OFF KILTER

KAREN MOSS JANUARY 22 THROUGH MARCH 22, 2013
The Kniznick Gallery is a central force in the scholarly community at the Women’s Studies Research Center (WSRC), a space that presents new scholarship through thought-provoking exhibitions that inspire analysis, creative writing, and multidisciplinary collaboration. It is highly appropriate to kick off a new year of feminist exhibitions at the Kniznick Gallery with the work of Boston artist Karen Moss.

In the aftermath of a divisive presidential election, in the midst of an ongoing economic crisis, and in light of our culture’s overwhelming social problems, Karen Moss’s mixed-media paintings reflect the complex, tumultuous, and confusing state of our times. Instead of avoiding this reality, “Off-Kilter” engages us in some of its bleaker components: eating disorders, youth violence, homelessness, rampant consumerism, and environmental devastation.

Despite the dark subject matter, Moss employs a rich pallet of color, alluring materials, plenty of humor, and a good dose of fantasy. In their playfulness and otherworldliness, her paintings offer a glimmer of hope, as well as a warning. With hybrid human/animal figures, solitary androgynous children, and landscapes teetering between domesticity and urban devastation, Moss’s work evokes an ambiguous threshold between something potentially magnificent and something dire: the choice seems to be ours.

Drawing on art history, children’s coloring books, mythology, and current news, Moss brings a fresh perspective that will contribute to the evolving dialogue, provocation, and social action at the WSRC.

In addition to the content of her work, Moss is a fitting choice as a seasoned artist who has devoted her entire career to the core tenets of the WSRC: research, art, and activism. “Off-Kilter” validates Moss’s place as a keen social commentator with a deft and spirited hand.

- MICHELE L’HEUREUX, CURATOR
Lost at Sea, 2011
MIXED MEDIA ON
UNSTRETCHED CANVAS
55” × 77”
Future Farm, 2009  
ACRYLIC ON PAPER  
22 ⅜” x 29 ⅜”

The Scream, 2009  
ACRYLIC ON PAPER  
30” x 22”
Have a Nice Day (Triptych), 2012

MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS

3 PANELS, EACH 72” X 48”
It is particularly apt that the Brandeis University Women’s Studies Research Center is showing the paintings of artist Karen Moss, as one of her main themes is the construction of femininity. Working with stereotypical images taken from such sources as children’s books of the 1940s and ’50s, vintage coloring books, and Japanese anime figures, Moss deconstructs middle-class complacency with hybrid figures, threatening backgrounds, and foreshadowed disasters. What appears on the surface to be a pleasant suburban scene takes on a darker tonality when examined closely.

Her use of popular imagery is partly inspired by her teacher and mentor Richard Merkin, who used toys and cartoon characters in his still life instruction. Another influence of hers is Pop Art in its adoption of commercial and advertising material; but unlike Pop artists such as Warhol and Lichtenstein, Moss critiques and skewers such material with frightening hybrids and blighted landscapes. She cites Bruegel and Goya among artists who have inspired her and might have also included Hieronymus Bosch. Her hybrid animals with human heads or humans with animal faces remind me a little of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland with its talking caterpillar and its watch-bearing White Rabbit, although references to genetic experiments are conjured, as well. We enter a world of fantasy in Moss’s paintings but one that critiques our culture and its presuppositions.

This is evident in the triptych “Have A Nice Day,” which greets the viewer entering the exhibition. On the last panel, a kneeling girl in a flowered vintage dress is holding a play rifle while a human-headed rodent in front of her seems to be begging for mercy. The girl wears an actual pair of dark glasses, perhaps a sign of her blindness to the world around her. In the background a brick fence is coming to pieces, and beyond it, a hooded figure wheels a shopping cart filled with plastic bags as a falling tree blocks her path. In the middle panel, a girl wearing a 1940’s dress and Mary Jane patent leather shoes wheels a stroller whose baby occupant has a bird head, while behind her the landscape is in ruins. On the left panel, the stereotypical girl figure is overlaid with falling green strokes of paint slowly obliterating her. Behind her is a broken brick wall and a devastated house in the landscape.

More disasters await in the large painting “Lost At Sea.” In it, the crowded boat is almost overwhelmed by stylized waves. The passengers on this ship of fools have large green bags of possessions that seem to be going into the sea. Among the passengers are three Barbie-like figures who have left the manufactured perfection of the iconic image—one is overweight, one is average, and one is turning into an animal. Two cartoon figures—a somber Bugs Bunny and a fur-coated Porky Pig—are also on board, while a tall Asian figure is silhouetted against an ominous red sky. Here Moss may be calling attention to disasters like Hurricane Katrina, as well as to the inappropriate icons of our culture.
Another painting referring to constructions of femininity is “The Lesson,” in which an androgynous child in a tutu is surrounded by a silhouetted Minnie Mouse and collaged tulle and flowered net material. Here the hues of pink and blue call attention to this stereotyped imagery and gender expectations.

One of the other themes in Moss’s work is a critique of the rampant consumerism of American culture and desires. Figures—animal and human—carry luxury goods, such as alligator handbags, or wear expensive fur coats. In “Strangeness in the Suburbs,” a white rabbit carrying a Neiman Marcus handbag is trying to escape a vengeful turkey following him. This may refer to the eruption of wildlife, such as turkeys, coyotes, and raccoons in the suburbs but could also be constructed as the indigenous American turkey opposing the commercialization of the culture.

In the background of “Strangeness in the Suburbs,” we see dying trees and overly manicured shrubs while three girls smilingly wheel strollers with bird-headed babies, totally unaware of the hybrid animals and disasters around them. Here the feeling of an unwinding frieze is evident, but the former classical figures and myths have been turned into a modern dysfunctional society whose values and concerns are trivial.

Moss creates another powerful image in “Broken,” in which the central figure is surrounded by flying smiley-faced plastic bags, an ecological menace. Wearing a 1940’s girl’s dress, the figure holds the ends of a collaged, broken jump rope, perhaps showing pastimes before the advent and commercialism of television. Unlike the garish colors of some of the other works, “Broken” is in gray and white and seems to harken the past, when we deluded ourselves into thinking we weren’t consuming too much plastic waste or threatening the environment.

Karen Moss’s work is a powerful indictment of a disposable and heedless culture. It also creates a world of fantasy and imagination, which is fun to look at even with its dark overtones and menacing scenarios. Moss is an accomplished and concerned artist holding up a mirror to the follies and extravagances of contemporary values and oblivion.

- ALICIA FAXON

Alicia Faxon is Professor of Art History (Emerita) at Simmons College and art critic for Art New England. She has written seven books, the most recent being Self-Portraits by Women Painters (with Lianva Cheney and Kathleen Russo) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
Follow The Leader, 2012
ACRYLIC PAINT ON FABRIC AND NEWSPRINT
25” x 157”
Broken, 2012  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS  
72” x 48”

All in The Family, 2011  
ACRYLIC PAINT ON PAPER AND ACETATE COLLAGE  
26” x 40”
Barbie Odalisque, 2011
ACRYLIC ON PAPER AND ACETATE COLLAGE
26” x 40”

The Lesson, 2011
MIXED MEDIA ON UNSTRETCHED CANVAS
78” x 57”
Strangeness in The Suburbs, 2010
ACRYLIC PAINT ON PAPER
26” x 80”
Near Future, 2010

ACRYLIC PAINT ON PAPER AND ACETATE COLLAGE

26" x 80"
Gnome to the Rescue, 2009
ACRYLIC PAINT AND COLLAGE ON PAPER
37" x 44 ½"

Solitary, 2008
ACRYLIC PAINT ON PAPER
30" x 22"
Karen Moss has been drawing and painting since childhood, when her earliest influences were the stories and illustrations found in children’s books. She was told that her love of museums was so intense that at the age of four, she threw a tantrum on the steps of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston upon learning that the museum was closed. Although there was no TV in her home, she appeared when ten years old on a TV quiz show about the collection in the Toledo Museum of Art. As a teenager, her interest in animals led her to consider becoming a veterinarian. These threads came together in later life to form Moss’s concerns with narrative, art history and the natural world.

Moss received a BFA in Painting from Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from Tufts University/School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. For over 25 years she taught drawing and painting in Massachusetts public schools, private schools, colleges and universities, including Wheelock College, Massachusetts College of Art, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University.

Her work has been exhibited in galleries throughout the United States, and is included in numerous public and private collections such as the Graham Gund Collection, deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Boston Public Library, Vassar College Art Gallery, Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Drawing has always been a strong component of her work, and paper is her preferred medium. She is attracted to narrative and social commentary and has been influenced by artists whose work focuses on the dark side and the persistence of human foibles—artists such as Goya, Breughel, Hannah Hoch and George Grosz. Her inspiration often comes from news items on topics such as eating disorders, youth violence, homelessness, consumerism and environmental devastation. In spite of these subjects, her work seductively draws the viewer in through use of pop imagery, delicate line, humor, and fantasy.