

MARIE STRAUSS



GATEKEEPER

**RDS Gallery
2021**

MARIE STRAUSS

GATEKEEPER

An Essay on the Occasion of the Exhibition
Held at RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin,
12 February – 13 March 2021

Occasional Essay Series

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Dream*, Marie Strauss (2020), oil on canvas,
125 x 100 cm

© Images, Marie Strauss

© Text, Federico Freschi

© Format and editorial material, RDS Gallery

RDS Gallery Occasional Essays Series editors: Alistair Fox and
Hilary Radner

*Published in February 2021 by RDS Gallery, on the occasion
of the exhibition 'Gatekeeper', 12 February – 13 March
2021, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin.*

ISBN 978-0-473-56454-4

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages
for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this
publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without
prior permission.

Contents

1. Gatekeepers, Dream Stealers, and Necessary
Monsters in the Work of Marie Strauss
Federico Freschi..... 7
2. Note on Contributors..... 15



Dream Stealers, Marie Strauss (2020), linocut, paint, collage
(71 x 48 cm)

1

Gatekeepers, Dream Stealers, and Necessary Monsters in the Work of Marie Strauss

Federico Freschi

In the preface to the 1957 edition of *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Jorge Luis Borges muses on the 'everyday yet mysterious occurrence'¹ of a small child's first visit to the zoo. In the 'terrible grounds' of the zoo, he writes,

the child sees living animals he has never before glimpsed; he sees jaguars, vultures, bison, and what is still stranger – giraffes. He sees for the first time the bewildering variety of the animal kingdom, and this spectacle, which might alarm or frighten him,

¹ All references from Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Revised, enlarged and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author, Penguin Books, 1974.

he enjoys. He enjoys it so much that going to the zoo is one of the pleasures of childhood, or is thought to be such.

The child's fearless fascination for wild animals, Borges suggests, could be as much about the excitement of the discovery of the unknown (since children are 'by definition, explorers'), as it is about the galvanising of the imagination informed by the child's 'toy tiger and the pictures of tigers in the encyclopaedia [that] have somehow taught him to look at the flesh-and-bone tiger without fear'. Borges's evocation of a visit to a real zoo serves as a prelude to the evocation of an imaginary zoo populated by mythological creatures, the bestiary of 'imaginary beings' of the book's title. The denizens of this imaginary zoo greatly exceed the real zoo not only in number and variety, but also in degrees of monstrosity since 'a monster is no more than a combination of parts of real beings, and the possibilities of permutation border on the infinite'.

Encountering Marie Strauss's work is to step into the space between Borges's real and imaginary zoos, where the childish delight in stuffed and picture-book animals gives way to the dark foreboding of the 'necessary monsters' of adult anxieties and preoccupations. The artist's proxies for these monsters are the ever-changing repertoire of wild, domestic and mythological animals that both recalls memories of her African childhood and references the important symbolic

role that animals play in our collective psychodynamic imagination. Compelling and enigmatic, Strauss's animals are benign companions and guardians, but also fearsome, nightmarish creatures that evoke our deepest anxieties. Taken collectively, they conjure a latter-day bestiary whose symbolism points to the fragility of our relationship with ourselves and the world around us.

In *Gatekeeper I, II, III & IV* a menagerie of wild animals jostle urgently for attention in a riot of saturated colour and feral energy. They confront the viewer with the peculiar intensity of the animal's gaze, at once defiant and wary; serene in its essential animality, yet piercingly alert. The extended vertical format and crowded, shallow pictorial space lend them a totemic, mythical quality, as playful as they are disturbing. The animals appear in a whimsical taxonomy – a monkey casually embraces an anteater; a leopard, fangs bared, rubs shoulders with an outsized hare; a flock of parrots cosy up to a gorilla – that compellingly evokes Borges notion that 'there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural'.²

Conceived and produced during a time of intense personal anxiety brought about by the illness of a close family member and against the backdrop of the unsettling early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, these works reflect what the artist calls

² Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins' in *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, University of Texas Press, 1964, 104.

'an illusion of Eden, a world that doesn't exist but is wonderful, a promise of redemption'. Yet this is an Eden, she continues, in which the serpent is never far away, and under which lurks a dark dread. The title 'Gatekeeper' suggests both the yearning for the certain knowledge of a benign, watchful presence as well as the fear that no such protector exists. A red snake with yellow eyes slithers into the top of *Gatekeeper III*, a disquieting portent that recalls Chinua Achebe's description of the nocturnal fears prevailing in an Igbo village:

Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string.³

In *Dream* the dread is realised: the field of brightly coloured animals now has sinister interlopers; dark, shadowy figures with horns, beaks and barbed tails whose malevolent presence shades into nightmare the pleasant dream of a benign Garden of Eden.

In the *Soul Eaters* and *Dream Stealers* any illusion of an antediluvian idyll is destroyed. The shadowy, gold-eyed monsters are now brought into sharp focus, picking their way

³ *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1958 (reprinted 2000), 7.

implacably through a darkening, dissolving, dream-like landscape that affords no protection to the unfortunate animals in their way. Although reminiscent of the demons of mediaeval and early Renaissance depictions of the Last Judgement, these sinister creatures are as much psychological as they are eschatological, what Carl Jung called the meeting of oneself that is also 'the meeting with one's own shadow'.⁴ For Strauss they evoke 'things that we try to explain through myths and ways of putting ourselves at rest. But when you dream, that filter is gone'. Intense and darkly compelling, these works hold a mirror to the labyrinth of the imagination and the dreams and nightmares it can conjure. They beg the questions: where do the slippages lie between the real and the imagined? When dreams become nightmares, what belongs to the realm of the fantastical and what, more troublingly, is a distortion of the real?

While the *Dream Stealers* drag us into the shadowy, menacing world of the unconscious, *The Sons of Horus* series offers hope of redemption. In ancient Egypt, the four sons of Horus personified the canopic jars that stored the viscera of the deceased for their use in the afterlife. Stomach, liver, large intestines and lungs were removed after death, mummified and placed in jars decorated with the attributes of each of the four sons who would ensure their safe passage to the afterlife: Duamutef, whose avatar was the jackal,

⁴ *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Northwestern University, 1959, 21.

guarded the stomach; Hapi (baboon) had the lungs; Qebehsenuf (falcon) took the intestines; and Imsety, who had the appearance of a human, took the liver. Strauss reimagines this journey both in a series of charmingly optimistic, hand-built ceramic pots, and in a playful evocation of the journey to the afterlife in two mixed-media works. In one of these, *Sons of Horus – the Journey*, the eponymous sons are seated in a boat, journeying solemnly through a colourful seascape replete with cartouche-like sea creatures against the backdrop of a dazzling sky. At once a narrative, a dream-like fantasy and a map of unconscious desires, this work suggests that beyond the shadowy monsters of our nightmares is the light of wakefulness, rendered all the more meaningful by the darkness it replaces. With Borges, Strauss thus reminds us that

We are as ignorant of the meaning of the dragon as we are of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon's image that appeals to the human imagination It is, so to speak, a necessary monster⁵

References

⁵ Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, 14.

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1958 (reprinted 2000).
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins'. In Jorge Luis Borges. *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1964.
- . *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Revised, enlarged and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974.
- Jung, Carl. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1959.



Baboon (Sons of Horus), Marie Strauss (2020), hand-built porcelain,
22 x 16 cm.

2

Contributors

Marie Strauss holds an MFA (2010) from the Dunedin School of Art and currently resides in Dunedin. Over the past two decades, since moving to New Zealand from South Africa, she has developed a national reputation as an artist who works proficiently across multiple media, from painting to ceramics to printmaking, expressively exploring both traditional oil-painting, etching and linocut techniques to the non-traditional use of flocking, velvet and gold. Her oeuvre ranges in scale from large paintings (300 cm x 150 cm) to small etchings (15 cm x 15 cm), and includes works on paper incorporating collage, water colour and gouache. With their layered treatments and etched surfaces, the fluid forms of her hand- built, multi-fired porcelain ceramics extend and complement the complexity of her two-dimensional work.

She has held 52 solo shows internationally since 1982 (Australia, France, South Africa and New Zealand), most recently at the Eskdale Gallery, Dunedin (2017) and RDS Gallery, Dunedin (2019). Her work is included in prominent collections in Australia, France, Korea, South Africa and New Zealand.

Federico Freschi is Professor and Head of College at Te Maru Pūmanawa | Creative Practice & Enterprise at the Otago Polytechnic. He was formerly the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. A widely published art historian, his research has focused on the political iconography of public buildings, with a secondary line of research into the construction of the canon of modern South African art, and more recently how the art market is implicated in this. In 2016, Professor Freschi was the South African curator of the exhibition 'Henri Matisse: Rhythm and Meaning', at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg. This was the first exhibition devoted to Matisse on the African continent. His most recent publication is the edited volume *Troubling Images: Visual Culture & the Politics of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Wits University Press, 2020) with co-editors Brenda Schmahmann and Lize van Robbroeck. (ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9515-3303>)

