

Susan Bee

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Tangled Tango: A Personal History

My historical and mythological paintings directly confront iconic moments of social and personal struggle through imagination and fantasy. I address specific political moments in *Votes for Women* (2018), about suffrage, and *Framing the Rosenbergs* (1993), about McCarthyism. On the side of fantasy, I have a series of feminist paintings that figure women as monsters.

Expressionist and symbolic elements explode in my work, with a riot of pop imagery, linear gestures, and layered painterly textures. These works are in dialogue with visionary artists of the romantic and the sublime. The works are homages but also confrontations. The paintings intensify expressivity, color, and texture.

I paint scenes and screens: vignettes from everyday life that I turn into heightened image tableaux. You can feel emotional forces pulsing through my canvases, whether they are idyllic reveries of waves and sea, boats embarking on a journey, psyches tossed into fates, or still lives alive with color.

The richness of my imagery – a potpourri of collaged and appropriated figures and forms – synthesize invented, observed, and received iconography. This syncretic blend of remade and remembered is so characteristic of my work that viewers to recognize will recognize both recurring and transforming images.

Two recent paintings – *Siren Song* (2019) and *Abuses of the World*, 2018 – are based on pages from medieval manuscripts. I reimagine for our times the strange beauties and frightful anomalies that populated the medieval world. These fantastic beings were meant to inspire awe. The monstrous women powerfully take on the world of men: the male figures drown as female figures play defiant songs on their instruments. I want paintings that bring music to your ears.

Abuses of the World (2018) is based on a very small page from a medieval manuscript that was featured in the 2018 Morgan Library show *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders*. This show explored the complex social role of monsters. One part, “Terrors”, explored how monsters enhanced the aura of those in power, whether kings, knights, or saints. “Aliens” showed how marginalized groups in European societies – Jews, Muslims, women, the poor, and the disabled – were figured as monstrous. The final section, “Wonders”, explored the unusual creatures and wondrous beings that populated the medieval world.

Demonology (2018) is inspired by a lightly colored lithograph by James Ensor, *Self-Portrait with Demons* (1898). I have reconfigured the composition to include an understated portrait of a woman, which is possibly a self-portrait of me at an earlier age. In changing the central figure from a man to a woman, the meaning of the image has shifted. The cartoon-like demons seem friendly and intimate with the central figure, which forms a strong contrast to the leering and scary demons. In converting the composition from a few flat colors to full color, the meaning of the image morphed. It is now more pop and comic. You can hear a rooster crowing.

In this close reading of the image, I suddenly saw the rooster crowing in the middle of the composition, surrounded by a radiant halo. Is this a religious symbol? A symbol of awakening and a call to chase away the demons surrounding Ensor? In effect, making these paintings give me a way of doing a close reading of images, that I might have given only a cursory glance to and to examine the original artist's mind. I become immersed in these images, retracing their logic and meaning. By inserting my own self-portrait into the image, I entered Ensor's mind space reinhabiting the details he used in his original composition.

Votes for Women (2018) was painted in honor of the centennial anniversary of women's suffrage in 1918. This scene is London's Trafalgar Square in 1918, where suffragette leader Charlotte Despard addresses the crowd. I based the painting on a black and white news photo. Daring stunts and civil disobedience were an integral part of the campaign for women's suffrage. My painting centers on the leader's figure, which is up against the back of the lion's statue. Strangely, the lion faces away from the speaker. I used dripped enamel paint, sand, and bright oil colors to illuminate the scene.

As I worked on the painting, I became more interested in painting the crowd, which consisted of men, women, and police officers. This represented a challenge as the image was not clear. I settled on a diverse and colorful sea of heads and that became central to the painting. I wanted to commemorate this momentous movement, but also to suggest the long and uncertain road ahead for equal rights for women.

Tangled Tango (2018) continues my engagement with imaginary landscapes and romantic couples, along with my European Jewish background. The couple in the painting are dancing: the image is inspired by a postcard advertising the Clärchens Ballhaus on Auguststraße in Berlin, which I had have visited several times. This legendary dance hall opened in 1913, during a tango craze; it has survived two world wars. The poster for space was designed by Otto Dix. Even now, couples are still dancing in its ancient wooden rooms.

In the painting, I place the romantic couple on a crayoned wave of paint that resembles *The Great Wave*, an 1833 woodblock print by the Japanese artist Hokusai. The couple face the music and dance; you can almost hear it. In the background there is a radiant sun circled my black enamel paint, illuminating their passage through life.

My mother, painter Miriam Laufer (1918–1980), grew up on Auguststraße in Berlin, when the Clärchens Ballhaus was active. My father, Sigmund Laufer (1920–2007), was also an artist. He grew up on Alexanderplatz in Berlin and emigrated to

Palestine at the age of 16. My parents met in Jerusalem in the late 1930s and then emigrated to New York City in 1947. I was born in Manhattan in 1952. On account of this, I feel close to both Berlin and Israel/Palestine. My parents spoke German at home and they loved the culture of the Berlin, which has been their culture, despite the ugly history that drove them from their home. So Berlin evokes complex feelings of regret mingled with the pain of loss. I struggle to render that in the paint.

This part of my family history was also addressed in my painting *Ahava, Berlin* (2012). *Ahava* was inspired by a trip I made to Berlin in 2012. My mother grew up at the former Ahava Kinderheim on Auguststraße, a politically progressive Jewish children's home where she lived from 1927 to 1934. Following the Nazi rise to power, the Kinderheim and most of its inhabitants, including my mother, were relocated to Palestine.

As Raphael Rubinstein wrote in, “Capitals of Pain and Love”, the catalog essay to “Criss Cross: New Paintings,” my solo show at Accola Griefen Gallery (NY) in 2013:

“Family history also guides *Ahava, Berlin*, a painting that shows a large weathered building distinguished by its arched entryway and paint-spattered façade. Standing to one side of the imposing entry arch is a woman dressed in purple and green clothes and a colorfully patterned scarf. Although the title doesn't tell us so, this is a self-portrait of the artist. [...] Situated in the former East Berlin, and also in the Mitte, Berlin's old Jewish quarter, the Ahava building was war-scarred, dilapidated and heavily graffitied when Bee came upon it. [...] Standing stiffly under a plaque that reads “Ahava”, the artist is a diminutive figure who looks overwhelmed by the ravaged façade, by the tortured history it represents. [...] Unexpectedly, Bee transforms a snapshot situation (tourist daughter standing in front of an orphanage where mother lived as a child) into a powerful image of hope and renewal, albeit one that acknowledges the heavy price of history. The ultimate message of this painting is legible on the sign placed just above Bee's head: ‘Ahava,’ the Hebrew word for love.”



Susan Bee, *Siren Song*, 2019, 18" x 24", oil and enamel on linen.
Collection: Ellen Hackl Fagan.



Susan Bee, *Abuses of the World*, 2018, 30” x 24”, oil and enamel on linen.
Collection: Layla May Berrada-Riggs.



Susan Bee, *Demonology*, 2018, 30" x 24", oil on linen.



Susan Bee, *Votes for Women*, 2018, 30” x 40”, oil, enamel, sand on linen.



Susan Bee, *Tangled Tango*, 2018, 24" x 30", oil and enamel on linen.