

I've always had a curiosity about where oral stories begin, why the traditions last, and why people believe in the things they do. At the ripe age of 18, I had my first ah-ha moment with fairy tales. When my freshman college roommate moved into our room, I sat with her as she unpacked her assorted and large collection of DVD's ranging from Peter Pan to Scooby Doo to the entire Barbie discography. Firstly, I was struck by her packing choices. This stranger that I was to live with for a year trugged boxes of physical DVDs a thousand miles. I couldn't understand why she didn't just watch the movies on one of the countless streaming services at her fingertips. When I asked her about it, she joyfully explained that she had been collecting DVDs since childhood and that she rewatches this archaic form of movie for nostalgia. This simple and sweet sentiment, a lingering of her childhood when fantasy consumed her world, was eye-opening for me. While I noticed her pull out her bedazzle pastel pink DVD player from time to time, the full impact on my awareness of my own childhood nostalgia did not click for quite some time. Fast forwarding a few years, the memory of my dear friend's joyous reaction to the opportunity to share her childhood nostalgia with me still rings strong, especially in consideration of these paintings. As I began the process of my thesis project, this memory continuously popped back up. Since then, I have, of course, had conversations with my peers about the effect of fairytale media on their lives. I noticed a through-line about the lasting childhood commonality; these fantastical stories, for better or worse, were informative to their childhood imagination and understanding of how to exist and behave in this world. Through this curiosity, my thesis project has taken me on a research and discovery journey.

My thesis examines the symbolic power of the fae figure, particularly within the context of the Tuatha Dé Danann, an ancient Irish myth, as a reflection of humanity's disconnection from the natural world. Focusing on the portrayal of women as synonymous with nature, the paintings explore how fairies, often marginalized and powerless in myths, embody societal views of women as insignificant, perpetuating misogyny. My project serves as a form of "practical fantasy," working through historical and contemporary notions of fairies in the modern Western world while providing a space for me to process my own experiences. There were many themes within fairy literature that I parced through, some including the relationship between fairies and children, fairies as agents of maternal protection, and fairies and war. However, I felt the most connected to the way the Western patriarchal structure, enforced by Christianity, has shaped and distorted these myths. Transformation within the myth and my work is a key theme; the capacity for transformation is inherently and necessarily female. While this sentiment invokes the familiar stereotype of women as essentially mutable and aligned with nature rather than culture, it also registers the deeply felt yearning to escape, if only for a moment, from a female social identity. Through the reinterpretation and reimagining of the myth, this work explores contemporary feminist anxieties and desires while addressing the long history of misogyny embedded in the figure of 'the fairy.'

The process of fully realizing this thesis concept was a slow and arduous one. This was not because of a lack of ideas but because of the profoundly uncomfortable process of self-reflection and discovery. I wanted my project to embody the whimsy and effervescent beauty of fairies, elements of transformation, and exploration of the female

experience. However, I was lost when it came down to my connection to the concept of fairies and fairy tales in general. I realized this after excitedly discussing my newfound hyperfixation on the aesthetics of fairies in art with friends and peers. This is where they would share their connections to fairies from their childhoods. Memories specific to the early 2000s like Tinker Bell, Bratz Pixiez, Pixie Hollow, and the Faeries' oracle graphic novels. In these moments, I quietly grieved the childhood commonality that these simple fairytale experiences represented. While a lack of exposure to fairy tales doesn't inherently harm a child's development, such omissions can sometimes reflect underlying issues. Fairy tales often serve as a medium for children to process complex emotions and experiences, and for me, their absence represents a broader childhood challenge. Though these conversations were eye-opening and slightly discouraging, I felt I could approach the vast concept of fairies from a fresh perspective, and I began exploring the subject matter without the bias of prior perception. It is important to recognize that many of us grew up with a more simplistic understanding of fairies, often shaped by co-opted Disney stories. Where cultural folklore is translated into a simplified, happily-ever-after trope for the province of children. However, there is a far more nuanced and complex understanding of these mythological beings. Traditionally, fairies are not one-dimensional creatures but multifaceted beings embodying a vast spectrum of behaviors—from nurturing to vengeful, from benevolent to perilous. What I missed growing up was a child's imagination inspired by tales of magical thinking, whimsy, joy, and magical powers. But I also missed the way it relegates the way women should look, behave, and even laugh; the cultural reinforcement of women's roles. So, with bright eyes and a bushy tale, I dove head first into researching contemporary and historical creative interpretations and stories of fairies. I found that fairies have been a

multicultural and widespread fascination for centuries. Sometimes, the fairies went by different names, such as fae or sidhe; some were depicted as cursed figures of evil or protectors of the natural world and infants. Many times, they were sexualized young women, often lounging nude on a flower or positioned as a willing participant for the salacious male gaze. Unfortunately, the latter interpretation is the most perpetuated stereotype of the fairy where they are often characterized as dim, ditsy, small, and powerless. This cultural perception was even more cemented when I began making monotypes and paintings depicting my early interpretation of fae. While I intended to explore my newfound fascination to reclaim childlike memories of the supernatural, I received rigorous criticism for my involuntary contribution to the male gaze. Though involuntary and unfortunate, in many ways, I couldn't disagree. This perspective was humbling and critical but necessary as I continued ideating this project. Through these early phases of this project, the discoveries I made about the Western perception of a fairy opened my eyes to the realities of unacknowledged misogyny. Where there is a well-documented female figure-esc group/genre/or stereotype, there is also a long history of de-personalized representations of misogyny in art history. Fae embody the infinite and long-standing effects of the patriarchy and its relationship to women. Women, like fae, are viewed as small, powerless, and often insignificant to their respective worlds. Even as a woman, taking on the marginalized subject of fae/fairies in my practice has prompted misogynistic reactions that are often subverted or coded remarks intended to make me and the work smaller. This is why I have made two 18-foot paintings where viewers must confront the work with their whole body.

In conversation, we use terms like fairy tales, mythology, and folklore interchangeably. Myth, in a grander sense, is more specific in explaining the world, the human experience, natural phenomena, and supernatural beings, and it is often rooted in spiritual beliefs. Myths reinforce cultural values and provide moral guidance. While folklore is the umbrella term that encompasses oral history for entertainment, focusing on traditional stories, beliefs, and practices. Myths and stories convey symbolic or fundamental truths, some specific to certain cultures and disputed by others, while others apply to all human thought. We use these stories to make sense of events, to put them in an order that aligns with our view of the world. A very different kind of truth to the evidential kind, and yet no less 'truthful'. The role of an artist when adopting myth is to reveal and clarify, so as the viewer can understand, empathize, or question.

Subjectivity in art is a universal experience, where objective truth can be a disguise.

My paintings are based on the mythos of the Tuatha Dé Danann, an immortal and divine race that occupies a unique and revered space within the annals of our ancient lore.

Since my initial proposal, where I explored 'the fairy' as a broad concept, I have found it important to focus on a specific fairy culture. This led me to the Tuatha Dé Danann, one of the original fairy myths dating back to 600 AD. The myth represents the tension between reality and fantasy, reflecting both the powers of a woman and the limiting social structures that confine her. This celestial haven, a utopia untarnished by human strife, wild and untamed, is a mirror held up to our world, inviting us to confront the frailties and injustices that plague our society. I find that utopia and myth can be one and the same. The beliefs of a system or myth allow you to view the world in an alternate light.

The feminist British writer, Angela Carter, rewrote and reclaimed many fairy tale narratives and opposed fairy tales as a cultural construct that reinforces the patriarchal values of the societies from which they originated. Carter intended for her work to turn the tables for the role of women in fairy tales and mythology by giving women in these stories the power to challenge and reclaim circumstances set by the patriarchy. In Carter's words, "*The historical and cultural contexts in which these stories were created reflect the societal anxieties, fears, and power structures of their time—structures that often sought to suppress women and demonize the "other."* By examining these tales critically, we can better understand how they shape our perceptions and, perhaps more importantly, how we might reimagine them in ways that challenge outdated notions of power, gender, and identity."

The sidhe, or fairy spirits, are powerful beings who influence both nature and human lives. Fae represent what is hidden when you are in nature; they are what's hidden in the openness of mystery, obscurity, and magic. Unlike passive figures, these fae women are active agents of change, their power rooted in nature, intuition, and magic—traits often undervalued as feminine. In Celtic folklore, the Tuatha Dé Danann and other fae exist beyond human societal norms, free from oppressive rules. Often tricksters or rebels, they challenge conformity by, symbolizing resistance against societal hierarchy and control.

Their realm, accessible only through sacred fairy stones—ancient rings of rock entwined in thickets and lush foliage—symbolizes a world where beauty, divinity, and untamed

freedom intertwine. The Tuatha Dé Danann are not mere creatures of idyllic beauty; they are symbols of change, growth, and defiance, challenging societal norms and embodying transformation in the face of resistance. Their presence signifies the eternal cycle of metamorphosis—both a rebellion against conformity and a celebration of individual transcendence.

Yet, these sidhe are equally known for their capricious nature—stealthy and often deceitful, capable of altering human destinies with a mere whisper. Feared by mortal communities yet simultaneously venerated, they wield powers that could bless or curse with equal measure. Warriors, dancers, artists, and survivors, their influence over human lives is profound. The myth of the Tuatha de, rife with tales of thievery and illusion, was woven into the fabric of human existence, serving both as omens of ill fortune and portents of harmony.

The essence of the Tuatha de predates the misogyny and patriarchal values of Christian influence. The fairies' oral tradition relied heavily on mystery and the imagination. They are spirits that existed between time, and they understood the secrets of birth, life, and death.

When Christianity arrived in Ireland, it merged traditional supernatural beliefs with dogma that controlled women's bodies, leading to the demonization of the fae as the desire to control women and the fear of the feminine body became intertwined.

This transformation recast once-exalted divine beings as fallen angels, exiled from the celestial order due to their pride and sin. This theological reframing shifted the mythos

of these ancient figures. This shift parallels a more insidious cultural change—the suppression of feminine power.

Just as the Tuatha Dé Danann were redefined and marginalized, so too was feminine agency suppressed in the face of rising patriarchal control. The reframing of the fae mirrors the broader historical erosion of feminine strength and autonomy—a cultural shift that echoes throughout the centuries. The erasure and redefinition of their stories reflect a world striving to control, tame, and silence that which is wild, transformative, and inherently powerful.

In the modern age, the Tuatha Dé Danann poignantly reminds us of our lost connection to the natural world, a world of untamed beauty and mystery that we have long neglected.

Part of my fascination with these rich, fantastical stories lies in their enduring appeal to humans across history and cultures. People have long turned to the supernatural for moral guidance in the face of existential struggles. Spirituality serves as a guide to solving ethical dilemmas, while myth provides the tradition that supports these solutions. In myth, the boundaries between humans and nature are fluid, like the connections between the spiritual and the earthly realms. As a devout atheist, the psychology of the human craving for existential answers and man's fabrication of the moral truth is beyond fascinating. This myth is where and why I have looked to the roots and moral elements of myth and its perpetuation throughout history. As I explored 'the myth as allegory', I looked to historical and contemporary artists that worked to explain the myth as religion, critiques of belief, and physical embodiments of the unseen and

unknown. Kiki Smith was one of these inspirational artists in the way she handles myth and religion in her multidisciplinary work. Her work addresses themes of sex, birth, and regeneration while embodying different spiritual elements and belief systems. Smith's perspective underscores art's role in expressing and preserving spiritual narratives, highlighting its capacity to bridge the tangible and intangible aspects of human experience. She explains the historically codependent relationship of art and spirituality: her work is based in storytelling and the reiteration of mythological and religious iconography as proof for how art can transcend and transmigrate the representation of the spiritual world. Similarly, I was inspired by Joan Jonas, a prolific performance and visual artist who reimagines fairy tales and mythology. Rather than simply illustrating stories, she uses them as fluid, living frameworks to explore identity, memory, gender, and perception—deconstructing and layering them into her performance, video, and installation work.

My studio practice has always involved intuitive experimentation, play, change, and failures. I find a deep satisfaction in trying different materials, subject matters, and methods of art making. Beyond painting, I have a practice with mixed-media collages, drawing, and printmaking. I view my non-painting art practice as a supportive element in ideation, an outlet from being stuck next to an easel, and a break to keep me motivated to paint. For my thesis, I considered including all these mediums. However, ultimately, to connect to the work and concept, I decided I needed to paint for this project. Painting is where I feel the most myself.

After my thesis proposal, I immersed myself in a whirlwind of studies. I spent weeks experimenting, producing dozens of monotypes and paintings that would become the heart of my ideation. The monotype process, in particular, was an incredibly tactile experience—one that allowed me to push my understanding of composition and materiality. There is opportunity for an immediate, spontaneous quality that is raw and ephemeral. These monotypes offered a fluid exploration of form and space, something I wanted to continue exploring in my paintings.

At the same time, I studied Greco-Roman sculptures and other iconic works to explore composition, remixing classical elements to create something new while honoring tradition. My goal was to transform these forms in personal, contemporary ways rather than simply replicate them. I focused on historical depictions of the female form, particularly in relation to male figures in Greco-Roman, Renaissance, and Neoclassical sculpture. My paintings reference these sculptures, attempting to reclaim the social implications of these historical works. I observed how female figures were often passive, posed in ways that suggest submission, while male figures were depicted as dominant. In response, I reimagined these feminine forms, turning them into active agents of power. This process of collecting, analyzing, and transforming these works was key to shaping my compositions and narrative.

Once I started solidifying my concept for the composition, I found myself drawn to the culturally rich reference of a frieze—a continuous band of narrative running across a surface. This reference felt timeless and sculptural, aligned with my ambition for the work's visual language. The frieze historically served as a decorative documentation of events, as well as religious iconography. The frieze as an art form was inherently

narrative, integral to storytelling, and the communication of mythological tales that shaped the social and political consciousness. These frieze-esc paintings act as a bridge between the past and the present, transforming the ancient symbols, embodiment of virtues, and structure for understanding the ancient and modern world. So, I began sketching. Page after page of studies, drawings, and compositional experiments flooded my studio. After weeks of refining my ideas, I scaled up my compositions, transferring small sketches to large rolls of butcher paper. This allowed me to physically adjust the figures, shifting their positions until I found the right balance. It was a process of trial and error, guided by instinct and a focus on composition.

Once I transferred the design to the canvas with charcoal, I began painting, starting with washes to build depth and atmosphere. The process was meditative, as I responded intuitively to the surface and allowed the painting to guide me. I worked slowly and deliberately, paying attention to the materials and the space between marks, drawing from historical art-making techniques.

Throughout this process, I found myself deeply immersed in past traditions while allowing my voice to emerge through intuition and experience. Each layer of paint, each movement of my hand, was an ongoing dialogue with history—a meditation on how art evolves, how it speaks across time, and how it continues to be reinterpreted through the individual artist's lens.

I titled this painting installation *May Day* to play on the double entendre.

"Mayday," often used as a distress signal in aviation, evokes urgency and crisis. This is a nod to the exterior painting, which reflects a sky-like setting that serves as a key element in the piece's narrative. The Irish festival of Beltane, celebrated on May 1st or May Day, which happens to be my and my twin sister's birthdays, marks the beginning of summer and a time of renewal, transformation, and the connection between the natural world and human rituals. May Day gatherings often include ritual offerings to reconnect with the local spirits and fairies. This celebration, frequently enigmatic with feminine energy, honors the cycles of the land with dance, sharing of food and flowers, and positive change. May Day is a symbol of the vibrant, pre-Christian culture that was later suppressed by its rigid patriarchal structure. This dual meaning also parallels the current social struggles facing women, drawing a connection to the fading power and relevance of these once-dominant female deities.

The installation of this canvas was decided in unison with the composition. The curve to the canvas has always been a critical element to the overall narrative. This is because it references the wholeness of a circle, the circle being a strong shape in both architecture and nature. The absence of the rest of the circle references the incompleteness of history, my own journey as a young woman, and the long process of healing inner trauma, and elements to the myth that are still untold. The shape of a circle within this myth references the 'fairy ring' portal where the spirits can enter and exit their home in the outer world. The Tuatha Dé Danann's realm, accessible through sacred fae stones, symbolizes a world where beauty, divinity, and untamed freedom intertwine. These beings embody change, growth, and transformation, challenging societal norms and

embracing individual transcendence. I can not claim to hold the entire myth, especially not in two paintings, so I must make space for more.

While the two paintings exist on one matrix, the moment in time that they represent is separate—both in the physicality of the pieces and within the narrative of the work. One can not witness both paintings simultaneously. This, in turn, challenges us to connect and parse out our memories of the other side, dividing but also lingering on our notions.

From the outset of this project, I've found myself gravitating toward representations of the body within my mythological and personal narrative, rather than the overt supernatural elements prevalent in the oral traditions. This inclination is complex, rooted in factors that may elude full articulation at this stage of my artistic practice. My art practice has always incorporated the body in some way, particularly the feminine form, for a vessel of communication, transformation, and power. Especially the feminine form as a historically charged conversation about gender and politics. While the mystery of supernatural magic has been pertinent throughout this project's exploration of myth, the embodiment both in the physicality and conceptuality of a marginalized experience had to be the emphasis. The compositions of the paintings where the connectivity between the figures triumphs, is a moment scarcely seen within, Western culture. The emphasis of the body in this depiction of an obscure Irish myth is an entry point for a heavily subjective spiritual subject matter.

Narratively, the pieces are connected by their myth, their purpose, their artist, and their viewer. The interior painting, in an embrace of the viewer, invites the viewers to imagine

themselves in a harmonious world. Perhaps this world is ordinarily unattainable, a mimic of the natural world's terra firma, or maybe it can belong alongside us as we are grounded in the exact moment. This is where I have given space for the myth to exist as a manifestation of my own desires, my imagination, and womanhood to exist together. This is where I have depicted an idealized past and hopeful future. At the core of this painting lies a transformation of practical fantasy: a vision of a matriarchal community, a moment of harmony, and a fully realized myth that encapsulates the female experience.

Each element was considered within the scope of the historical, cultural, and personal context. The basis for the interior painting is the recognition of the pre-Christian understanding of the myth. Brought to life by my imagination and the re-grounding of the myth into the 'Now'. I focused the composition around the 'everyday' existence for the sidhe, where they lived in a harmonious matriarchal community as protectors of the land. In the oral tradition, this mundanity of the everyday describes their dancing, diet, magical roles, and power. According to the myth, the sidhe held the power to transform everyday materials into animals. I have depicted three figures weaving straw into a double-headed horse. The horse is a rich symbol of strength, power, and transformation within both Christianity and Paganism. Another poignant element to the 'every day' is the diet, connecting nature and symbolic healing elements. Their diet consists of food imbued with mystical properties, reflecting their deep bond with the natural world. The paintings reference a land flowing with milk and honey, bees coexisting with the figures, poppy bulbs leaking milk, and flowers ripe with sweet nectar. Honey symbolizes life and

vitality. Poppy milk, sleep, and death together encompass the spectrum of human experience.

The exterior painting's symbolism depicts what I refer to as the 'purgatory for the sidhe.' The figures engage with unwavering determination, embodying a steadfast commitment to the myth, facing formidable odds, and confronting their fate resolutely. The animals in this painting are multifaceted emblems of spirituality. The hybrid swan represents transformation, both in its physical nature and the evolution of the myth. Swans are linked to many cultural associations as shape-shifters and emblems of grace, love, and divinity. In Celtic tradition, swans are sacred and symbolize careful, calculated movement and emotional transformation. The doves, iconic symbols of the Christian Holy Spirit and messengers of the divine, are particularly significant in this painting, where they are depicted as aggressors in a violent scene. Within the story, the bat serves on the side of the sidhe as a defender against the aggressors. Within Christianity, bats are called 'the bird of the devil' and are associated with darkness and obscurity. Bees are scattered throughout the painting as an ode and connecting point to the other side. The lightness in this painting is symbolic of heaven and the sky, as the religious colonial agenda attempted to transform the traditional notion of the sidhe as earthly protectors into fallen angels from heaven, cast away by pride and sin.

While the historical relevance of symbolism within the paintings is essential, each element also reflects personal experiences from my own life. The three consulting figures beside the horse represent my sisters and me, illustrating the evolution of our relationship, our shared childhood experience, and the journey of uniting together as

individual young women in adulthood despite our childhood trials and tribulations. The reconciliation has involved healing the wound of competitive conflict and reshaping our understanding of societal expectations of women. Ultimately, this forces the three of us to decenter ourselves to heal together, mirroring the collective ethos exemplified by the Tuatha de Dannan. The shared narrative emphasizes unity, resilience, and transformation by illustrating a moment of collaboration. The effervescent camaraderie and connection between the figures on the outside painting is the embodiment of the profound impact of collective effort among women. On the other side of the painting, I have woven other layers of personal symbolism: blossoming flowers that correspond to powerful women in my life and a lifeless dove that bridges both paintings, symbolizing the departure of patriarchal Christian influence from the narrative. The deceased dove serves as a poignant marker of the defiant transformation of doves as emblems of peace and the holy spirit. The presence of the domesticated cat reflects the Irish association of cats as protectors and a connecting spirit to the supernatural. And more trivially, if you know me, you know I HAD to include my cat.

In the end, these paintings became a manifestation of all the research, experimentation, patience, and deep respect for historical methods of making. It is both a tribute to the past and a reimagining of what is possible in my contemporary practice, a space where history and intuition collide. Fae represent the loss of our connection to the natural world because of human degradation, consequences of colonization, and the ever-lasting effects of the patriarchy. Despite this, the ethos of the myth encourages us to evade the weight, the inertia, and the opacity of the world. Though these paintings are a

representation of this message, ultimately, what I have gleaned from working with fae mythology is that we, not it, are the real subjects.

As I close out my speech, I would like to thank my mentor, Michelle Ross, for her unwavering support throughout this semester and really all of my time here at PNCA. Your passion for art is infectious and felt throughout the entire student body. I could not have accomplished this ambitious project without it. I would also like to thank my partner, Jeremy, for keeping me grounded with my weekly thesis-imposed stress panics and for taking on all of the cooking and cleaning for the past semester. I also want to thank all of my friends and family for your support and for patiently letting me rant about my paintings whenever I needed. Lastly, thank you, everyone, for showing up this morning and taking time out of your busy lives to join my thesis defense.