

Art historians of the twentieth and twenty-first century have investigated visual art in a myriad of contexts. Art has been studied as a way for us to better communicate with one another, as a discipline in which to develop a universal connoisseurship and as an exercise to decipher the physical manifestation of one artists' thoughts and worldviews. Though the term 'art' itself has traditionally referred to a specific mastery of one process, contemporary art requires a vast skill set and mastery of multiple disciplines. To further complicate things, technology and innovation have spurred the creative process by offering artists multiple outlets for the expression of the way in which they alone see the world. Rarely does one find an artist who has harnessed both technology and traditional methods like the artist and filmmaker, Catya Plate.

In her newest work, *The Reading*, she has embraced every resource available to tell her story. Despite the playful associations with stop motion film, her work is not simple, posing a greater challenge to viewers compelled to 'categorizing' the artist and her work. How does one classify an artist who has mastered so many disciplines so well? Is she a painter, an illustrator, a sculptor, a filmmaker, a creator of artist books or a writer? Perhaps this work is a case where, like the artist, the rules of categorization do not apply.

The unconventional place Plate assumes in contemporary art should not matter, because at the heart of her work she has seen the world in a new and remarkable way. Her singular vision, articulated in the best media suited for the idea, is a universal measure of what constitutes quality work among connoisseurs, scholars and curators. As such, we all have permission to simply enjoy the piece, as film and fine art.

Far from the shallow escapism of some current video art or the derivative performances that seek to entertain us with shock alone, spending time with Plate's work reminds us why we fell in love with art in the first place. Like other good art, *The Reading* makes us think about things in a different way and forces us to abandon what we know. Thinking this way can be unsettling, enlightening, or for some, downright existential. We are reminded that Platonic theory has been intertwined with visual art for centuries. As Plato suggests, Plate questions the material objects of life versus the ideas behind them. In the Allegory of the Cave, subdued prisoners were only able to see the 'shadows' of life passing in front of a fire. Plato theorized that if one has only ever seen the shadow, a reality (the idea) beyond illusion (the physical) materializes. *The Reading*, with it's convergence of real and imaginary forms, challenges the viewer to move beyond materiality and consider the idea of real knowledge.

Born in Barcelona to a German father and a Spanish mother, Plate grew up astride two vastly different European cultures. She was raised and educated in Köln, Germany, and continued postgraduate studies on a Fulbright Scholarship at the School of Visual Arts in New York. It is evident that these eclectic and diverse cultural exposures have left their mark on the artist's work. Clearly influenced by everything from German fairy tales to early twentieth century film, Plate has successfully produced a body of work that provides vivid insight into her thoughts and processes.

It is rare to see an artist whose career development is so well documented in the studio, but I had the luxury of doing just that. Plate's process - or perhaps I should say 'evolution' - started like so many successful artists with painting and drawing. Embracing both ordinary and extraordinary subject matter, her earlier paintings are executed with a wonderful balance of technique and creativity. The 1996 work *Trials and Tribulations Of Barbie®*, Or *The Way To A Man's Heart Is Through His Stomach*, is executed in the style of a Gothic altarpiece, with its triptych hinged doors, ornate details and beautifully executed and deliberate Byzantine flatness. The subject matter is arresting and complicated, and requires work on the part of the viewer to understand. It asks us to question physical beauty, sexuality, bodily functions, pop culture and violence. This painting, done in 1996 contains the seminal moment that leads to a body of work that will eventually be seen as the groundwork for *The Reading*.

*1001 Smells*, 1997, *Touchy Subjects*, 1998, and *A Matter of Taste*, 2000, accelerate the artist's process by inviting viewers to smell, taste and touch the work. In effect, the work has officially left the printed page and the canvas. This move toward the experiential is a logical (if perhaps subconscious) step toward creating a physical manifestation of the artist's vision. By leaving the canvas and literally engaging the viewer, an alternate reality emerges that incorporates the here and now with the future.

2003 was a year that embraced technology in the art world, as video and new media work started to fill galleries. While many artists were working with the best possible technology, Plate began using the simplest of materials. Clothespins, yarn, crafting materials and other items long associated with domesticity, feminism and women's work gave birth to the Clothespin Freaks of the paintings and drawings. These associations with conventional domestic items and materials characterized by their intrinsic alignment with the feminine have led to the inclusion of Plate's work in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Feminist Art Base at the Brooklyn Museum.

Simultaneously with their creation, in what I can only call a 'happy accident', the artist began using Tarot Cards as a method of developing a spiritual path for the Clothespin Freaks to walk. Plate did what comes naturally- she let the Clothespin Freaks take on their own identity. Harnessing her fascination of terrifying German fairy tales and the influence of such filmmakers as Jan Svankmajer, Roman Polanski and even Charlie Chaplin, the Clothespin Freaks come to life in this luscious and sometimes terrifying work.

In the opening, live-action, scene the artist plays the role of 'Alice', if you will, and awakens to a ringing of the doorbell. Donning a pair of cartoon like slippers, placing her retainer in its holder and with a head full of clothespins, The Woman shuffles to the front hall to find an invitation under the door. Immediately we recognize appropriated elements of well-known children's stories that are obvious (Alice) and subtle (the 'doer' mouse). These clues are successfully combined in so many ways that it is no longer possible for them to assume a familiar narrative, which is captivating.

Blood, bugs and beasts function as a reminder of the continuous theme of our denial of our own mortality wrapped up in a childlike costume as we follow The Puppet on her journey. In addition to drawing from the present by using her own blood, the artist includes personal history in her work. The artist's mother's family grew up in a tiny village called Barchín in Spain. She explained to me that the village has a small cemetery where many of her deceased Spanish relatives are buried. While visiting the cemetery she found a human jaw, quite possibly belonging to a distant relative and included it as a recurring 'character' in the film. These elements provide not only continuity with Plate's earlier work, but also a link between the artist, the viewer and mortality.

*The Reading* is an animated short film, a painting, a drawing and a sculpture. It is in fact a project that galvanizes the talents and career of Catya Plate into one brilliant package. I do hope you will enjoy *The Reading* as much as I did.

—Heather Dell, 2010

*Heather Dell is an Art Historian, Curator and Director at Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York.*