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CONQUERING TALES OF VIOLENCE  
THROUGH IMAGERY AND METAPHOR

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When we were children we liked to play in pretend houses. I am the oldest, and have always been more industrious than my sisters, even in play. The houses were just about always my creation, and I would willingly do the hard work of planning and collecting the materials, and then the careful construction. My sisters were happy enough to go along with my ideas for a while, until they got bored and moved onto other games or TV. I, on the other hand, was lost in a timeless realm, inside interior spaces in my mind. This was the early development of my young artist self.

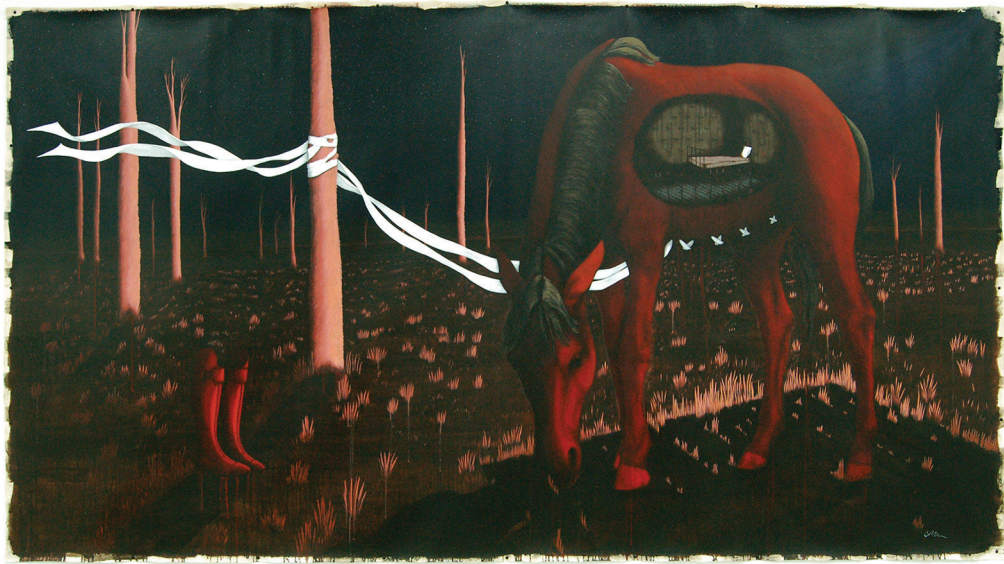


Figure 1. Charlotte McLachlan, *Lost*, 2020/21,  
acrylic on canvas, 3300 x 1800mm.

To the side of our house was a grassy area with sycamore and elderberry trees. Most of our houses were built there; big lean-to type constructions made with fallen branches with leaves piled on top, or tiny houses with many rooms made from twigs, all woven together with wool. One was up high with imaginary stairs, perched flat on top of a chopped tree trunk. Another was just down the road, in the long grass of a farmer's paddock. That one had a long crawl entranceway leading to a circular, flattened down 'room' where you could lie down and look up into the infinite blue summer sky. I made houses out of anything and everything – so great was my wish to be anywhere other than my actual house.

My MFA project, "Animal Inside," deals with the issue of violence used to gain power and control over animals and women. I used Charles Perrault's fairytale "Donkeyskin" as an apparatus for my research and studio practice. My narrative paintings follow the style of the early European fairytales of the 1900s, depicting stories which are brief and to the point, relying on symbolism – relating to an object, a colour or an animal – to represent an abstract idea or to suggest a certain mood or emotion. The tale of "Donkeyskin" is essentially a horror story, juxtaposed with the familiar context of home and family. It is about a young woman who is so terrified within her home that she has no choice but to flee. In order to escape, she is forced to first kill a donkey and then disguise herself inside its pelt.



Figure 2. Charlotte McLachlan, *Between Worlds*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 3000 x 1800mm.

Sigmund Freud used the term "the uncanny" (*das Unheimliche*) to describe a sense of estrangement within the home, the presence of something threatening and unknown that lies within the bounds of the intimate.<sup>2</sup> For Freud, the uncanny is a type of dread which returns to what is long familiar; something new that exists in something already known. He used the term *heimlich* ("homely"), with its opposite *unheimlich*, to point out that most "homely" scenarios have a dark underside, and are not in fact safe: he plays the unhomely off against the homely, the known and comfortable, on the one hand, and the concealed and threatening, on the other. For Freud, the home is a type of secret place, and the unhomely or the uncanny is something that should have remained secret, but has been revealed.<sup>3</sup> For us, Freud's distinction between the homely and unhomely in the domestic context has become a distinction between the private and public realms – a contrast which is very relevant to contemporary discussions about gender and violence within the home.

Central to the tale of "Donkeyskin" is the cruel slaughter of a pet donkey. According to Carol Adams, male perpetrators of domestic violence often also harm or kill pets as a means of instilling terror in family members.<sup>4</sup> When pets are harmed or killed in this context, it sends the message that such harm could also potentially be inflicted on family members, that matters of life and death are literally in the hands of the perpetrator. However, in the tale of "Donkeyskin," it is the female protagonist who commits an act of animal cruelty in order to escape the violence being perpetrated against herself. In the killing of the donkey, she reiterates both a gendered and species hierarchy. Adams shows how we enact species hierarchies when we make animals "absent referents" through language.<sup>5</sup> For example, when we rename carcasses with less confronting names, before consumers eat them, or when animals become metaphors for describing human experiences.

As humans we tend to project notions of brutality, and what we think of as primitive and animalistic qualities, onto animals – as if we are above these kinds of behaviours ourselves. Everyday human practices that exploit and harm animals lurk in the ‘shadow’ of the human psyche. Carl Jung developed the concept of the “shadow” to describe the unconscious, disowned, “dark” aspects of the personality.<sup>6</sup> They are “dark” because they consist predominantly of the negative, socially or religiously depreciated human emotions and impulses such as sexual lust, power strivings, selfishness, greed, envy, anger or rage. Our “shadow” impulses are completely obscured from conscious awareness – whatever we cannot bear to know about ourselves becomes part of the shadow. Many of the darker elements of “Donkeyskin” might be considered the shadow material of the human psyche. “Donkeyskin” is a universal story about hidden horrors that have persisted across time, cultures and socioeconomic divides. These horrors remain locked away in the private sphere of the domestic; they are secret, and are also kept as a kind of “secret” from the conscious mind.

Throughout my project I have employed some favourite motifs of the aesthetic uncanny, including the use of the double and of repetition.<sup>7</sup> The animals in my works frequently morph into various alternate forms of themselves (the double). They are sometimes seen outside and sometimes inside, moving into domestic scenes, the habitat of their humans. Donkeys and horses are frequently depicted as a (repeating) motif in the wallpaper of domestic interiors. While the paintings refer to human interaction with these animals, humans are almost completely absent, with only traces of their presence left behind. I emphasise dark shadows in my paintings to reference the dark side of human behaviour. Alongside my use of dark shadowing, I have adopted another version of this concept with my use of translucence, which denotes psychological qualities. These are not as heavily disowned or denied as the shadow impulses, but are rather things which may be just within reach ... barely known, or imagined, distorted or forgotten.



Figure 3. Charlotte McLachlan, *I See You Walk Between The Realms*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 3000 × 1800mm.



In my project, I drew on Susan Stewart's writing about the miniature and the gigantic, examining the different qualities that scale and space bring to the viewer's experience. The most quintessential miniature is the dollhouse – "a house within a house promises an infinitely profound interiority."<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the gigantic is experienced as all-encompassing and all-powerful. "The most typical gigantic world is the sky – a vast undifferentiated space marked only by the constant movement of clouds with their amorphous forms."<sup>9</sup>

Paintings can be thought of as "spaces," or narrative structures, and I have explored the use of the uncanny in the context of inside and outside spaces, juxtaposing the experiences of the claustrophobic and the remote.

According to Bachelard, "outside and inside are both intimate – they are always ready to be reversed to exchange their hostility."<sup>10</sup> "Too much space smothers us much more than if there were not enough ... precisely because of too much riding and too much freedom, and of the unchanging horizon, in spite of our desperate gallopings, the pampa assumed the aspect of a prison for me, a prison that was bigger than the others" (quoting the poet Jules Supervielle).<sup>11</sup> In trying to create a sense of the uncanny within a space, the 'ingredient' required need not be one thing or another; but something subtler than this device versus that other one. There is something about the tension in between. Many elements of the uncanny reside in the ambiguity of the familiar or the repeated, something that creeps up on you because you didn't notice it at first glance.

The work in my MFA project is not bloody or gory, but instead alludes to its violent themes in more subtle ways. The dreamscape qualities of the works are infused with elements of grace and beauty, inviting the viewer's own projections and a reinterpretation of the tale. I invite personal reflection rather than offering abject horror, which would run the risk of alienating the viewer.

I have modified the fairytale "Donkeyskin" in a series of narrative paintings which explore scale in relation to positions of power. In the original version of the story the animal killed for its skin is a donkey, but the animal has also been portrayed as a horse, a deer and even a cat in subsequent versions. A retelling of "Donkeyskin" fits within the discourse of various postmodern feminist groups, where there has been a strong move to revise and rewrite many traditional fairytales.

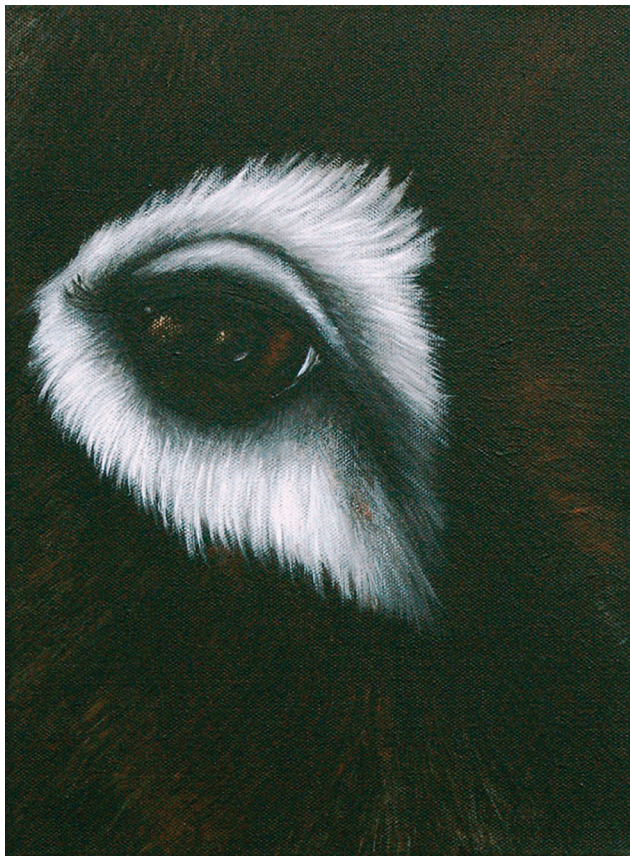


Figure 4. Charlotte McLachlan, *I See*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 230 x 304mm.

Veronica Schaones writes:

A story's artistic and cultural power can reach or return to its full effect only in a revision. It is vital to distinguish revisions from duplicates, not only for the sake of aesthetic quality and artistic achievement, but also in order to avoid thoughtlessly recycling stories or propaganda whose messages have caused great harm; rewriting stories so as to expose and/or transform underlying misogynies is one of the tasks of feminist revisionism. Revision has the potential to expose the ideological underpinnings of the stories that shape our lives, not in order that we surrender to them but in order that we can shape them in turn.<sup>12</sup>

"Animal Inside" invites others to identify with, 'imagine into' and shape the tale for themselves. After all, storytelling is part of our psychic development. We all need to have a story, a way of unifying our experiences and our sense of self. Stories help integrate and make sense of our experiences.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 5. Charlotte McLachlan, *The Red Jacket*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 304 x 230 mm.

**Charlotte McLachlan** graduated from the Dunedin School of Art with a Master of Fine Arts (distinction) in 2021. She lives and works in Dunedin as an artist and as a psychotherapist. Her current painting practice explores psychoanalysis, power relations, the environment, animals and insects, and nostalgia.

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