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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Paint It Black

Melancholic ambiguity in the work of Eva Rothschild



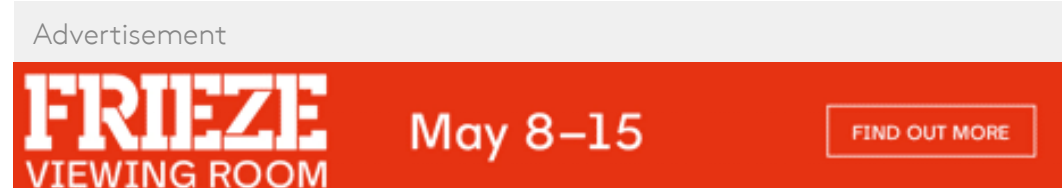
There was a time, not so long ago, when posters of wolves were particularly popular with teenagers. They came in many forms: howling wolves silhouetted against forbidding forests; a lone wolf running into a sunset; dreamy, good-looking wolves under a pair of floating, almond-shaped eyes; 'spiritual' wolves beneath rainbows; savage, Heavy Metal and swamp wolves.

Despite their apparent differences, subtle parallels abound between teenagers and wolves. Both are usually less bold than they appear to be, are driven by insatiable appetites, and seem permanently trapped in an all-pervasive melancholy born of a longing for something or someone they do not have. United in their desire to serenade the world with misery, the howl of wolves at night is surely echoed in the weeping of teenagers behind locked bedroom doors. That said, it seems obvious that, deep down, neither would mind feeling less beastly than the world demands they must be. But if, in fairy tales, it is a sudden, magical transformation which releases people and animals from their bondage, in reality, freedom is always conditional and gained by more prosaic means - the wolf is shot or starves, the teenager grows up.

Despite this popularity, few people have actually seen a wolf, a situation which must bear responsibility for its existence in our collective imagination as more of a kitsch approximation than a complex actuality. Nonetheless, you can't deny its symbolic power. Many things to many cultures, in the West, the wolf starred for centuries as the villain of fairy tales, before being recast as noble anti-hero in the hearts of a post-1960s generation attempting to connect with their 'wild side'. It was an inevitable shift in status. The wolf, so good-looking, restless and maligned, is possibly the perfect Romantic signifier of teenage alienation - a James Dean of the animal world.

Eva Rothschild may no longer be a teenager, but she used to be, and, like so many other teenagers, she collected posters. As if trying to understand something that was once important to her by destroying and then rebuilding it, she now paints over posters, or cuts them into strips so that she can weave them. Alternating between originals and photocopies, her recycling of posters which feature the image of a wolf are made with such a strange, obsessive sensitivity, that the animal emerges, despite the constraints of its own cliché, as something only half-understood - distorted but somehow deeply felt.

In one painting from the elegiac series entitled 'Black Psycore' (1999), Rothschild coloured-in a poster of a wolf using black gouache. 'Psycore': a combination of 'hardcore' and 'psychic' or 'psychological' - it's difficult to imagine a more appropriate title. Look closely at the picture and the silhouette of the animal, vague and faintly terrifying, emerges gradually from beneath the dry paint - a ground-zero thought suspended in the black hole of childhood memories. It's an unsettling image; one that, despite the apparent simplicity of the artist's approach (creative vandalism), possesses a disquieting power. Whether that power stems from the potentially grim overtones of the gesture - the annihilation and reclamation of someone else's image - or its odd mix of Minimalism and a kind of tongue-in-cheek, Heavy-Metal nihilism, is hard to say. Perhaps it's just that it's a picture unashamedly loaded with restless, even destructive feelings - about no longer being a kid, about having an alienated relationship with nature, about the potency of clichés and Romance, and the function of images - that it must strike a chord in the heart of anyone who has ever once a miserable teenager, transported to a better place by the simple act of looking at a poster stuck on the wall.



In *Night of Decision* (1999), Rothschild has used the same poster found in *Black Psycore* (1999), but the result is a little more upbeat and intricate. Comprised of inter-woven images of the wolf and a fluorescent text, the words of the title seem to erupt from the throat of the animal like a corny but potent howl against that great hunter, Time. What the decision is, and whether it even concerns the wolf at all, doesn't matter - it's like a line in song you don't literally understand, but empathize with. Once again, the wolf is unwittingly asked to play many roles: a symbol of urgent, urban angst; a cipher of lost youth; even an ecological statement. It's a tangle of meanings that might be a little confusing if it wasn't presented in such a vibrant way. Ideas literally weave in and out of its bright, highly artificial palette, while its surface, by the very nature of its fabrication, cunningly hides as much of itself as it reveals.

The melancholy ambiguity found in Rothschild's wolf images bleeds into her weavings of flowers. Floating in a dark expanse, their heightened colours and suggestion of a deep nothingness recall the heavy, sickly smells of funeral wreaths, or the morbidly beautiful arrangements of Victorian posies. Deliberately vague about their relationship to any single historical period, long paper fringes occasionally dangle from the bottom of the pictures like decorative details on a hippie coat. The lurid weaving lends them a home-spun, slightly vampiric air, as if they were made by a woman compelled to perform feminine duties, but bidding her time and forcing colours to spring from the gloom as symbols of endurance. Images weave in and out of stories and memories so tightly they become inseparable.

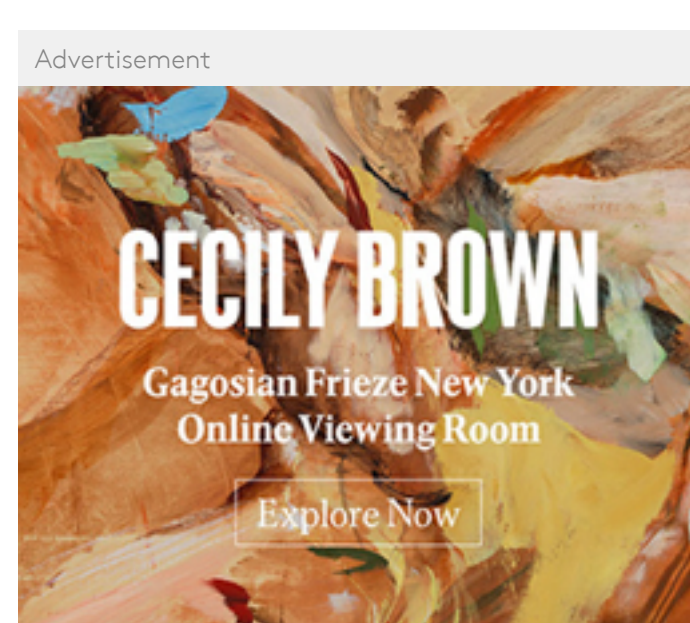
Rothschild's pictures are a little perplexing. They're surprisingly sad, in the same way fairy tales are sad - creepy, compelling and oddly moving - and as good to look at as an intricate carpet or an orchard in bloom. But there's also something present that refuses to state its business - perhaps an intimation of the restless, often fickle, way our tastes and interests shift with age. That we fling things aside to make way for new things may be how our culture works, but it's not necessarily the best way. Rothschild's recycling, not only of materials but of memories, is like trying to recall, and to understand, that which we assume we can easily forget. As a result - as with all recycling - the original is woven into the fabric of what it has now become, haunting the heart of it.

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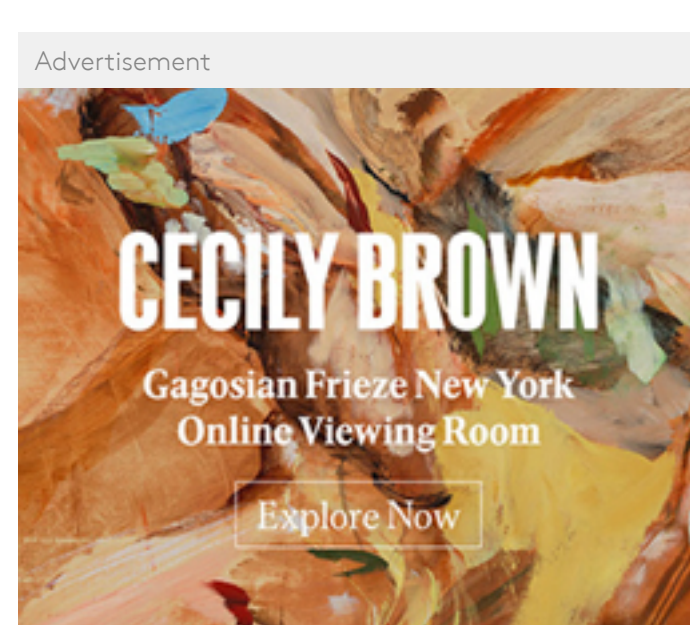
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