



THE BIRD GAME

By Marianna Simnett (co-written by Charlie Fox)
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"Welcome to my nest. It's full of treats and secrets," intones a haggard crow (Joanne Whalley) to six young children as she leads them through the gaping door of Waddesdon Manor. She has just convinced them to play her game, after promising the prize: to never sleep again. What follows is a nightmare-like horror in which each child is gruesomely killed off in a series of violent sexualized games that reference fairy tales and myth. Adorned with botched, Disney-esque prince and princess costumes and set against the backdrop of plush interiors one immediately feels that they are suspended in a time and place far, far away.

The confluence of these various elements come together in Marianna Simnett's most recent film *The Bird Game* (2019, 20 mins.) co-written by Charlie Fox and commissioned by the Rothschild Foundation for the anniversary of the Evelina's Children Hospital. Unlike Simnett's other recent films (*Blood and Roses*, *The Udder*, *The Needle and The Larynx*) the plane of activation in *The Bird Game* is not the corporal body, but the psyche. Marianna weaves together a sort of hero's journey of horror replete with archetypal imagery, fantasy and violence that

with every convolution leads us deeper into a modern fable of abuse, trauma and ultimately transformation. Exactly whose transformation and in what sense may remain unclear, but given the contemporary nature of this fable and Simnett's parasitic prowess at implanting something unnameable but visceral in her viewers, it might just be us.

As the camera takes us down lush, red carpeted mahogany hallways and through neo-renaissance style ballrooms and boudoirs, we feel increasingly that we are a part of this nightmare. Camera angles alternate between the perspectives of the different characters throughout, creating a sense that you are seeing what they see. This also allows for a third perspective to emerge, which is neither Crow looking at the children or the children looking at Crow, but a silent observer privy to their secrets. From this perspective we hear voice overs that are not heard by other characters: Crow admitting her lustful urges for the young princess as she twirls blindfolded in the ballroom seemingly under a spell, or the children fantasizing about what they would do when they never have to sleep again. This perspective clarifies



ABOVE AND PREVIOUS PAGE Marianna Simnett, *The Bird Game* (2019). Courtesy the artist, FVU, the Rothschild Foundation and Frans Hals Museum.

the inner world of each character thereby intensifying the tension between them and the opposing forces they portray: innocence and evil, young and old, pure and defiled, real and not real. As the tension builds so does our awareness of how, and why, all these actions and characters are part of a larger narrative.

The sequencing of these scenes unfolds a sense of architecture and visual language that builds throughout this gruesome narrative. Like the levels in a video game or the rings of hell Dante navigates, each scenario is more explicit than the last and the styling more resplendent. After leading the children upwards through the building between the first two scenes, the final instance shows the last two children walking down a dimmed hallway to a large door, indicating that they are no longer climbing, but have arrived. Similarly, the children's costumes become subtly more embellished with bows and fake jewelry as the story progresses, signaling their entanglement in this nightmare and the slow erasure of boundaries between reality and fantasy. It is not a surprise that the main inspiration for the film was that birds do not sleep but enter a REM state while awake, solidifying their unique status as being able to travel between worlds. For this reason, and perhaps their mischievous nature, crows are traditionally characterized as either messengers or therianthropes of evil. "Sometimes Death whispers in my ear, and makes me do his work. We infect your dreams. We move your brain, down to the darkest, deepest parts."

But in the same way that Crow gets into the brains of these children, Simnett affects us as our expectations are artfully subverted around each turn. Evil birds like Crow usually represent male characters that prey upon young women. In this story, we learn that the Crow similarly preys on young women but being a woman herself, she not only transgresses gender roles but also expectations surrounding her sexuality. In the final scene before giving the young princess her prize, Crow confesses her story. We learn that she "was once a pretty girl like [her]" who was turned into a crow by a witch to save her from "a hungry boy." Through this confession Crow is humanized and gains a new status not only as abuser, but abused. Muddling these binaries suddenly opens up the possibility that this game is not as simple as we thought. Rather, Crow is perhaps a victim of a much larger entanglement of trauma and abuse whose roots are in the very biases Simnett sets us up to commit to the various characters in this film: Goodness, Beauty, Innocence, Strength, Evil, etc. As Simnett suggests in her press release: "Crow says we're all sick, every one of us . . . In *The Bird Game*, rules can change at any moment. There is no stable ground to stand on. And so the only thing to do is stay alert, embrace the strangeness and fly into the flame."

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