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Stephanie Wilde

Shorn Heads

Opinion without knowledge and information
Possessed by the Furies Book
Edition 30 1999

Ben Mitchell

Notes on Stephanie Wilde's *Possessed by the Furies*

The light of reverie let us note, is a dim light.... Making deities is what we do in our reverie. Images surrounded by shadow and silence. Silence is that vast, cosmic church in which we always stand alone. Silence is the only language God speaks.

--Charles Simic

For nearly two decades before beginning work on *Possessed by the Furies*, Stephanie Wilde's art was almost entirely focused on the AIDS epidemic. In 1990 her research took her to Gambia, West Africa, Dublin and Edinburgh. These experiences left her, she says, "humbled." The parallels between the Black Death of the European Middle Ages, and today's AIDS epidemic were undeniable to her. Then, a little over four years ago, her work on *Possessed by the Furies* began following her mother's death. "We all face that," she says, "losing a parent is a universal experience. And when we lose someone dear to us, it puts all of us into a place of self-realization." In caring for her mother through her final illness--a struggle that Wilde realized was not only physical, but also mental and spiritual--death, she discovered, reminds us how hard it is to look at our own lives with any courage, clarity or openness.

She began closely observing herself, her family, friends, and the society around her. *Possessed by the Furies* is the result of her--there is no other word for it--journey. "The images," she says, "are the things that need to be examined." Prejudice. The pervasiveness of lying and deceit. The dangerous zealotry of the extremist Christian minority. The steady leeching away of tradition and respect in the community. Ill winds blown up out of gossip and half-formed opinion. Fear of illness and death. Yet all of this work--these images she has carved out of the small copper plates--is fundamentally based upon her own self-examination. What she brings us back from this work is a remarkably courageous and challenging art.

The examination of a life. Just that. It seems almost achingly quaint in our time, doesn't it--when was the last time you heard someone use the phrase *the inner life*? Charles Simic said in "Street-Corner Theology"

All things are interrelated. As above, so below. We are fragments of an unutterable whole. Meaning is always in search of itself. Unsuspected revelations await us around every corner.

The blind preacher and his old dog are crossing the street against the oncoming traffic of honking cabs and trucks. He carries his guitar in a beat-up case taped with white tape so it looks like it's bandaged.

Making art in America is about saving one's soul.

"I have been trying to understand how my work can make a difference," she says, and says so simply. The old Hebrew word for what she struggles with in this art is *tikkun*--redemption, restoration. Trying to mend the rift between heaven and earth, between good and evil, trying to understand human weakness--her obsession--is a challenge not to us, for she is no missionary, but is a challenge she has taken up for herself.

Like some fantastic and esoteric narrative from the 14th century, the images are biting, mordant, uncompromising commentary on human nature in all its gaudy shortcomings and frailty. The themes are deeply inherent in our natures, in our lives. Here are some clues to the iconography: the "Tumblers and Jugglers" images refer to manipulation. On stilts, we look down upon others; balancing plates is a metaphor for relationship--who hasn't waded through the shards of hurt and misunderstanding? Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), the source for the "Suffering from Severe Savonarola" prints, was a Dominican living in Florence who attacked moral laxity, as he perceived it, and was executed for his zealotry and for being a false prophet. Following her mother's death, Wilde says, "I started thinking how we look at the elderly as a spent force, how we put away what does not celebrate and glorify beauty and youth." The basis for "Shorn Heads" is inescapable for any of us living near the western mountain haunts of white supremacists.

But it is not enough, in fact it is futile, to make a necessarily temporary and incomplete map for reading these prints: those knives and snakes in "Opinionated Cacophony," the skulls and dogs and elongated figures in "Man Radically Falls," the family-like groupings in "Shorn Heads." In their complexity and in their mysterious narrative force, these images contain so much *potential* meaning. And so much potential to move us. It's silence itself that's essential here, the silence surrounding each image, that emanates from their intricate lines and dramatic composition. And your silence as well, the quiet that you bring within you that makes a path toward understanding, a place for contemplation and introspection.

In the end, *Possessed by the Furies* is a Pandora's Box that contains within it fourteen tiny etchings. When you open it, you discover that the images are all connected on a continuous sheet, and after unfolding each, one by one, you find that they must all be folded back inward on themselves: And the book closed. Stephanie Wilde says, "When examining our own lives, we fold into ourselves as human beings...at the end of the day, that's who you are."