

i

The first time I ever saw a ghost I was ten or eleven. I was lying in bed with my sister. She slipped into my room saying she was afraid. I was grumpy and rolled away from her. In hindsight this was potentially quite cruel, but if you have younger siblings then perhaps you might understand my response. We lived in a very old angular and creaky house, opposite some showgrounds. Inside the roof, around the verandah was a possum whaanau, whose abhorrent noises while in heat still make me shiver to remember. It was not uncommon for there to be bumps in the night. I started to fall asleep and woke up at some point, because the room was very cold. I turned over and a woman with a very harsh face stared at me. Her body was grey and she hovered over me. She looked older than maybe she might have been and she was dressed like a Victorian servant. My sister and I screamed and when my parents turned the light on there was nothing there.

ii

Our bodies are all stuffed together, packed in like sardines, pressed up body to body, faces on the glass. We smell each other. It's that smell of bodies pressed together, the sweat, damp carpet, metal, and pheromones. Noses and bodies circumvent on top of each other. Moments in the dark I hear only the seagulls squawk and fight over a carcass. I feel breath resting against my neck, encircling around my body are drinks, giant rats baring their teeth, pinstripe suits, bare legs, stockings, hair, noses, cunts.

iii

When the narrator, an unnamed teenage boy in Bataille's *L'histoire de l'œil* first meets Simone, she stands over a bowl of milk, hikes up her skirt and lowers herself down to give her "pussy" a drink. Later on in the novella she uses her "pussy" to hold boiled eggs. One of the problems I have always had with *L'histoire de l'œil* is that the male narrator is anonymous and Simone exists as a male fantasy, who joins him without question in realising his most violent and disturbing sexual desires. The problem is that Simone is one dimensional, so she has no mauri or substance or anything that draws on you to feel anything for her besides disgust or contempt. She's as sex crazed as Sada Abe who in 1936 accidentally killed her lover via erotic asphyxiation, and then cut off his penis and testicles and carried them around with her in her kimono.

In Édouard Manet's infamous painting, *A bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) we see a barmaid front and centre and a representation of the bustling interior of one of the most prominent music halls and cabarets in Paris, the Folies-Bergère. The barmaid is named Suzon, and she did actually work at the Folies-Bergère and had sat as a model for Manet for *A bar at the Folies-Bergère*, which became his last major artwork. The Folies-Bergère was known as a place to meet sex workers. The writer Guy de Maupassant described the barmaids as "vendors of drink and of love". When it was first exhibited in Paris many critics found the composition unsettling. It is often still debated, because of the inaccuracy of the barmaid's reflection, which is shifted too far to the left. The other thing that is often noted about this painting is Suzon's expression and it being described as unjoyful or as though she's dead eyed. In art historical analysis Suzon has largely been denied the right to opacity and of

having any agency. I still believe that Suzon was probably just bored and thinking about what bills she needed to pay and how so many of the clientele were drunk, entitled assholes.

iv

In Priscilla Howe's drawings, her figures and their bodies intersect in claustrophobic ways, but they always retain their agency and fluidity. The gaze of each figure reveals a range of inflections like anger, disgust, lust, nervousness, despair and boredom. Each scene is engulfed by bodies, or houses, that could be jarring, but they swirl like water going down the drain, or are warped like the lighthouse in the opening credits for *Round the Twist*. While looking at Priscilla's drawings I thought about Diego Velázquez 1665 painting *Las Meninas* and imagined the skin of the figures curtsying around Infanta Margaret Theresa reaching off and out with their claws outstretched. I imagined it as a nightmare scene, where Margaret Theresa doesn't panic, but rather has a tantrum annoying all of the demon courtesans encircling her, so they decide to cook her.

In the worlds that Priscilla creates the eyes of each figure demands opacity and complication. They perform as a resistance to objectification, as a means to escape from subjection.¹ They look directly at you, then you realise there are many eyes on you like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. Their bodies twist and roll. They seem otherworldly, existing within a world beyond ours. A word you could perhaps use to describe it might be uncanny. But what is the uncanny exactly? Well, according to the Macmillan dictionary, the etymology of the word Uncanny "...has its origins in a word used in northern and Scottish English: 'canny' meaning smart or careful, preceded by the prefix 'un' which means 'not'." It has been used since the 19th century as a way of describing something that feels strange, or unusual or mysterious. It may refer to something supernatural or frightening, but it could also be something as mundane as a resemblance to a filmstar, in what Sigmund Freud referred to as a 'double' in his 1919 essay, *The Uncanny*. There is something familiar and mundane in many of the scenes drawn by Priscilla and yet it's also unnerving and forces you to scour the pictorial plane in search of alleviating your anxieties. When you are forced to do this you realise that while you might feel like what you are seeing is strange or scary, and you might question whether these figures might haunt or devour you, that you can sit with these discomforts. These subversions of reality are perhaps already enmeshed in our lives, we just don't notice it.

v

Priscilla and I often talk about how being around children is a way of unlearning the way we make art. This is because when we hang out with children we are reminded of other ways of making that are fluid, organic and based solely on thinking through making and learning through making. In Priscilla's drawings, her use of pencil recalls that of childhood, and each work has a child-like quality, which belies its deliberate lines. Conjuring fantastical worlds, Priscilla displaces all reduction of the self, by imagining new ontologies and environments in which queer bodies can coexist, converge and weave fabrics of meaning², that are free from

¹ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (USA: Duke University Press, 2017), vii.

² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of relation.*, trans. Betsy Wing (Chicago: University of Michigan, 1997), 190.

or blatantly reject a heteropatriarchal gaze. There is no gender. Bodies act as sites of union, of the physical and material structure of all living beings. Bodies, like those depicted in Priscilla's exist in multitudes as they are deliberately "... claim[ing] that our bodies are in a sense *our own* and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies."³ They are revealed, splayed out in public spaces, exercising the right to the city, along with their familiars in the form of rats, cats and seagulls. They both reveal and conceal themselves, with a kind of self awareness and deliberate ambiguity. In these scenes the supernatural exists in the everyday and as a phenomenology provides an inherently queer, indefiable, seductive and unnerving set of scenes that recalls film stills. Priscilla treats drawing much like the creation of worlds we see in film and television. For me Priscilla conjures the unease of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, Anjelica Huston removing her wig as the Grand High Witch in *The Witches*, Lady Divine eating puke with her Cavalcade of Perversion in *Multiple Maniacs* and the parody and pastiche inherent within the films of David Lynch.

vi

I recently watched my cat fail to catch a rat and couldn't help but be impressed by the rat's resourcefulness. I thought about kiore, the pacific rats brought to Aotearoa with my Tuupuna. These creatures were said to descend from Hinemataiti, who stole kumara from her mother Pani. Kiore are considered pests by the Department of Conservation, but Ngaai Tai ki Tamaki consider themselves to be kaitiaki of these rats, because of their whakapapa relation to Maaori. In Priscilla's drawings there's an affinity with and appreciation of animals considered pests, particularly rats, but also seagulls. When I was with Priscilla recently, my friend Matt noted that the reason seagulls circle around in the centre of Ootepoti is not simply because it's by the ocean, but because the shoreline used to be in the Octagon. For me Priscilla's work imagines spaces for refuge, freedom and for the magical and unusual. Free from the categories and binaries that we fight to disseminate, we can run naked, cause trouble and drown our sorrows in drink alongside kiore and the displaced seagulls.

³ Sayak Valencia quoting Judith Butler in *Gore Capitalism* (Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e) Intervention series, 2018), 291.