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Brook Hsu

DELI GALLERY



Brook Hsu, *Psychedelic Outfit (Sweatshirt and Bellbottoms)*, 2017, felted llama wool, mesh, wooden plinth, 2 x 48 x 84".

"On an April evening in the year AD 1," wrote British classicist Robert Graves, and quoted by Brook Hsu in the essay that accompanied her first solo show, "a ship was sailing to Northern Italy along the coast of Greece, when the crew heard distant sounds of mourning, and a loud voice from the shore shouted to one of them: 'As soon as you reach the next port, be sure to spread the sad news that the great god Pan is dead!' But how and why he had died nobody ever knew."

Pan—the caprine god of wilderness, shepherds, and rustic music—died in the traditional Anno Domini 1, symbolically marking the passage in the West from the mystery cults of Greco-Roman paganism to the universalizing morality of Christianity. But since the Romantic movement, Pan has enjoyed a rich artistic afterlife, inspiring works by J. M. Barrie, E. M. Forster, Knut Hamsun, John Keats, Arthur Rimbaud, Guillermo del Toro, and Oscar Wilde, to name just a few. Our word *panic* derives from *Pan*, Hsu reminds us in "Panic Angel," titled in a double homage to the wild and woolly demigod and the sentimental doo-wop ballad "Earth Angel," recorded by the Penguins in 1954.

Characterized by cloven feet, red horns, a double set of pointed ears, and phosphorescent green flesh, Hsu's Pan is voluptuous and indeterminately sexed. In the oil-on-panel painting *Reclining Pan* (all works 2017), he is posed languorously after Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*, 1814; his nude backside presented to the viewer, he peers over his shoulder with sanguine eyes. Inspired by Rimbaud's prose poem of the same title, *Antique* puts Pan in sheer panties and an exaggerated contrapposto stance, smoldering against a nocturnal landscape with red vegetation. Meanwhile, tiny faux-naïve paintings of butterflies, fairies, and human ears—*Two Fairies Carrying the Green Ear*, *Psyche 1*, and *Psyche 2*, respectively—occupied cognate fantasy spaces.

Pan is an erotic but also a panicked, pathetic figure: a crier and an insomniac, so ugly—according to Graves—that his mother abandoned him and his father, Hermes, brought him to Olympus to be the laughingstock of the gods. "I wish this story could be told by the person who it is about," writes Hsu in the text-based work *Essay (Panic Angel)*, a montage of Graves's mythography, rejected exhibition titles ("BAAAAAAAAAAAAAH," "Cynoceph," "Psychopomp"), songs she's played (by Lana Del Ray, Nirvana, Roy Orbison), and staccato memories of her mother's death printed onto pink fabric. The artist regrets that she "can't seem to learn anything about who Pan actually is." Invested with grief, pleasure, and unnameable affective excesses, Pan's imaginary body is indexed in *Psychedelic Outfit (Sweatshirt and Bellbottoms)*. Displayed on a blush-pink plinth in the center of the gallery, it is a work of "sculptural clothing" (as Hsu terms it) in two parts: a pale-green felted-wool bodice and a pair of mesh stockings trimmed with a chubby tentacular fringe. It is "an outfit designed for the soul," the artist stipulates, "and is *not* for our physical bodies to wear."

Hsu's viewers, to their taste, can take this business about spirit clothing, fairies, and felled gods as a statement of personal mythology, a symptom of post-internet spiritualism, a bit of whimsical fun, or reformed new age baloney. But as it performed a series of returns—to myth, to the figure, to depth psychology—"Panic Angel" felt manifestly contemporary in its diarism, its drive toward reenchantment, and its reinvestment in painting, among other procedures, as a method of making not only meaning but, as the late great god would have it, mischief.

—Chloe Wyma