



Open Season
Whitney May interviews artist Kimberley Hart

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Kimberley Hart, *Rabbit Live-Trap*, 2007. Walnut with brass fittings, fabric, cord and furnishings, 108 x 12 x 30 inches.

Whitney May: I recently stopped by Mixed Greens in Chelsea to find it transformed into a kind of kindergarten hunting ground. Although each of your creations on display were whimsical and imbued with a kind of 70s kitsch feel, I found the elaborate scene I had come upon unsettling in its unapologetic mixture of children's toys, traps and red bullseyes. What was the inspiration and idea behind all this?

Kimberley Hart: This body of work revolves around an alter ego, conceived of in the hope of creating a complicated figure through which to address issues of identity and gender expectation. Before her emergence, I had been making works based on narratives from my own pre-adolescent tomboy exploits. While I was interested in the gender issues I was addressing, I became bored fairly quickly because I knew innately what each piece was about and where it was going, as the works were purely autobiographical. The pieces were mere illustrations and that was not particularly challenging to the viewer or to me. The creation of the alter ego allows me to continue exploring issues of identity and stereotype but through a persona I don't relate to, who

is interested in an activity I have no previous knowledge of and is lucky enough to exist in a purely imaginary world. That has proven to be a sufficiently challenging source of inspiration.

This persona is the quintessential sweet girl, all frills and petal pink. She's the doe-eyed, sentimental icon with dolly in tow and teacup in hand. My preoccupation is in discovering and exploiting her more malevolent inclinations. Her complex nature is revealed through mini, make-believe narratives depicting her enterprising endeavors. She's been an aspiring angler, a fortress defender and impudent enough to strike down her coveted pony. Of late, she fancies herself uniquely suited to the pursuits of the consummate sportsman. While cunning and, on occasion, successful in downing her prey, her best-laid plans are often thwarted or simply too naïve to be anything but mischievous. And still, she remains dedicated. I often admire her and occasionally think she is ridiculous.

For me, this project can at times be a complicated and confusing enterprise. When is the work hers and when is it mine? When am I poking fun at her and when am I poking fun at us? When is that sarcasm inappropriate? How far do I let her lead me giddily down a dark path before I drag us both back? How do you deal with violence in a fearless and unselfconscious way? How do I keep an adult voice out of a pre-adolescent imaginary world? When am I simply perpetuating the stereotypes I'm attempting to conflate? The more unsettling it is to me the more honest I think I am being.

WM: In the work *Rabbit Live-Trap*, you reference the concept of the home or domicile as an example of an inescapable prison. How does this idea figure into the rest of your works' themes?

KH: A live-trap is only as successful as its bait is enticing. A carrot placed in your path is much more appealing than braving the garden patch and having to dig a carrot up yourself.

The special breed of rabbit my alter ego is attempting to trap is attracted to and fascinated by the atmosphere of the traditional home. Rather than finding the domestic to be something foreboding or sinister, these rabbits find security and contentment in such surroundings. This special breed is the offspring of such esteemed hares as Brer and White Rabbit, Flopsy, Hazel, Peter Rabbit, Peter Cottontail and Rabbit of Winnie the Pooh fame.

Throughout children's literature, animals have been richly anthropomorphized, none more than the rabbit. They wear clothes, they talk and they have relationships and feelings. As children we have a special affinity with these animals. The use of a domestic scene as the lure in *Rabbit Live-Trap* seemed obvious but came out of an erroneous memory of the rabbit hole scenes in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. I remembered the rabbit hole as a home in the classic sense including a kitchen with a hearth and a sitting room with a couch and lamp. In reality, there is a hearth and Mrs. Rabbit has on an apron, but that's about the extent of hominess. I've come to realize that I was blending Peter's hole with Rabbit's home from *Winnie the Pooh*. Rather than use a scene from a kitchen, which is not only the epitome of domesticity, but I feel is a more intimate congregating room, I chose the parlor where a family is more likely to entertain visitors. A rabbit in a live-trap is surely just a visitor.

WM: In works like *Shooter* and *Buckshot*, these instruments of death are decorated with sparkly streamers and detailed with pink paint. Is there anything to be said about the fetishizing of dangerous material objects like these within the context of our own, non-fantasy-based society?

KH: With the gun pieces, I didn't set out to make a statement about the current political state of guns or gun culture. From certain perspectives, guns have already been fetishized culturally in that they are very popular toys. My interest in them stems from this popularity and their place at the top of the list of gender specific toys.

Is there a gun marketed toward girls? Not to my knowledge. So when my alter ego needed weapons for her hunts, I found artillery on the sweeter-side of aggression in the popguns and rubber band pistol. While a number of issues guide their embellishment, their decoration generally asserts their new ownership through blatant references to the other pole of gender specificity.

What makes a gun intrinsically beautiful? Is it their sleek design or is it the power they represent?

Boy's love brandishing them and men grow to prominently display their most coveted examples in glass-faced cabinets and ornate mantle racks. The presentation of the popguns in display racks not only references that tradition but reveals that she is indeed a cunning hunter through the inclusion of the hummingbird trophies and reminds us that her guns are real pretty and she wants you to know it.

WM: How do you view this little girl's fascination with hunting? Do you perceive it as a positive as she hunts for the likes of unicorns in an imaginary world equipped with pre-set targets, thus getting her thirst for blood out of her system without harming anyone or anything in the real world, or does her love of and dedication to hunting prove disquieting to you as well?

KH: I often find the whole endeavor disquieting and perverse but in a smirky way. Years ago, when I began this project I didn't know anything about hunting or ultra-frill missies. I found both to be disturbing and malicious and have ultimately found a way to reconcile them into something I find intriguing. Rather than simply focusing on the insidious evil lurking under the petal pink packaging, I've conjured up an alter ego plagued by more subtle complexities. She's not just the child who has tea with her mom and the neighbor-lady but kicks the dog when adult eye's are turned. She's still sweet but she can be dangerously cunning. She's often incredibly naïve, overly confident and still surprisingly unsuccessful in some of her endeavors. She's easy to poke fun at and remains endlessly fascinating. Ultimately, her dedication to becoming the quintessential sportsman is more about a game of make believe, you play it with fervor and become lost in the ridiculous reality of it. Instead of playing house she's just playing lodge. I try to stay true to her in her world and probing in mine.

WM: Are you able to translate this set of works recently on display into a concrete narrative at all?

KH: Narratives, some of which are more simplistic than others, inspire the works in "Open Season." Each piece informs the other and connections can be drawn between elements of the installation but there is no concrete narrative that binds the entire show together into a singular, concise anecdote. I'm more interested in creating an environment where the viewer is given a wide variety of cues in the ultimate hope that they'll conjure their own image of the missing heroine. The subject of all the excitement, the character never expected to explode onto the scene, she is what people should take away from the show.

WM: Does this mischievous and frilly little girl hunt the likes of cuddly unicorns only to defy expectations or might she be attempting (consciously or not) to say something about her set place in contemporary society?

KH: One of my interests in using an alter ego is that she is outside cultural conventions because she occupies her own imaginary world. While I gladly exploit stereotypes and happily throw gender expectations out the door, I am always cognizant that the persona and the attendant machinations that I so depend on have an internal logic that is free of the self-consciousness that created social expectations in the first place. In the world that my alter ego occupies there is no “set place” or “expectations to defy.” It’s in our apprehension of her that we use such constructs to define her.

Regarding her hunting of unicorns. Whether it’s the cuddly plush toy or the heraldic, golden-horned animal of medieval lore, it is generally frowned upon. Specifically, my alter ego has her sights on the “real”, mythological unicorns similar to those in the movie Legend (1985). These are the unicorns that can be tamed by virgins, captured only through unfair means and if killed, bring on great cataclysms. These are definitely not traditional prey for the average hunter but part of the very specific menagerie that she has chosen to target.

WM: In this exhibition in particular, you employed an incredibly diverse range of media, do you begin by sketching out your works and then moving toward color, three dimensions and even found objects, or does the process begin through an accumulation of knick-knacks, frustrations or ideas?

KH: Since I have a fairly specific thematic basis for this body of work, the materials are dictated by the need to convey a particular narrative in each piece. Besides making patterns and occasional notes, I rarely sketch a piece unless there is some sort of complicated construction involved. Each idea for a piece fuels the next either through research or a new way of looking at an issue. For example, the Hunting Stand led to the artillery simply because she needed to hunt with some kind of weapon. Looking at guns led me to the popgun and the rubber band pistol and I chose those over a BB gun because they are the most naïve and are actually completely useless. I’m lucky enough to have a varied background in that I was a painter as an undergrad, I weld, I’m a so-so wood worker, I grew up sewing, I’m a fairly skilled pattern-maker, I’m a well trained sculptor and I have a lot of patience for painfully repetitive tasks involving yarn. So a wide variety of approaches allow things to be challenging but still fun and exciting.

WM: Obviously this fantasy world belongs to a young girl (unicorns, pink guns with streamers, etc.). Does this little girl obsessed with hunting have anything in common with you and/or your own identity as creator rather than hunter/killer?

KH: I don’t have much in common with my alter ego except that we are both a hodgepodge of things both unexpected and conventional. Depending on the perspective of the individual, our identities can be more familiar or more disconcerting. For instance, I feel as a child I was a real tomboy. I played with G.I. Joe, I climbed trees and built forts. I rode a skateboard and played catch with my Dad before dinner. I really liked doing stuff with my Dad, and since he only knew how to do guy things and that’s what we did. My Mom often questions whether or not I was really such a tomboy. Her favorite example is that I was a ballerina. She thinks of me as her four year old twirling around on my tippy toes in my leotard and tights. It is true that I took ballet classes. I danced until I was 15 years old as a member of a professional company. It’s also true that most people envision that to be a real sweet, pink activity. By the time I really remember taking ballet classes, it already seemed like a big “S” full-contact sport. So to me it was a “no-pain-no-gain” bloody toe, aching-muscle job, to my Mom I was her cute little girl in

a tutu and to my Dad...he thought I was cute too. But to me I was a tomboy, end of story. I think my alter ego thinks she's a frilly, horse-obsessed, doll-collecting, dress-up girl no matter if she's hunting unicorns or not. It's all how you look at it.

WM: What's next for Kimberley Hart and her endearing alter-ego?

KH: There are few pieces remaining in the sportsman arsenal. A traditional hunt with hobbyhorses and beagles, some sort of be-jeweled hummingbird net, a selection of scalped unicorn horns and a couple of paintings.

Then we are off into a whole new genre. I've begun looking into boys' conventional affinity for war-gaming. Just as I did when I lacked direct knowledge of hunting or trapping, I'll have to depend on my alter ego to introduce me to all things tactical and bombastic. I'm sure she'll be dedicated in her approach and knowing her proclivities, there's likely to be a medieval atmosphere such that only castles and princesses lend. I've already made notes for a variety of fortresses and a large installation based on the war board games, Risk and Stratego.

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