



SHELLEY HAKONSON
PERPETUAL CURIOSITIES:
A 30-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

Scenes From A Riotous Imagination

“So go to your quarters now, and attend to your own duties at loom and spindle, and order your maids about their tasks: let men worry about such things, and I especially, since I hold the authority in this house.”

—Telemachus to Penelope, *The Odyssey*

“In my quest for the truth, I was even struggling against Frida herself, who seems to have wanted to invent her own biography, to plot her own myth and legend.”

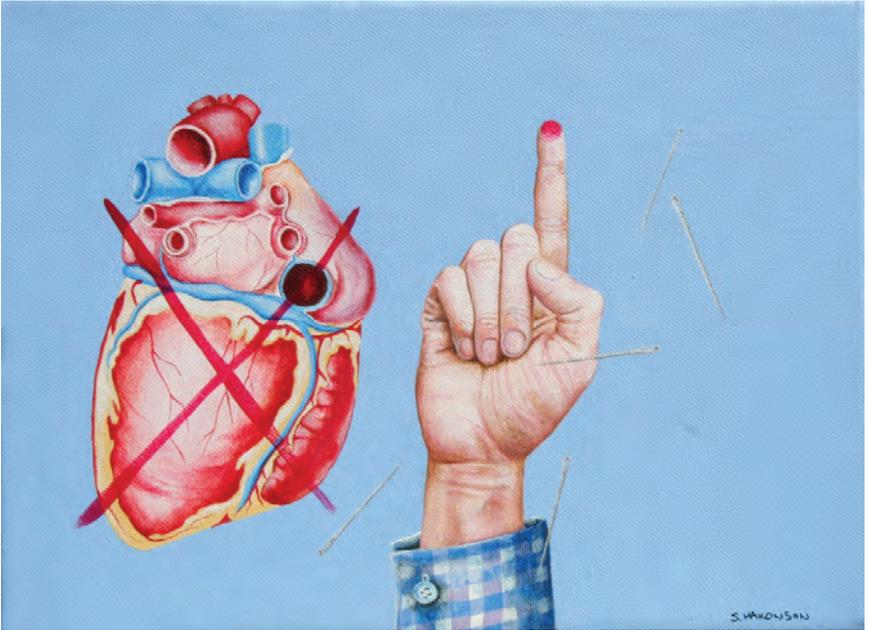
—Martha Zamora, from *Frida Kahlo: the Brush of Anguish*

When viewing Shelley Hakonson’s *Perpetual Curiosities: A 30-Year Retrospective*, it’s hard to resist using the works to form a conclusive narrative around the artist. The oldest piece from the exhibit—a denim coat that Hakonson began to embellish with sequins and beadwork in 1968—is neatly bookended with the newest, a technicolour silk-fiber dress held together by brass safety pins. In between, we see a riot of ideas and imagination, rendered with paint on canvas, resin and wax on wood, wire around paper, and just about every other material Hakonson has been able to get her hands on in the past three decades.

Who wouldn’t want to conclude that the wearer of the jacket and the dress were the same woman at different points in a life, and the works in between the footprints of her movement through the world? But the viewer must resist. While the jacket was indeed once worn by a 16-year-old Hakonson, the dress belongs to one Madam Zoom, the nickname for Xhuzune Firenze Corbett, a Gold Rush-era inhabitant of Dawson City who reportedly sought to sew a dress with pure gold thread. When her plans were thwarted by a lack of available materials, an undaunted Madam Zoom gathered all the brass pins in town and fashioned them into a reasonable facsimile of the seams from her imagination.

Starting with the captivating image of a young woman in the 1960s remaking her own image in denim and beadwork, *Perpetual Curiosities* brings us through Hakonson’s bold experiments in subverting conventional narratives.

In *Tattered Remnant* (1999, mixed media), we are invited to suppose that we are looking at the remains of a garment that once belonged to Ngawang Lozang Gyatso, the Dalai Lama from 1617-1682. A text accompanying the work explains that this fragment of history was found in a crumbling wooden reliquary in a disused storeroom of the Potala Palace, Lhasa. The viewer is a magpie, and the glossy beads lashed to the jewel-toned silk shine seductively under a glass case. We are hungry for narrative; it’s not hard to see why we so easily swallow myths.



With that context in place, it's easy to follow along into Hakonson's explorations of religious iconography and mythology across vast sections of time and geography. The fabled pre-Amazonian Scythians are here in *Royal Daughter* (bloodthirsty and waiting to be conquered), as is Lilith, the all-but-forgotten first wife of Adam (still sowing her revenge by inflicting miscarriages on pregnant women). *Kumari* depicts the Living Goddesses of Nepal—prepubescent girls taken from their families and worshipped as the manifestations of divine female energy.

In many works, Hakonson, a self-identified atheist, focuses on the effect of religion and mythology on the lives of real women and girls. The female deities on offer here are deeply flawed and accordingly punished. What unites the *Kumari* (2006), the *Royal Daughter* (2002), *Lilith* (2005), the courtesan of *Drowning* (2004) and the Greek Goddess *Demeter* (2009) is each subject's capacity to be tamed and possessed; to suffer for the sin of seeking control.

Perpetual Curiosities offers lighter work too. The witty *Zoomorphics* (2011) series transposes a Dorothy Parkeresque spin on human neuroses onto animals, and the *Hearts Series* (2010) takes well-worn idioms starring the human heart to their absurd conclusions. Certainly these works are less confrontational than Hakonson's explorations of religion and women, but they still present pointed questions. The slew of visualized heart-centric expressions ask, why exactly is the heart still seen as the compass of the human journey? And the neurotic lizards and cocksure fowl of the *Zoomorphics* scoff when we take it all so seriously.

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Certainly Hakonson presents an argument for serious study. But she also offers her audience a narrative journey: we begin weaving our own story as a means of attiring ourselves, and along the way we learn what we can and cannot accept as part of our own story. We learn what sets us on fire and what extinguishes us, and finally, we learn what parts of our heartache we can bear to laugh off.

By the time we're standing with Madam Zoom, we arrive at what we hope is another pivot point in Hakonson's journey of perpetual exploration. Put on your best clothes and sally forth into your own story. And who needs gold when you've got the brass to make it up?

— Elaine Corden ©2016

Elaine Corden is a Dawson-based writer currently pursuing her MFA at the University of British Columbia.

SHELLEY HAKONSON

Shelley is a mixed-media artist who lives and works in Dawson City, Yukon, working with acrylics, papers, fabric, metal, found objects and many sculptural mediums.

Symbolism and surrealism are the foundation of Shelley's art and the starting point of her pieces. Research constitutes a significant part of her process; obscure practices and traditions which are no longer part of our knowledge are the catalyst for her work. Women often play a key role in her works and she uses her art to explore women's topics that concern her.

Shelley's formal instruction is modest; she studied art throughout her high school years and had a year of training at Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland, in 2000, but for the most part has learned by her own efforts.

Shelley's art varies through time, the mediums and topics change, the styles evolve, but what remains constant is her fascination with our obscure human history and the small hidden, sometimes surprising stories to be found.

Images:

Cover: "Lucille's chameleon-like behavior mystified her friends, she was never the same way twice." (2011, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 18") Zoomorphics Series

Inside: "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye." (2012, acrylic on canvas, 9" x 12") Heart Series

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