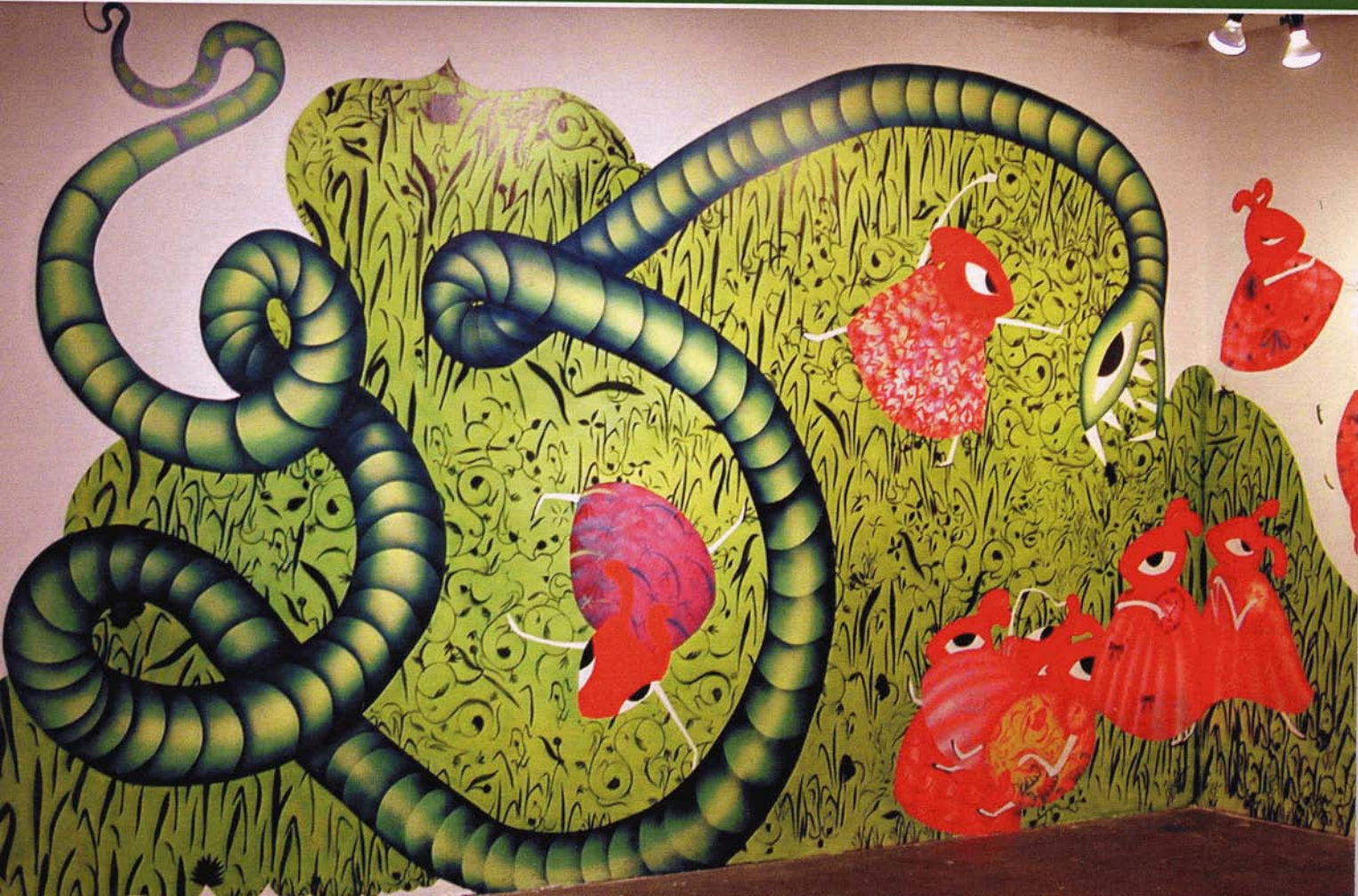


Samantha Simpson

The Snake Cycle



untitled wall painting, Hallwalls project rooms, May 2002, airbrush ink, approx. 23' x 12'



top: *Mythologizing Back*, 2001, airbrush ink on paper, 52" x 113.5"
bottom right & left: wall painting in progress



Snake Hunt, 1998, airbrush ink on paper, 75.5" x 80"
from: *Robobear*, 2000, airbrush ink on paper, 78.5" x 80"



Wounded Union, 2001, airbrush ink on paper, 80" x 80"



It's A Wild World

The paintings of Philadelphia artist Samantha Simpson are unapologetically entertaining. They are vivid, energetic works that purposely push the envelope of eye candy with a panoramic aspect, their own rendition of “blockbuster.” They promise and deliver splashy action, adventure, sexy visuals, and just enough drama to torque the whole mix into something simultaneously appealing and unsettling.

In Simpson's world, girlish-looking bears are perpetually situated in skirmishes with big, powerful snakes. In direct opposition to their formally joyous appearance, the predominant subject matter is one of conflict. And these combative scenarios are writ large in Simpson's oeuvre, with a brightness that accentuates their intensity and proportions that play up the epic scale of the emotions involved. Taken collectively, the works read like chapters from a big book of dystopic fairytales: pictures of broad moral lessons about the problematic arenas of life, love, sexuality and gender relationships.

Simpson's flat, illustrative style of rendering makes good use of the grandness of scale she utilizes. Her re-appropriation of brush, decorative applications of color and design serves to explore deeper problems and conflicts, most of which remain unresolved. Simpson reclaims this style and torques it to create the centrifugal force of her own visual language. This reclamation occurs via an airbrush and compressor, tools whose predominant use is automotive and decidedly macho. Simpson's use of that tool, however, remains traditional and painterly. While the works are phenomenally flat—even in their depiction of depth—they are just as phenomenally layered. They wind their way to a finished form through a process of successive maskings, painting and detailing.

In Simpson's metaphoric battle of the sexes, no one is seen to conclusively win the war. Ultimately, any moral in the work is more ambiguous than specific. Her bears are never outnumbered (they are never battling a posse of snakes), but the varying size and configuration of the snake form often suggests an imminent and continuous peril. In *Mythologizing Back*, the coiled body of a snake ominously occupies fully two-thirds of the painting.

Despite this, the bears typically acquire the upper hand. In *Battle*, a cluster of armed bears gang together to insure victory, while one bear in the background encases a snake in a brick holding pen. A couple of bears appear wounded, but the others control the battle. In *Snake Hunt*, a quartet of bears subsumes and gathers up some snakes with relative ease. Over a short course of time, it becomes apparent that, in Simpson's visually-gleeful world, nothing happy is actually taking place. The occasional smiles on some of the bears in selected pieces seem more like expressions of nervous laughter. In *Robobear*, while one bear rides the snake with a look of pure hilarity, another runs in abject terror. Meanwhile, the deep background reveals a third bear, torn literally limb from limb.

Simpson does not pretend to illustrate solutions to this comedy of gender roles but more the inanity of it all, its neverending tragicomedy. If these works are a contemporary moral tale, the lesson may not have anything to do with who gets the upper hand in this battle. If it were about that, we would no doubt see the obvious visual pun that is missing: a bear swallowed whole by a snake. A cartoon gag perfectly suited to Simpson's characters.

However, Simpson's epic conflagrations are not about victory. While much of *The Snake Cycle* revolves around conflict, Simpson plays to an ultimately ambiguous sentiment regarding gender relationships, almost suggesting the senselessness of using “difference” as a measuring stick. In contrast to the battle scenarios, *Wounded Union* adroitly suggests that there is something else of equal or more importance than facing off in endless skirmishes. In this work, a group of bears attempt to sew up wounds in a snake, while one of them cradles its head with a gesture of comfort and reassurance. Simpson's world is a beautiful one, propelled by conflict, but with enough room for wounds to be acknowledged and treated. Discord *can* succumb to tenderness.

Hey baby, it's a wild world, up here in your arms tonight...

John Massier, Visual Arts Curator

left: *Battle*, 1999, airbrush ink on paper, 80" x 80" right: installation view Hallwalls project rooms

SAMANTHA SIMPSON received her MFA in painting from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1993. Her work has been shown on the west coast in alternative spaces such as at New Langton Arts, Southern Exposure and The Victoria Room and internationally at Gallery Michael Rasche in Freiburg, Germany. Recent exhibitions include *Bizarro World*, at the Cornell Museum, the Atlanta Contemporary Museum's 2001 Biennial, and *Slugfest Printmaking Workshop*. Upcoming shows of her work include the *Lawndale Art Center in Houston in 2003* and *Artists In Residence in Chelsea in 2004*. She currently lives and works in Philadelphia, where she teaches at the Tyler School of Art.

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