblance to Disney's iconic Mickey Mouse. With their rotting and spoiled appearance, the Cherrygirls represent what truly lies beneath the sugary exteriors embodied in Disney's money grubbing characters like Mickey Mouse. They frolic and play atop a slimy black millipede that is slowly creeping its way through a cascade of toxic filth. Smoke and smog from a nearby factory pollute the air, while a small cluster of trees fade into the distance. A chubby pink pig ironically assumes the predatory role of the Big Bad Wolf as he stands in front of the factory mischievously eyeing the blissfully unaware Cherrygirls. "Help" is spelled out in black, cloudy, ink-like blots as it disappears within the rest of the polluted sky. Its letters linger precariously in the corner of the painting, serving as one last plea, a last gasp before it is too late.

Garcia's calculated tonal ranges of black, yellow, grey, and brown in this painting emphasize the most disturbing and negative aspects of the painting from the millipede, to the oil-like substance permeating the ground, to the smoke emitting from the factory. While hues of red creep into the composition, it is the light blue of the clouds that contrasts with this abundantly muddy palette distinguishing between the sparseness of fresh air and the rest of the contaminated sky. Scale also figures prominently into this image, as can be seen by the juxtaposition of the large factory on the left side of the painting to the barely visible grouping of trees on the right. This is significant of the natural resources that are paved over while making room for factories, suburbs, and shopping malls. While this painting conveys the dangerous ecological effects of pollution, it also calls attention to a society which values the instant gratification granted

by consumption as is symbolized by the Cherrygirls who play happily despite their rotting veneers and wasteland playground. The themes in this painting, including industry, capitalism, pollution, and the deceitful nature of media images, clearly convey Garcia's personal experiences growing up in Southern California and visits to her grandparents in the redwood forests of Northern California.



1. Camille Rose Garcia, *Cherrygirls vs. Contamination*, 2000, acrylic and glitter on wood, 30 x 60 in. (76.2 x 152.4 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

In Garcia's teenage years, a self-proclaimed glam rocker that resulted from her affinity for music by David Bowie and punk rocker Iggy Pop, she recalls experimenting with drugs and living in a commune with struggling, drug addicted musicians.²⁶ At this time she also began designing stickers and fliers for various local bands. Despite what some may consider an alternative lifestyle, Garcia graduated with honors from

²⁶ Susan Landauer and Camille Rose Garcia, chronology in *The Tragic Kingdom: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2007), 125.

Huntington Beach High School and began art school at LA's Otis Parsons School of Art in 1988. She continued on to graduate school at UC Davis. After obtaining her Master of Fine Arts degree in California, she was awarded a summer residency through the prestigious Skowhegan Art School in Maine. In spite of an impressive resume and mainstream education, Garcia disliked the conventional rules and institutionalized standards of art she encountered in the bureaucratic high art world of academia. Instead she preferred to break the rules, choosing glitter and texture over sterile and matte, narrative and figurative over abstract and conceptual, and paint over digital – all of which were considered taboo in the confines of art school but would soon become her trademark. Recalling some of the reactions when she first began using glitter in her paintings, she says:

Narrative was bad. Figurative was bad. Cartoony things definitely wrong; unless you were Keith Haring or a Japanese artist, then okay. Text in paintings was bad. Illustration was defiantly bad, trite, common, not art. Glitter and fancy frames definitely bad. Anything kitsch or cheesy, even if you were doing it ironically, was bad. Unless you were Jeff Koons, then it was art. So the glitter started as kind of quiet revolution, because I knew it was cheating. But it just looked so good. And those are my art rules: it has to at least look good.²⁷

Narrative is one of the key techniques used in Garcia's art as a means of communication and of critiquing contemporary culture. With reoccurring characters and landscapes that are conscientiously rendered in her distinctive style, Garcia creates series of paintings that correspond to one another under a specific well thought out theme. In

²⁷ Merry Karnowsky, "Camille Rose Garcia," in *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine*, No. 100, May 2009, 76.

an interview she says, “I do a lot of reading first, and then I write out the theme of the show. Then I figure out the characters and the symbols that will tell the story.”²⁸ The fairy tale in today’s society has become an aesthetic of commodification, especially characters and images from Disney’s animated films. For example, The Walt Disney Company’s *Disney Princess* franchise, which incorporates characters such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Ariel the Little Mermaid, markets a variety of products to young girls ranging from dolls, books, and clothes to video games. Such characters have come to signify beauty, love, innocence, and domesticity in our culture, reinforcing the socially acceptable gender roles of a patriarchal society. Garcia employs a similar strategy to “market” her imagery to viewers through the comic and illustrative style of her characters and her repetitive use of characters throughout her work, as can be seen by General Royal Disorder in Figures 2 and 3. As a result, her characters, like Disney’s princesses, go from symbolic figures to icons in that they become associated with various meanings based on their use.



2. Camille Rose Garcia, *General Disorder's Deep Deep Hole*, 2006, acrylic, and gold mica on paper, 45 x 60 in. (114.3 x 152.4 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

²⁸ Marisa Solis, “Army of Darkness: Camille Rose Garcia Fights the Forces of Evil,” in *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine*, 47.



3. Camille Rose Garcia, *Royal Disorder Subterranean Invasion*, 2006, acrylic, glitter, and gold mica on wood, 48 x 72 in. (121.9 x 182.9 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

In addition to reoccurring characters, Garcia also emphasizes the importance of landscape and decorative backgrounds in which her characters assume their respective roles and act out their scripted scenes. For example, in *Royal Disorder Poison Party* (Figure 4) from 2005, Garcia depicts a wiry, disengaged figure with blonde pigtailed dressed in a cascading ball gown and adorned with emerald colored jewels. Her stare is fixed on the large blue bottle of poison she holds, which comes to life as a character in and of itself as is apparent by its hollow eyes and crackle-toothed mouth. The main figure is shown isolated in a fanciful forest spotted with floating green three-leaf clovers that recede into a dark, ominous background. The illustrative style of Garcia's painting is reminiscent of Walt Disney's 1951 film *Alice in Wonderland*. Its whimsical woodland background and multi-tiered "un-birthday" cake pays homage to the notorious debauchery of the "Mad Tea Party," whose cups of tea have been replaced by Garcia with bottles of poison. This painting also displays Garcia's use of collage, as can be seen by the decorative patterned paper on the figure's dress and underneath the green moss covered trees. A favorite technique of Garcia, the paper is first adhered to wet paint and

then glazed over in another translucent color, further enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the painting and adding the illusion of depth to the forest landscape.



4. Camille Rose Garcia, *Royal Disorder Poison Party*, 2005, acrylic and glitter on wood, 36 x 24 in. (91.4 x 61 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

The carefully rendered space, which the main figure inhabits, plays an equally important role in her narratives as do her characters. Renowned semiotician and narrative expert Mieke Bal notes that while space can be a fixed-frame functioning solely as a background, space can also be “thematized,” as is true of Garcia’s narratives. Bal explains that, “In many cases, however, space is ‘thematized’: it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an ‘acting place’ rather than the place of action [. . .] The fact that ‘this is happening here’ is just as important as ‘the way it is here,’ which allows these events to happen.”²⁹ In many fairy tales, the dark forest is

²⁹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 136.

a space representative of the evil from which the protagonist is desperately trying to escape. However, in Garcia's *Royal Disorder Poison Party* the main character is making no attempt to escape her dreary surroundings because in this fairy tale there is no valiant prince waiting in a castle or seven friendly dwarfs ready to offer refuge in a nearby cottage. Instead the evil forest has traversed the entire land of the fairy tale, leaving the character no escape other than by numbing the pain of her failed world with a bottle of poison. Such a struggle is a common narrative theme found in Garcia's paintings, while the fated princess-like figure is a typical portrayal of her characters, symbolic of the human subject in a media saturated society, who like Alice is torn between reality and the imaginary.

Garcia has acknowledged a number of musical and literary inspirations important to the development of her work. Some of her better known musical muses include the Dead Kennedys and The Clash. Garcia's personal brush with the musical world came at the age of twenty-five when she temporarily stopped producing art and joined an all girl punk band called the Real Minx with three other young women from a local coffee shop where she worked in Huntington Beach. After a brief stint with the Real Minx, Garcia began illustrating posters and stickers for KBLT, an illegal pirate radio station in Los Angeles. In 1997, she got a break and became the art director for the magazine *Grand Royal* founded by the popular punk/hip-hop band the Beastie Boys. She recalls that it was at this time she began creating art again inspired by illustration and "[. . .] the fact

that no one was looking.”³⁰ In 2009, Garcia also designed a show poster for one of her favorite bands, Death Cab for Cutie, for their July 5th concert at the Hollywood Bowl.

Her literary influences include science fiction writer Philip K. Dick and Beat poet William Burroughs. In 2001, Garcia created a series entitled *The Soft Machine*, which was named after Burroughs’ 1961 novel of the same name. This particular series deals with the sneaky tactics that dominant cultural institutions, such as government, use to impose and naturalize various ideologies as a means of controlling a media addicted public. Control has been a long standing issue for Garcia. With a politically active father who was recruited by the CIA while he and Garcia’s mother were serving in the Peace Corps during the Vietnam War, her 1994 Master’s thesis exhibition at the Basement Gallery at UC Davis dealt with government and military forms of control and surveillance.³¹ Displaying a different approach from her signature narrative paintings, the show *Invasive Actions/Evasive Forces*, “[. . .] combined actual listening devices with images from military tactics manuals and medical implements to form her installation. It spied on viewers and actually allowed people to eavesdrop on other gallery-goers via a remote listening station.”³²

As a more than an appropriate precedent, Burroughs and his Beat contemporaries were against the conventional literary norm, as they saw the traditional use of language as a subversive mechanism of control. Subsequently, Burroughs became synonymous with a writing technique known as “cut-up” or “cut and fold,” which pieces together various

³⁰ Landauer and Garcia, chronology in *The Tragic Kingdom: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia*, 127.

³¹ See Merry Karnowsky, “Camille Review Rose Garcia,” in *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine*, No. 100, May 2009, 72.

³² Hobe Urban, “Camille Rose Garcia’s Empathy Overload,” in *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine*, No. 31, Mar/Apr 2001, 29.

narratives often with no distinguishable beginning, middle, or end, forcing readers to reconsider the typical structure and use of language. In addition to the title, Garcia also adapts Burroughs cut-up technique in her execution of this series. She explains:

I was also playing with the idea of a ‘broken narrative,’ which William Burroughs does in his cut-up writings. A broken narrative in painting means to abstract the space or the linear motion in order to arrive at things you couldn’t have thought of before. I was interested in laying abstract and real space together in the same painting to create a kind of dreamlike landscape with multiple layers of meaning not just a literal interpretation space.³³

Moreover, this type of technique as Garcia has applied it to her paintings commands a necessary reconsideration of the traditional ways in which pictures are used to tell a story, similar to that of Burroughs.

The use of Burroughs’s non-linear cut-up technique also evokes similar feelings associated with the postmodern link to schizophrenia, or what Dominique Nahas cites as “multiphrenia,” a symptom “. . . in which the besieged self flails about trying to take advantage of the sea of choices, creating a number of selves to respond to an increasing number of potential relationships from TV, travel, telephones, faxes, computer, E-mail, mass mailing,”³⁴ as well as to Sartre’s comparison to nausea. In *Nausea*, what is arguably considered Sartre’s most famous narrative piece of Existential literature, the main character, historian and writer, Antoine Roquentin, is confronted with his own existence and is simultaneously confused and appalled with his relationship to the world.

³³ Camille Rose Garcia, *The Saddest Place on Earth*, ed. Sue Henger (San Francisco: Last Gasp and Santa Ana: Grand Central Press, 2005), 24.

³⁴ Dominique Nahas, “Not Cloning Around: The Grotesque Body in Pop Surrealism,” in *Pop Surrealism* (Ridgefield: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 84-86.

The world signifies for Roquentin a cruel and enslaving agent of control, resulting in an overwhelming feeling of nausea. Sartre writes, “Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them: they are useful nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts.”³⁵ Similar to Sartre’s character Roquentin, Garcia’s series *The Soft Machine*, evokes a reevaluation of one’s existence and their relationship to the world.



5. Camille Rose Garcia, *Dream Factory Escape Pod*, 2001, acrylic, oil and glitter on wood, 72 x 96 in. (182.9 x 243.8 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

In *Dream Factory Escape Pod*, from *The Soft Machine* (Figure 5), Garcia creates an extraterrestrial setting rendered in muddy hues of orange, brown, and black. A chain of cloned, black doll-like creatures, resembling characters from the popular children’s television show *Teletubbies*, float ominously through the space. In the center of the painting, a black parasitic castle with long, slithery tentacles sits atop of a slippery brown and orange gelatinous mountain. The snaky tentacles of the castle attach to one of the

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans., Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964), 19.

Teletubby creatures as if to pull him into the mother ship. Barely visible from the exterior of the dominating castle, patches of light stem from the barred windows. Often in fairy tales, castles are depicted as sparkly, clean, and white, but not here. To end up at the castle in a fairy tale implies that one will live happily ever after. Garcia has portrayed the castle in a number of different ways throughout her oeuvre, this time combining the characteristic pointed towers of a castle and the smokestacks of a factory. The castle/factory can be read as a symbol that mirrors agents of control in our own world, ranging anywhere from government to media to religion, that use homogenizing tactics to keep subjects in line with their status quo. Garcia employs this form as a sign of imprisonment and power, bringing to mind Michel Foucault's study of the Panopticon.³⁶ Like the Panopticon, a late eighteenth century style prison designed so that the guards always have optimal views of the prisoners, but the prisoners can only view the building itself never fully aware whether they are being observed at any given moment instilling a sense of fear and obedience, Garcia's castle is central to her painting, as is Sleeping Beauty's castle central to the Disneyland theme park.

Images and characters from Disney films prove to be an undeniable influence on Garcia's narratives and aesthetic style, but Disneyland also plays a huge role in her work as a symbol for postmodernism, which blurs the line between imaginary and reality.³⁷

Disneyland opened in Anaheim, California in 1955 and was designed by

³⁶ See Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

³⁷ Despite what initially seems to be a critique on Disney, Garcia cites Walt Disney as a genuine influence in terms of her aesthetic and imagination. Her critique lays more within the brand of Disney and how the multi-billion dollar corporation has become an iconic symbol of consumerism by selling the fairy tale and perpetuating the myth of a happy ending to a global market in the form of movies, toys, clothes, and music. For Garcia, it is no longer an innocent childhood dream, but a mass marketing scheme.

cinematographers, or as Disney dubbed them early on, “imagineers.” Imagineers created an experience that encouraged visitors to feel as if they were leaving one world behind and entering into a whole new world of instantaneous fantasy and make believe, deliberately modeled upon classic Disney movies with artificial colors and synthetic materials so that the characters seem ageless. The experience of leaving one world for another is an intentional marketing ploy in Disney’s design carried out in his multiple theme parks including Disney World and Euro Disney. After paying admission, visitors stream down Main Street USA, a nostalgic recreation of Walt Disney’s own childhood memories. As visitors move closer and closer to Sleeping Beauty’s castle, the buildings of Main Street decrease in size, enhancing the size of the castle and staging the symbolic entrance from reality to the imaginary.³⁸ Sleeping Beauty’s castle can be seen from anywhere in the theme park, exerting its powerful presence by its large scale and central location, similar to the Panopticon, but also medieval feudal societies.

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard asserts that Disneyland is a simulation of reality, or more rather an example of the hyperreal, where the differences between real and imaginary are indistinguishable.³⁹ For example, Main Street USA is merely an image from a memory of Walt Disney’s childhood and yet these romanticized images of an early 1900s city hall or candy store have come to signify a reality which may never have existed except as a figment of Disney’s imagination. Baudrillard writes, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real,

³⁸ Hine, *Populuxe*, 152.

³⁹ See Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, trans., Jacques Mourrain (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166-184.

when in fact all of Los Angeles and America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.”⁴⁰ Garcia challenges Baudrillard’s postmodern claim through her own recreation of imaginary worlds, using similar imagery from the fairy tales and rides found in Disneyland. Garcia’s depictions, however, contrast with Disney’s synthetic and sugary exteriors exposing the true nature of these characters who represent the multi-billion dollar company behind their creation.

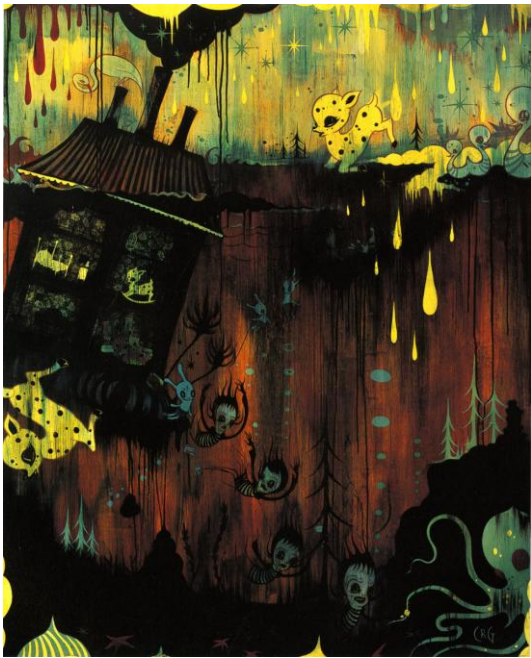
Garcia further attests to the hyperreal presented by Baudrillard in her 2002 series *Retreat Syndrome*. This series touches upon the feeling of being disenfranchised which causes a need to escape from a world of sensory overload and the control of the capitalist machine that took off in the 1950s. Garcia’s *Retreat Syndrome* takes its name from the Philip K. Dick short story by the same name where the main character is controlled by a schizophrenic-like memory causing him to drift between alternate realities and parallel universes. Garcia adapts Dick’s science fiction narrative to this series which was made after September 11, 2001 saying, “I thought this was a really good metaphor for what people were going through at the time (being bombarded in the media by constant and unstoppable horror) with everyone creating their own safe little parallel universes complete with antidepressants and 500 thread-count sheets.”⁴¹

In the painting, *Retreat Syndrome* (Figure 6), Garcia depicts the sinking of what was once the epitome of the American Dream. A house, along with Garcia’s signature Bambi-esque animals and doll-like characters, sinks to the bottom of a rust colored ocean. The roof of the house is topped with a trio of smokestacks, crowning the home

⁴⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁴¹ Camille Rose Garcia, *The Saddest Place on Earth: The Art of Camille Rose Garcia*, 40.

and the American Dream as another cultural myth or agent of control. Its windows only serve to magnify what was surely a perfect life. In one room is a bed and dresser, in another a child's rocking horse. The lower right window houses boxes of Ritz Crackers, Alpo Dog Treats, and other assorted name brands. A Hawaiian Fruit Punch juice box and a mini box of Kellogg's Frosted Flake's fall to the ocean floor. Garcia's paintings beg the question of what do we do when what we thought was real turns out not to be, and what if what we thought was imaginary turns out to be real? The brand name foods, child's rocking horse, and two-story house are all items marketed to consumers who buy into the myth of materialism, which promises perfection, stability, and a better quality of life. Many Americans today, however, are facing foreclosures on homes they bought for these very reasons and as a result are now seeing the deception and cruelty of such myths at their expense.



6. Camille Rose Garcia, *Retreat Syndrome*, 2002, acrylic, oil, and glitter on wood, 60 x 48 in. (152.4 x 121.9 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

The endings to Garcia's paintings are presented in the form of a choice, evoking existentialist themes such as abandonment, angst, and despair, feelings which also unite many viewers today. With such a philosophy comes great responsibility, but also great optimism in the hope and possibility that exists within the human subject's capability to change. These existential characteristics come to the forefront in Garcia's paintings reminding viewers that a better world is indeed possible and that its future lies in the realization that through choice alone, we are responsible for each other. As Garcia states, "I think what humans need to do in order not to destroy ourselves is realize that the world was not made for man, but man was made for the world."⁴² However, by placing this type of Existential consciousness and autonomy in the forefront, the subject can also choose to do nothing, to leave things as they are, choosing to live in a world that is on a destructive course.

In *The End is Near* (Figure 7), painted especially for the Jonathan LeVine Gallery's booth at New York's Scope Contemporary Art Fair, Garcia illustrates a candy-colored forest the curtain parts to reveal a menacing figure, uncomfortably similar to images of the grim-reaper, wading through an icy blue lagoon. In hand, the ghostly figure carries a large gel capsule and an overflowing cauldron stamped with the sneering face of evil. Floating ominously behind, are a sharp hatchet, striped umbrella, and a bottle of poison. A grinning owl perched on a moss-covered tree watches as a doe-eyed deer attempts to buck out of the path of the steadily approaching figure who is sure to bring instant death. The foreboding words "The End is Near," found at either of the

⁴² Kirsten Anderson interview with Camille Rose Garcia, "Black Mirror: The Work of Camille Rose Garcia," *Hi Fructose*, vol. 8, 2008, 72.

lower corners, allude to the danger about to ensue unless something happens, unless something changes to save this world from an arctic Armageddon. The title also hints at the fanatical apocalyptic prophecies to come in the year 2012. It is with this threat of fast approaching destruction that Garcia presents viewers with an existential choice.



7. Camille Rose Garcia, *The End is Near*, 2009, acrylic and glitter on wood panel, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

Fairy tales, we know, are supposed to have happy endings. There is a moment in each story when something changes, also known as the climax, and the protagonist inches closer to the happy ending. In most fairy tales this change generally occurs as the result of some type of magic (for example, the fairy godmother in *Cinderella* or the kiss of a handsome prince in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*). However, Garcia cannot paint the ending to her story because it is not her story alone to tell, but that of mankind, and an ending, although near, has not yet been written. The ending of our own fairy tale lies

within the choices made by individuals which will either better or worsen the realities of our own world and seal our fate. An ending, happy or not, is in store.

III

STORYTELLING

Garcia describes herself as a storyteller, but her paintings tell anything but a traditional story.⁴³ Many of her series and work titles are taken from literary and film sources whose writers, including William Burroughs, Anthony Burgess, and Philip K. Dick, have pushed the conventional boundaries of literature and cinema with their unconventional styles and techniques. For example, *Ultraviolenceland* is a series from 2004 that takes its name from the 1962 novel by Anthony Burgess and film directed by Stanley Kubric; *The Soft Machine* is a series from 2001 named after the novel by Beat poet William Burroughs; *Retreat Syndrome* is a series from 2002 and the title of a short story by science-fiction author Philip K. Dick; and *Soylent Dreams* (Figure 8) is a painting from 2009 that alludes to the 1973 film *Soylent Green*, which addresses some of Garcia's own fears including overpopulation and pollution. Preferring the rawness of the psychotic, alien, and eccentric to society's prescribed standard of the sane, familiar, and safe, these writers shattered the ways in which language had been previously used in storytelling, exposing the familiar form of communication and entertainment as a deceptive mechanism of control through their departure from the accepted literary norms. Garcia adopts a similar rebellious attitude and innovative style to subvert the illusory use of traditional language by dominant cultural institutions in order to reveal their detrimental effects on society at large.

⁴³ Merry Karnowsky, "Camille Rose Garcia," in *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine*, No. 100, May 2009, 72.



8. Camille Rose Garcia, *Soylent Dreams*, 2008, acrylic, silver leaf, and glitter on wood panel, 33 x 40 in. (83.8 x 101.6 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

While her themes evolve out of satiric, psychologically charged and offbeat books and films, Garcia’s main aesthetic inspirations are still from children’s books and films, especially Walt Disney’s animated fairy tales. Garcia’s childhood home in southern California put her within close proximity to Disneyland, and her family’s frequent visits to the theme park had a profound impact on not only her aesthetic style, but perhaps more importantly, her choice of narrative. Her works resonate with viewers who have also “grown up Disney” and have begun to see through the falsities presented by their plastic and animated forms.

Garcia’s paintings function as a means of communication, a way of demystifying viewers from the undercover marketing strategies used not only by product based corporations like The Walt Disney Company, but by other leading cultural establishments such as government and religion who, like profit driven businesses, are selling an idea in

a quest for control and power. These ideas that we so easily accept without skepticism, without question, and sometimes even without the knowledge that inception is taking place are infused within the images disseminated through mass media and come to play in Garcia's own contemporary fairy tales. It is myth that has taken hold of consciousness and imagination transforming the human subject into a consumer subject that is constructed and controlled by society. Guided by the principles of Roland Barthes in his essay *Myth Today*, this chapter will explain the function of myth and the demystifying processes at work in Garcia's uncanny reinterpretation of iconic fairy tale imagery to argue that her narratives demystify a society that has become spellbound by the myths of popular and consumer culture.

In order to successfully support this claim, we must first propose several different levels on which Garcia's paintings function in order to battle against myth. On the first level, a purely visceral level, her paintings draw viewers in with their seductive surfaces and familiar imagery, similar to any advertising image. On a second level, once viewers have begun to look more closely at what is represented, a satire is created of the world and characters that are depicted in Garcia's paintings and that of the viewer's. This satire creates a third level where viewers must relate and interpret her work against what they know reality to be, for example her work versus that of Disney. It is here where an important parallel level exists that is often overshadowed, but a characteristic Garcia returns to in her paintings and that is the history of the original literary fairy tales that were commodified by Disney.

Fairy tales have persisted as popular and familiar cultural forms throughout history because they communicate a message of hope, telling the story of the triumph of the common man over the exploitative natures of governing powers. Authors and storytellers have continued to make these stories relatable to readers and listeners in various historic eras by casting the protagonist as a member of the proletariat or working class and by maintaining that the magic and fantasy within these stories can indeed happen to even the most unlikely of people at the most unsuspecting of times during the most impossible circumstances. It is however this same characteristic that has been commodified by Disney and has subjected the classic fairy tale to nothing more than an animated image that proclaims Disney's philosophy of happiness, playfulness, and nostalgia for American innocence. Disney has become the very presence of happiness. This is myth. By presenting such a satire, Garcia is asking viewers to interpret her work against the myth it mythifies, thereby exposing the truth and intention behind the myth.

In order to explain the process of myth, we must acknowledge that Garcia's imagery and even her style which appears akin to cartoon animation are in fact myths composed of signs, meaning that they are already loaded and invested with cultural significance. This cultural significance or meaning, as well as their recognizable forms are what allow Garcia to comment on their nature through her appropriation and alteration of these images. They are the result of a form and a concept that embody the ideology of the culture which they are a part of, forming what Roland Barthes refers to as the mythological system. According to Barthes, the mythological system is a restructuring of a tri-fold pattern already inherent in the semiological structure of

language which consists of a signifier (the acoustic sound of a word), the signified (the object of what the acoustic sound has come to stand for or signify), and the result of the two, the sign (the acoustic sound as meaning the object).⁴⁴

The mythological system, which constitutes the formation of myth, is by design similar to language in that it also has two parts, a form (the sign taken from the semiological system) and a concept (the idea or intention of the myth creator embodied in the form), whose associative sum equals a third, the signification or myth (the naturalization of a concept through a form).⁴⁵ Myth steals from language the linguistic sign, emptying it of its meaning and instead filling it with ideological meaning, tied to the systems which produce it. The intentions and motivation of the myth are contained within the mythological concept which is in turn wrapped up in the form. It is the concept which becomes naturalized through the form. Barthes explains that, “The intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythological speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason.”⁴⁶

After having explained the parts of the mythological system, I will now apply Barthes’ principles to a painting by Garcia by looking first at the history, the myth, and then the *artificial myth* or *mythology* produced by Garcia in order to unveil the demystifying process contained within her work. *Snow White* is a historic fairy tale with

⁴⁴ See Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies*, trans., Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 111-114.

⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

many versions, written and verbal that spans many cultures. However, what may come to mind is not necessarily the story or history of *Snow White*, but inevitably Disney's 1937 animated image of the character Snow White. Even if one is unfamiliar with the story, more times than not one can recognize the household character with her short black hair tied up in a red ribbon, milky skin, red lips, and her blue, yellow, and red dress as being the character from the Walt Disney movie *Snow White*. First, we must admit that Disney's image of Snow White is a myth; the form being her easily recognizable animated image and the concept being any number of ideas from societal standards of femininity and domesticity that Disney as a corporation and brand wishes to sell through the form.

This brings us to a small impasse: what exactly is the Disney myth? The myth of Disney is that life can be a fairy tale with a happy ending made possible by the magic from some mystical force that in reality does not exist. Disney films and products sell the possibility of magic through fairy tales, asking consumers to mimic the ways of Disney characters in order to turn a profit. For example, Disney characters such as Snow White, who are beautiful, innocent, and subservient to their male counterparts, are doing what they have been conditioned to do by social standards and as a reward for this good behavior will be granted the wave of a magic wand to ensure happily ever after. Magic and fantasy figure prominently into Disney films as the primary source behind the events that are taking place.

While magic and fantasy figure into the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, they are also laced with rich psychological connotations that teach lessons and evoke social

dialogue and commentary. For example, in the case of *Snow White*, Maria Tatar notes the presence of Snow White's biological mother and father in the original Brothers Grimm version, but writes that the elimination of her parents in the Disney adaptation, as well as the title change from *Snow White* to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, shifts the focus of the complicated relationship she has with her stepmother after her real mother dies to her relationship with Seven Dwarfs.⁴⁷ Child psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, further evaluates the relationship that develops between Snow White and her stepmother after the death of her biological mother in Freudian terms, noting the ways in which jealousy and temptation play a key role in the development of the characters and outcome of the story.⁴⁸ The analysis presented by both Tatar and Bettelheim show that magic is used only as a secondary aspect, taking a backseat to the relationships and actions made by the characters, rather than as a primary characteristic which serves as the reason alone that a happy ending can be achieved in Disney films. Magic is a falsified promise by Disney, leading viewers of films and buyers of their products to act as the characters do in order to achieve a happy ending.

Now, to return to our previous discussion of the mythological system, the concept, as Barthes notes, is inextricably tied to the form which has come to stand for the concept. The concept, however, is made up of many associations that involve the fairy tale (beauty, dreams, Americana, etc.), but all of which lead to or signify the Disney

⁴⁷ See Tatar's introduction to "Snow White" in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans., Maria Tatar (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 242-243.

⁴⁸ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (New York: Vintage Books 1989), 198.

brand. Thus, the sole purpose of the concept is for it to be appropriated by consumers.⁴⁹ As a result of this characteristic, a single concept can actually be repeated through a number of forms. For example, while the stories of *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Beauty and the Beast* like *Snow White* have histories that date back centuries, any one of these Disney creations can easily stand in as the form to communicate the same concept. As a result, the cultural history behind *Snow White* the story is lost, and *Snow White* the product, the myth, is born. The history is no longer that of *Snow White*, but that of Disney whose myth is inevitably bound to the Cineplex, Hollywood style productions, and The Walt Disney Company, the systems which created her for commercial profit.



9. Camille Rose Garcia, *Snow Black Liberty*, 2008, acrylic, silver leaf, and glitter on wood panel, 39 ½ x 33 in. (100.3 x 83.8 cm). Reprinted with permission from the artist.

In *Snow Black Liberty*, from the series *Ambien Somnambulants* (Figure 9), viewers are confronted with a dismal and abject looking figure resembling Walt Disney's

⁴⁹ See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, 119.

portrayal of Snow White. In this painting, like many of her pieces, Garcia uses iconic imagery from familiar fairy tales to symbolize the individual's struggle to survive in the constant flux and flow of today's globalized society. Garcia's Snow White is reminiscent of Disney's 1937 classic character with her black hair, fair face, and princess dress. She is positioned upon a bed of black mushrooms that is surrounded by a popular fairy tale motif known as a fairy ring, a group of mushrooms that form a circle and is believed to be a space where magical things happen. However, it is obvious by her bemused eyes, entranced by the storm of poison apples floating above her, and yellow skirt that seems to flood and disintegrate into the abandoned landscape, that the possibility of a happy ending is grim.

In her transformation of Snow White to Snow Black, there is another apparent difference that separates Garcia's representation from Disney, her technique. Instead of digitization or animation, Garcia painstakingly creates, shapes, and molds her grotesque princess (as she does all of her paintings) with acrylic paint, highlighting the details in silver leaf and glitter. For her 1937 debut, Snow White was sketched by Disney for the sole purpose of being animated for the film. Now, not only is Disney's Snow White mass-produced through animated form, but also widely distributed in the form of plastic toys, books, and costumes. The mechanized means in which Disney's image is produced further reinforces and exposes the systems at the root of its myth (i.e. corporate conglomerates, mass-production, and big-budget Hollywood productions.) While Garcia appropriates a style and aesthetic that may seem comparable to Disney, she imagines her own image, her own story, and then pieces together each detail to create her own

narrative. Unlike artists associated with postmodern art where appropriation is executed through photographic and digital means, such as Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine, Garcia does not mechanically copy an image directly from its source, or to use Prince's term "re-photograph" a digital image to make use of it in a new piece of art. While it could be argued, however, that Garcia does evoke a similar twinge for American nostalgia as Prince does – for example in his photographic series *Four Cowboys* he appropriates the all-American, rough and tough cowboy from Marlboro cigarette advertisements in a similar ploy to expose the commodification and naturalization of popular imagery – her painterly style and fresh interpretation keeps her work from being categorized as nostalgic in the postmodern sense and from running the risk of mistaking an appropriated image as historical fact.

In addition to modifying the Disney character's form through appearance and style, Garcia calls further attention to the opposing nature and concept of her image of Snow White/Black to that of Disney's with her title and the replacement of the word "White" with "Black." This is a significant change, one which alters the perception of the character herself. The name "Snow White" has historically signified the mirroring of the heroine's physical beauty with her virtuous and innocent nature. For example, the Brothers Grimm began their tale with a queen, who in her search for happiness wishes not only for a child to fulfill her lonely void, but a child of renowned physical beauty. She says, "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the

wood of the window frame.”⁵⁰ Disney follows in this trend beginning his film with a description of Snow White’s unmatched beauty, sketching out her trademark features which include, “Lips red as the rose, hair black as ebony, [and] skin white as snow.”⁵¹ Maria Tatar, a Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University and the author and editor of a number of books concerning the social function of fairy tales, notes that while these three colors red, black, and white make up Snow White’s physical beauty, she is however, “Named after only one of the three colors that characterize her beauty . . . she is often connected with the purity and innocence that our culture associates with the color white. But the term ‘snow’ adds another dimension to her characterization, deepening the meaning of her innocence.”⁵²

Similar in concept, Garcia’s grotesque physical make-up of the character is mirrored by the descriptive word “black” in her title and name. Just as the word “white” signifies the beauty, purity, and innocence of the princess described by the Brothers Grimm and Disney, the word “black” in Garcia’s case represents a soiling or tarnishing of history’s squeaky clean version, exposing the truth behind such superficial representations. What separates Disney’s version from the Grimm version, is that Disney hides behind the physical form of Snow White, a form that glorifies her physical beauty, while proposing to carry on a historically familiar story, but only adopting an incomplete image (the physical portrayal of Snow White to mean history) to represent a whole story that has many versions and cultural significations. As a result the concept can now make

⁵⁰ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Snow White” in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans., Maria Tatar (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 243.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 240.

use of the form to promote the intentions of The Walt Disney Company, the creating system behind the myth, to mean physical beauty, a fairy tale life, happiness, all in an effort to sell Snow White for profit.

Finally, the third word of Garcia's title "Liberty," is the most intriguing given Garcia's dismal portrayal of the prototypical princess. At first glance, any notion of liberty seems unimaginable. The word "liberty," paired with Garcia's overwhelmingly grim composition of the character Snow Black, who is transfixed by the apples above, gives way to a further analogy and exposes yet another myth cemented in today's consumer driven culture—prescription drugs. The myth of liberty through prescription drugs, as represented in this painting by the apples and more blatantly in other paintings by pill bottles, is similar to the structure of myth presented by Disney, but simply employed by a different product. It is again capitalism and profit that are behind the myth. With a range of emotions including angst, despair, boredom, helplessness, disorientation, and hopelessness emanating from the work's impenitent shattering of the popular fairy tale image, how to achieve liberty and happiness in such a world comes into question. These emotions and reactions have been targeted and categorized as "symptoms" by pharmaceutical drug companies, introducing the general public to addictive stimulants and pain killers such as OxyContin and anti-depressants like Prozac promising to liberate its patients from a world in which they feel imprisoned. These drugs are analogous to the myths embedded in media images in that they are sneaky, strategic, and seductive, and tied to the multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical drug industry. Such drugs have led to dangerous and careless addiction habits. Garcia has entitled the

series of paintings from which *Snow Black Liberty* is a part of *Ambien Somnambulants*. *Ambien* is a popular sedative prescribed to treat insomnia. Many of her characters, including Snow Black and the figure from *Soylent Dreams* (Figure 8), appear to be in a state of total withdrawal, oblivious to the world that is crumbling around them, and captivated only by the alluring frenzy of poisoned apples or the next hearty helping of poison. While one half of the world is under the myth of consumer culture, ignorant and indifferent to issues such as Global Warming and the Iraq War, the other half are anesthetized, sleepwalking through a life they feel they cannot control.

For Garcia to alter such iconic imagery that has become associated not only with the aesthetic of the fairy tale, but with the overall aesthetic of consumption in today's society, such as pills and bottles which allude to prescription drug use, she is forcing viewers to reconsider the validity and accuracy of their reality. Under the assumption that Garcia's paintings themselves are myth (we know this based on her form [appropriated images from pop culture that are associated with both fairy tales and consumption] and concept [the motivation of the message that is portrayed by Garcia's altered forms]), her paintings are first meant to signify or allude to reality through their recognizable forms. By only signifying or alluding to reality, they are in no way claiming to be a whole or complete picture of reality. This allows them to be open enough to be interpreted by viewers, but familiar enough to signify or allude to reality from which their images are appropriated. Barthes writes, "The writer's language is not expected to *represent* reality, but to signify it."⁵³ Louis Althusser goes a step further

⁵³ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, 137.

explaining that, “. . .while admitting that they [ideologies] do not correspond to reality, i.e. that they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = illusion/allusion).”⁵⁴ According to Althusser, the ideologies embedded in myth only allude to reality through the form of an illusion. Ideologies are not real until they are perceived and interpreted as relating to something real. For example, Garcia’s Snow Black alludes to or signifies reality through her similar appearance to Disney’s Snow White. Because we understand that Garcia seeks to expose or demystify viewers from myth by producing an artificial myth, the ideology embedded in Snow Black’s grotesque physical characterization can then be compared to the ideology contained within Disney’s happy cookie-cutter depiction of Snow White. The contrast between the two illusions and thus the two ideologies of Snow White is what is left to be interpreted by viewers.

Until this point, I have discussed and analyzed the systems whose ideologies are embedded within the popular myths Garcia aims to dispel. But whose ideologies and what systems are behind Garcia’s myths? Aligning Garcia with authors like Burroughs, Burgess, and Dick who have pushed the boundaries of convention, and by claiming that she is exposing the truth behind the capitalist myths of dominant cultural institutions, such as The Walt Disney Company and pharmaceutical drug distributors, we have been positioning her as avant-garde, someone who goes against the status quo. To classify her

⁵⁴ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 44.

as avant-garde would be to establish her as part of the very systems that her paintings proclaim to contest for two reasons. The first lies within the natural relationship of the bourgeoisie to the avant-garde. The avant-garde, as Barthes notes, is in fact part of the dominant social, political, and economical regime, the bourgeoisie.⁵⁵ He writes:

True, there are revolts against bourgeois ideology. This is what one generally calls the avant-garde. But these revolts are socially limited, they remain open to salvage. First, because they come from a small section of the bourgeoisie itself, from a minority group of artists and intellectuals, without public other than the class which they contest, and who remain dependent on its money in order to express themselves.⁵⁶

The second reason is also explained by Barthes in the reference above, and that is wrapped up in the natural relation of the avant-garde and bourgeoisie to capital. Garcia's work has proven to be highly collectable because of its seductive surfaces, vibrant colors, and the savvy way she communicates her message of not only change and hope, but of her acknowledgement of the anxiety, angst, and cynicism. The characteristic, however, that makes Garcia's paintings most marketable is her own take on and contribution to popular imagery, such as Snow Black. Garcia, like Disney, has created a style that is instantly recognizable. Just as Disney's images become the very presence of its brand, embodying happiness and innocence, Garcia's images become the very presence of her brand, signifying awareness for global issues and contempt for conformity. These characteristics bode well with young, off-beat, and wealthy collectors— such as Long Gone John, who is the founder of the record label Sympathy for the Record Industry and

⁵⁵ See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, 139.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

avid patron of a number of Pop Surrealist artists; Tarina Tarantino, who is a popular Hollywood jewelry designer; and Gino Joukar, a Pop Surreal collector who also recently opened his own gallery of plastic and vinyl toys in Hollywood called the Toy Art Gallery— looking to buy something that is beautiful, representative of the pop culture imagery fad, and mirrors their own concerns, feelings, and relationship to the world. In addition to her paintings, Garcia also has a number of other products for sale, including limited edition glicée prints through her website and various galleries, quirky Christmas cards, a children's book entitled *The Magic Bottle*, a toy line called PITCO (Prosthetic Industries Toy Company), two beautifully printed catalogues, and her most recent endeavor which came in February of 2010, the re-released unabridged text of Louis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with watercolor illustrations done by none other than Camille Rose Garcia. (The watercolor paintings, an uncharacteristic departure from her signature acrylic paintings were also on display at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery in Los Angeles in a small show called *Down the Rabbit Hole* all of which were for sale.)

Is it still possible for Garcia's paintings to challenge the myths of popular culture despite the artist's apparent tie to the avant-garde? The fairy tale is a form that is familiar to viewers, and although it has been commodified by Disney, for many it is still a vernacular form that signifies hope and possibility. By choosing to use imagery and narratives from classic fairy tales, Garcia engages an audience that is not only made up of avant-garde intellectuals, but a public who understands fairy tales to be a form of storytelling, entertainment, and most importantly teaching. If we follow Barthes and

Althusser and posit the fairy tale as an illusion (a myth) that alludes to reality through its stories and characters, then it is left to viewers to interpret how the ideology contained within Garcia's imagery relates to the reality. Jack Zipes notes that for the fairy tale to once again be a valid proponent of change, its formal characteristics must correspond with today's historical epoch and also signify a new kind of imagination that is consistent with the human subject's relation to the world.⁵⁷

If we return briefly to Garcia's *Snow Black Liberty* and read Garcia's Snow Black as a symbol for what the human subject has become, a frenzied figure bombarded with media images and endless streams of information, we can now offer a second interpretation for Garcia's use of the word "liberty" in her title. Garcia's demystification of sugary fairy tale imagery gives way to the signification of liberty. Her painting exposes the myth of Snow White as it has been taken from its original historical grounding by corporations like Disney and re-mythifies in turn to expose what our society has not only stolen in terms of authenticity of the story, but of the human subject. Garcia's paintings set the precedent for a new kind of contemporary fairy tale that embodies the possibility of change and the acknowledgement of the grim state of the world. Garcia's "myth on myth" technique is a key element that aims to give her paintings hope by allowing viewers to interpret the richness of her imagery and to see through the fakeness of the images she appropriates and the ideologies they embody.

⁵⁷ See Jack Zipes, *Fairytales as Myth*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1994, 140.

IV

CONCLUSION

In the early 1990s a small group of talented artists based out of Los Angeles, California began championing a return to figurative and narrative painting after the dominance of contemporary art by photography and digital media. Pop Surrealism, which includes Camille Rose Garcia, the Clayton Brothers, Tara McPherson, Mark Ryden, Gary Baseman, Tim Biskup, and Todd Schorr, is influenced by pop culture, illustration, Japanese anime and manga, comics, punk rock, tattoos as well as high brow art movements including Dada, Surrealism, and Pop. Their body of work, which is executed with first class precision, technique, and skill (most have been academically trained), is instantly captivating with its fresh take on popular and commercial imagery. It is, however, their socially and politically motivated subject matter paired with the charismatic style of each artist that has gained attention from galleries and collectors around the world. The works of these artists are highly coveted, recognized as a fleeting generational mirror that represents the rebellious and disenfranchised nature of youth culture today as well as wealthy, left-winged intellectuals. What sets Camille Rose Garcia apart from her contemporaries is that her paintings are more than a critical glimpse into popular culture or a concern for the world today (although they are that too), but her imagery works on a more profound level to demystify viewers entranced by the myths of a consumer driven society in order to effect change.

In my introduction I quoted Frederic Jameson, who posed the question of whether or not postmodernism could resist the logic of consumer capitalism. As I have

demonstrated throughout this thesis, the art of Camille Rose Garcia is in direct dialogue with this statement from Jameson. Garcia's imagery is largely appropriated from the commercial fairy tale aesthetic of Disney. Instead of a smiling princess surrounded by cheery animals, we see a version of Snow White who is paralyzed by a storm of poisonous apples, and in place of a majestic castle, we are confronted with images of smoke emitting factories and parasitic citadels. As I explained in Chapter III, by applying the theories of myth by Roland Barthes, the fairy tale aesthetic of Disney is a myth that markets all the makings of a happy ending in its infinite number of products that are tagged with fairy tale characters like Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Ariel the Little Mermaid. The images used to sell Disney products, having become the very presence of happiness with catch phrases like "Dreams Really Do Come True" and "Welcome to the Happiest Place on Earth," are really selling an idea of happiness that Disney has created and turned into a multi-billion dollar business. This contrast between Garcia's imagery and that of Disney produces an analogy that forces viewers to consciously interpret her imagery against the images from which they are appropriated. In the name of demystification, Garcia hopes to direct the attention of viewers to issues such as the Iraq War, drug addiction, and Global Warming.

I have also called attention to the evocation of themes associated with the twentieth century philosophy existentialism as it is professed in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. While existentialism has been a subtle undertone, its importance should not be diminished. Existentialism lends itself to Garcia's work in two ways. First, themes associated with its philosophy such as angst, despair, anguish, and abandonment, seep

through to the surface of her paintings mirroring the feelings of individuals today. While Garcia's imagery aims to expose myth, the frightened, anxious, possessed, devious, and melancholic expressions painted on the faces of many of her characters also acknowledge the current mood of today's society. Advances in technology have made communication and the dissemination of information instantaneous, but mass media has also taken on a parasitic quality inundating audiences with an infinite number disheartening news images, mindless product information, and demoralizing government updates to the point where one's role in the world feels diminished and pointless. This acknowledgement of individualized anxieties and fears lends one to find unexpected solace in Garcia's work.

Secondly, existentialism is also a philosophy that posits the human subject's ability to think, choose, and act. In his philosophical doctrine *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes:

[. . .] to act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end; it is to produce an organized instrumental complex such that by a series of concatenations and connection the modification effected on one of the links causes the modifications through the whole series and finally produces an anticipated result.⁵⁸

The subjective act of choice, reliant on the consciousness of the human subject, is an existential sign of the freedom and capability of man to create his own essence. It is this idea of choice that frightens people, according to Sartre. Responsibility is innately tied to the choices that one makes. The weight of that choice, the responsibility of the repercussions of that choice, falls solely upon the individual causing anguish and despair.

⁵⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1966), 529.

Choice and responsibility however, are what allow individuals to change course, to choose left or right, become this or that. This Existentialist idea of choice is what has the ability to supply hope to Garcia's paintings, hope that the human subject, demystified from the myths of consumer culture, can consciously choose to change the world's trajectory. However, by accepting this definition of choice, we are also acknowledging the human subject's freedom to choose nothing, solidifying and reinforcing the dismal representations of the world in Garcia's paintings.

Despite these theoretical frameworks and socio-political associations that can be applied and derived from her paintings, Garcia is first and foremost an artist. It seems as though her appropriation of classic Disney characters and fairytales has created a new niche and a new audience for her work. In 2009, publisher Harper Collins approached Garcia with a new venture, to illustrate, in her own signature style of course, the beloved story *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Garcia jumped at the chance to reinterpret a story she had grown up with, both Carroll's version and Disney's film adaptation of the story. In February 2010, Harper Collins re-released the unabridged text of Carroll's famed classic with contemporary illustrations by Garcia, not coincidentally just one month before Tim Burton's adaptation of Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* was to hit theaters. With this, Garcia's audience went from a select cult following of scholarly, politically aware, underground art lovers to children and adults from all walks of life, who like her, grew up with the widespread films of Disney.

Garcia's characters are well on their way to rivaling the iconic status of those of Disney and Burton through their instant familiarity, unique style, and now mass-produced

form. But, with such commercial success are the unique characters that have been discussed throughout this thesis now in danger of becoming part of the capitalist myth they claim to expose? Or will her art, through the form of the fairy tale, continue to challenge the social issues plaguing humanity? Time will tell. What can be said is that the time of cookie-cutter Disney movies has passed. Fairy tales have survived for thousands of years as a powerful communication device and is evidence to the unyielding imagination of the autonomous human subject. A new storyteller is here to adapt their magic to our present day and to remind viewers that change is possible. That storyteller is Camille Rose Garcia.

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