



# SWEET DREAMS

## OR A BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARE

Fantasy and Fact in the  
Work of Versia Harris

By: Katherine Kennedy

Versia Harris | "For Peace" | Detail | 2019

Since the 1800s, through stories like the Danish fairytale, "The Ugly Duckling" (Hans Christian Anderson, 1843) or the Russian ballet, "Swan Lake" (Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky, 1875), swans have remained symbols of beauty and grace in popular culture, crossing continents with these fictional narratives. The first piece I ever encountered by Barbadian artist Versia Harris, an animation titled "A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes When You're Awake" (2012), subverted this familiar archetype, throwing much of the rhetoric that typically surrounds the "fantasy" genre into question.

Set against a backdrop that merges Harris' incredibly detailed drawings with digital imagery and footage that references classic Disney films, we are introduced to "Swan Girl"—a hand-drawn character with the head and long, slender neck of a swan attached to a hunched, emaciated torso, possessing spindly legs and talon-like hands and clad only in a patchwork skirt.

When it comes to self-image, the consumption of fairytales and fantasy have, whether consciously or not, shaped society's view of reality on a massive, cross-cultural scale. We feel Swan Girl's desperation for beauty, as she herself goes against every exaggeratedly glamorous depiction of what a princess or heroine "should" be.

The romanticized image of a swan begins to unravel, and we are left with a character who is relatable in her struggle for acceptance, but also cast as monstrous in her amalgamated form; Swan Girl was the first of many chimeras that would immigrate to the realm Harris was constructing, as I would find out as her practice grew and, by extension, the scope of this fantastic world.

The word "chimera" originally came from Greek mythology and, as have many scientific terms or seem-



Versia Harris | "Merely A Chimera No 1" | 2015

ingly impossible theories which become actualizations of myth, it has been adopted by geneticists to refer to creatures containing DNA from multiple organisms. "Chimera" itself is also hybrid in its meaning, alternatively referring to something that is wished for but is unattainable, such as Swan Girl's yearning for the ideals trapped in an alternate dimension of fantasy/technology that she can't quite reach, even in her journey's "sequel," "They Say You Can Dream A Thing More Than Once" (2013).

In Harris' first solo exhibition entitled "This Quagmire" (2015), facilitated by Punch Creative Arena at the Barbados Community College (an independent arts initiative founded by Ewan Atkinson and Allison Thompson), this second animation was shown as an ethereal installation, alongside two series of digital prints. The first of these, "Merely A Chimera," portrays several original characters/hybrids inhabiting

"The dream didn't leave, people just don't know a nightmare when they right in the middle of one."

—Marlon James, "A Brief History of Seven Killings"

different landscapes, a combination of photographs, drawings and technical distortions where there is just enough off-kilter to render the scene anything but ordinary.

Some characters are clearly discernible in the environment, bright colors standing starkly against muted photographs, while others are barely perceptible; hybridity does not have to be overt or pronounced for worlds to be merged or affected by one another. The realism of this series somehow makes the appearance of phenomena in these postcard-sized scenes all the more intriguing and unsettling for viewers trying to situate themselves in these mini-vistas.



No. 27 in the “Merely A Chimera” series in particular enters a kind of meta-, self-referential plane within this imagined universe, as the tripod and the camera presumably used to shoot the surroundings feature in the photograph itself, along with the looming shadow of Swan Girl, who appears to be holding up a cell phone. We don’t know if she is taking a “selfie,” trying in vain to get reception and connect to someone outside of this barren terrain, or if it is even a phone at all.

It is our minds naturally filling in blanks, our imaginations making conclusions that—contrary to the setting—are ironically quite banal. The viewer is fleetingly grounded, before no doubt being caught off guard by another strange discovery in this body of work.

As Swan Girl’s fascination with fairytales taints her perception, these prints represent the instant that a disconnect from reality happens. The landscape is literally distorted like a glitch on a TV screen, causing two channels to overlap—catching the crackling static of that slight pause in between, the last flickering moment of a dynamic color spectrum—before the image dissolves entirely into white noise.

The link to technology and its impact on our ability to capture, alter and influence thoughts and memories is reiterated in these series. Ease of access to the internet, coupled with the way social media have been woven into nearly every aspect of personal and professional domains, means we have been armed with the tools to curate our own visage and fantasies to an extent; presenting the version of reality we both



Versia Harris | Still from “A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes When You’re Awake” | 2012

“Parataxic Distortion,” the second photo series, builds on this collusion and blurring of existences. Named for a psychiatric description of the skewed views we have of others based on projected assumptions as opposed to facts, these images challenge the lens through which we regard our environment and ourselves, instilling an internal paranoia that casts a shadow over our own sight and recollections.

wish for ourselves and for others to see... but notably exposed in this work are the occasions of vulnerability and the cracking of this facade, whether a hairline fracture or a shattered pane.

In 2017, Harris began her postgraduate studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan having been awarded a Fulbright Laspau Scholarship, and on May 10, 2019 received her MFA from the institution. I was

curious to see what impact her advanced studies would have on her practice. Based on personal experience and numerous conversations with peers in Barbados and other Caribbean islands who have studied abroad, I know that it is not only the intense focus on one's work, but the culture-shock and often the harsh change of climate that can cause surprising shifts in one's trajectory.

And so, seeing Harris' recent work, where she had been experimenting with sculpture, installations and videos in a way I had not expected, created my own case-in-point of parataxic distortion. Crisp drawings were replaced by three-dimensional sculptural objects, creating fascinating puppet-like characters, and the echoes of familiar soundtracks from Disney films were replaced by heavy, powerful political

speeches, in contrast with the almost toy-like subjects in the footage. However, the more I engaged with this fresh direction, the more I appreciated it as not

"[Fantasy] can be used as a weapon, a way to be accepted, a way to gather, a way to separate entertainment from remnants of infantile wishes. It has its hand in segregation, racism, in homophobia and sexism. Fantasy is cultural, social and political. The fantasies we have about our identities run in tandem with the shared ideas of our cultures and societies."

— Versia Harris



Versia Harris | "For Peace" | Full Installation | 2019





Versia Harris | "For Peace" | Detail | 2019



Versia Harris | "Parataxic Distortion, No 14" | 2015



Versia Harris | "Merely A Chimera, No 27" | 2015

She creates honestly and from a place of curiosity, spawned from her individual thoughts and influences, but carried by the endless breadth of possibilities for understanding fantasy through fact, fiction and every gray area in between.

necessarily a departure in her work from the personal to the political, but more of a natural expansion.

Fantasy is regularly explored as something whimsical or escapist, but the double-edged sword of fantasizing and power dynamics is not always acknowledged. In the work "For Peace," the soundtrack is the inaugural speech by former Guyanese Political Leader Forbes Burnham, delivered in 1964 as the country continued to strive for independence from Britain after a period of militant rule and occupation.

Inviting and harmless craft materials are used to set the scene accompanying the address—paralleling the assumed innocence of a Disney animation. The "masses" gathered to hear the speech are made of modeling clay, a malleable and impressionable substance that can be morphed by enticing words and promises, while the leader at the head of the crowd is represented as a comparatively enormous sheep, sheathed in red cloth. A "sheep" in this context conjures thoughts of a wolf in sheep's clothing, or easily led sheep being shepherded by politicians through collective mob-mentality.

Burnham's words, which at the time of delivery meant to bring comfort to a traumatized country, clash with what we are seeing. He speaks of "an atmosphere of relaxation and reduction of tension" while we see one of the constituents impaled on a fence. He discusses the importance of "survival" while a prostrate body comes slowly into focus amidst the crowd. As eerily still as the scene is, there is no true peace to be found here.

Levels of hierarchy have always been alluded to in Harris' pieces, and we can see overlap between what seems to be a more abject political statement with the subtler explorations through the social politics of characters in previous work. The crown Swan girl yearns for (and takes by force) is an animated part of her fantasy, but it reveals a malevolent desire for beauty and power that is rooted in perpetuated norms that classify certain people as inferior to others, based on the ever-fluctuating standards, cultures and extenuating circumstances of any given community.

These ideas around political unrest and rising tensions based on what, at the end of the day, may be conceded to be vicious fantasies or dreams perverted into nightmares, have sadly captured the imagination of many. They touch on a particular nerve in the present-day global atmosphere... though Forbes Burnham's 1964 speech is used, the themes explored are neither time nor place specific. Imagination is ubiquitous, and although we each have beliefs and values based on whichever environment we are a product of, Versia Harris has never set out to conform to, nor move against, a "Caribbean" aesthetic or mindset in her work.

She creates honestly and from a place of curiosity, spawned from her individual thoughts and influences, but carried by the endless breadth of possibilities for understanding fantasy through fact, fiction and every gray area in between. Moving forward, Harris said, she wishes to continue incorporating and layering the existing and future chimeras in multimedia work, seeing how they interact and work in confluence with or opposition to one another; ultimately exploring the different facets of humanity by fleshing out the labyrinthine microcosm she has been building for years.



Versia Harris | "Merely A Chimera, No 8" | 2015