



Natalie Frank, *All Fur III*, 2011–14, gouache and chalk pastel on paper, 30 × 22".

of German Romanticism retain their astonishing power to spark artistic invention, as testified to by the twenty-five works in gouache and chalk pastel on paper that made up the Drawing Center's presentation of "Natalie Frank: The Brothers Grimm," now on view at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, and selected from the drawings made for her copious recent publication *Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (2015), which features seventy-five images accompanying thirty-six stories.

Most of us are aware by now that the tales as they were first passed on to the Grimms were far different from the sanitized retellings we grew up on. The original stories assume a violent, unstable, amoral world in which murder, cannibalism, and incest are everyday occurrences; cultural taboos are practically nonexistent. But by the same token, it is also a world of wonders, in which bizarre transformations are routine, people and animals are interchangeable, and even the most brutalized urchin may be rewarded with comfort and riches. And of course transformation had always been part of the tales' form: Passed on orally, they were constantly metamorphosing, and even after being written down and published, they turned out to be infinitely adaptable. No wonder these stories have stimulated artists' imaginations. They seem to offer a royal road to that "dark inaccessible part of our personality" that Freud named the id, that "cauldron full of seething excitations" where nothing is forbidden and everything is possible. For Frank, who has said that drawing is "like committing a murder," they also seem to have enabled a degree of painterly spontaneity, coloristic richness, and formal intensity that surpasses that of the works in her last New York show (at Fredericks & Freiser) in 2012.

For all her evident sympathy with the strangeness of the Grimms' tales, Frank's approach to them is more seductive than unsettling. In the works that were on view here, she draws from thirteen of the tales, including "The Juniper Tree," the story that was used by Jonas. In these images, everything seems to be happening at once, as if a swirl of disparate actions—sometimes very hard for the viewer to correlate with specific episodes in the opposite tale—were sweeping one along without allowing time to question things. As in the tales themselves, the accent is more on the wonder at strange and possibly incomprehensible events than on revulsion or regret over their often dire consequences. No one's identity is securely established, no contradiction disallowed in Frank's magical realism. And then the very texture of the works' surfaces becomes in itself a kind of mineral fairyland that pleasantly distracts us from whatever is merely legible in the image: For instance, in *All Fur III* (all works 2011–14), in which a girl's face seems to morph into that of an animal, it is the zone of overlap where the melding of tones effaces the boundaries between kinds and becomes sheer nondescriptive flux that holds my attention most strongly. In *Cinderella I*, my eye keeps returning to where the Lolita-like protagonist's left leg, surrounded by slightly pictographic birds, seems to melt away into the surrounding atmosphere as it points toward the fireplace in which a second figure squats—Cinderella herself again, picking the lentils from the ashes? The less I understand what I'm looking at in these luminous, densely packed works, the more exhilarating I find them.

—Barry Schwabsky

"From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics"

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

"There is a train track in the history of art that goes way back to Mesopotamia," Willem de Kooning once said. "Duchamp is on it. Cézanne is on it. Picasso and the Cubists are on it; Giacometti, Mondrian and so many, many more," including, one might add, the organizers of this small, studious, remarkably concise exhibition at New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. "From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics" took that train running the opposite way, following archaeological objects from Mesopotamia to the present day. The show featured two lush, powerful, lesser-known paintings from de Kooning's fabled "Woman" series—the toothy, yellow-tinged *Woman*, 1953–54, and *Woman on a Sign II*, 1967, gooey, fleshy, sinister, and salmon pink—and placed them in a novel context. Here, they had little to say about de Kooning's dramatic oscillations between brilliance and brutality, or about American painting's epic struggles between figuration and abstraction. Instead, they gave evidence of the presence of Sumerian statues through decades of art, scholarship, excavations, exhibitions, mainstream media, avant-garde fashion, popular culture, and public imagination.

De Kooning first encountered the statues at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—upright, majestic, enigmatic with enormous hollowed out or kohl-lined eyes and diminutive hands clasped delicately to the chest. It was around 1950, the year he had finished the monumental abstract canvas *Excavation*, and he was about to embark on the first of his "Woman" paintings, which would torture him for years. Among other ancient artifacts and deities, the Sumerian statues of Tell Asmar, in modern-day Iraq, struck de Kooning as "contemporary as well as ancient, an Everywoman in many guises . . . open-ended and mysterious . . . mother and wife, monster and lover, a creature at once earthbound and hallucinatory."

Presented as a collection of biographies telling the stories of archaeological objects through their origins, actions, and fates, "From Ancient to Modern" filled just two small galleries but included nearly two hundred items, from newspaper clippings, research materials, old books, journals, study photographs, and field notes from various excavations to five-thousand-year-old relics and rarefied works of art. In addition to de Kooning's paintings were cast-concrete sculptures by Henry Moore; ink-and-pencil drawings by Alberto Giacometti; a grid of twenty black-and-white photographs related to the Gulf War by the Irish-Iraqi artist Jananne al-Ani (*Untitled May 1991 [Gulf War Work]*); and Michael Rakowitz's capacious and tender-hearted installation *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, which includes four pencil-on-vellum drawings from 2007 and twenty-five small sculptures from between 2007 and 2014 made of newspaper and food packaging and representing twenty-five of the artifacts that were stolen from Baghdad's National Museum in 2003.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman*, 1953–54, oil on paperboard, 35 1/2 × 24 3/8". From "From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics."



As important as the stories of the objects were the people who made them, discovered them, promoted them, or otherwise animated them, shaping their place in the world through a sensational press release (in the case of the archaeologist Charles Leonard Woolley, who desperately wanted Mesopotamia to compete with the Egyptomania triggered by the discovery of King Tut's tomb in 1922), a fast-paced detective fiction (Agatha Christie worked on Woolley's dig, where she met her second husband, Max Mallowan, as well as Woolley's wife, the model for her victim in the Hercule Poirot mystery *Murder in Mesopotamia*), or an erudite interpretation (as exemplified by Henri Frankfort, who spoke of Sumerian artifacts never in terms of primitivism but always in the language of fine art).

And yet, by focusing so closely on the materiality and movement of ancient relics, the exhibition made an important scholarly contribution to an ongoing curatorial conversation about the seemingly counter-intuitive fascination of contemporary art with all things archaeological. Dieter Roelstraete's essay "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art" (2009) and subsequent exhibition "The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology" (2013) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago did much to articulate the debate in terms of pedagogy, research-based practice, and relentless political crises. "From Ancient to Modern" refined the discussion further, illuminating the ways in which the unabashedly academic field of archaeology has offered a set of skills and methodologies that are attentive to the mysteries of art without ever diffusing their power, all while admitting the uncomfortable fact that wars and archaeological expeditions almost always come paired. With an extreme economy of selection, arrangement, and pacing, "From Ancient to Modern," itself an exercise in archaeological technique, allowed for unexpected moments of slippage, excess, and overflow, not only in the predilections and personalities of its characters but also, more importantly, in the sorrows and tensions of its contexts (colonialism, modernism, war without end in Iraq), which echoed everywhere among the objects on view and the stories they told of their journey, way back—and back again.

—Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

DETROIT

Jack and Leigh Ruby

MICHAEL JON GALLERY

Jack and Leigh Ruby's *Car Wash Incident*, 2013–15, directed by the Rubys and produced by Eve Sussman and Simon Lee, is a looped two-channel video that blurs the line between reality and fiction. Installed on hanging screens in the middle of Michael Jon Gallery's recently opened Detroit space, it was based around a staged aerial photo from 1975—depicting three people, a station wagon, and a car-wash sign at a dilapidated urban intersection—which the directors had originally fabricated as supporting evidence for an insurance scam (the two worked as a brother-sister con-artist team from the 1970s until their arrest in 1998). The viewer was allowed to navigate the dimly lit gallery, observing the simultaneously unfolding videos from multiple positions, while an eight-channel sound track of dialogue and ambient noise wafted from seven speakers positioned around the edges of the large curtained space. The conversations' audibility changed depending on the spectator's location, and this instability added to the sense that one was watching an unedited slice of reality, in which significant words and actions commingled with the mundane stuff of everyday life.

Car Wash Incident, which presents a vague and intentionally ambiguous narrative concerning the handing-off of a mysterious shopping bag between several different people in the vicinity of a car wash, is

based on a photograph that purportedly documents an event that never happened. Despite this, the videos, shot on 35-mm film at a meticulously fabricated set in Jersey City, look like footage from a '70s documentary. The action is minimally edited, with continuous takes lasting up to about



seven or eight minutes, and the cinema-verité style and quasi-improvised dialogue produce a strong reality effect. The ever-present ambient noise and overlapping conversations on the sound track further heighten our sense of the representation's verisimilitude, as do the off-center framings and empty spaces devoid of action that the camera sometimes captures.

The two screens reveal the shopping-bag transfers, which involve four main characters (a man in a suit, a mother and son in a car, and a woman in a red shirt), from a variety of different angles via a moving crane. Initially, they suggest the simultaneous recording of the same situation shot from two different points of view. Slowly, however, the spectator realizes that the takes are out of sync with one another, and that the dialogue is not entirely the same. As the narrative develops, the four protagonists and the location double and the handoffs reverse, until we are confronted with two identical car washes situated across the street from each other and a multitude of doppelgängers engaged in an endless circuit of passing a bag whose contents are never revealed. Subtly, the real has been transformed into the surreal.

In its inclusion of the 1926 song "When the Red, Red Robin (Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along)," which a woman occasionally sings or hums on the work's sound track, *Car Wash Incident* explicitly references *The Conversation* (1974), Francis Ford Coppola's brilliantly self-reflexive film starring Gene Hackman as a guilt-ridden surveillance expert who searches his audio recordings—commissioned by an unnamed corporation—to discover his own complicity in a possible murder. And like Coppola's meditation on the truth and falsity of cinematic sight and sound, *Car Wash Incident* emphasizes how we can be fooled despite engaging in close observation, and how the surreptitious spy inevitably becomes the spied upon. Going beyond the Watergate-era film, however, *Car Wash Incident* reminds us that art can resemble fraud (and vice versa), that authorship continues to fragment, and that surveillance is met by simulation in today's rapidly evolving digital moment.

—Matthew Biro

CINCINNATI

Titus Kaphar

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

The story goes that, while looking at a portrait by Titus Kaphar hanging in the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, a man named Benjamin Vesper suffered a sudden psychotic break and attacked the painting. The man was hospitalized but later escaped, and was eventually found squatting in an abandoned nineteenth-century house that he insisted belonged to his family. The history goes that the ancestral Vespers were a well-to-do, mixed-race family living in Reconstruction-era Connecticut. Their light skin allowed them to "pass" as white until

Jack and Leigh Ruby, *Car Wash Incident*, 2013–15, two-channel video projection, color, sound, 35 minutes. Photo: Monia Lippi.