

Zoe Hawk *Curiouser and Curiouser* reviewed by Tracey O'Shaughnessey in Republican-American December 21, 2021

Plunged into the turmoil of adolescence, girls can turn alternately tender, compassionate and devoted; and vicious, vindictive and vengeful.

Zoe Hawk's blisteringly vivid paintings, at the Jennifer Terzian Gallery in Litchfield, illustrate all of these subtle brutalities in colors so dazzling that they seem to have been painted with an exclamation point.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Zoe Hawk, "Curiouser and Curiouser"

WHERE: Jennifer Terzian Gallery, 3 South St., Litchfield

WHEN: through Jan. 8

HOW: visit jenniferterziangallery.com or call for an appointment at 714-932-5497

To single out teenage girls for proclivities of treachery is not to absolve boys. But Hawk's vision is female-specific and the narratives she weaves, through color, position, expression and juxtaposition, are of a confused, lonely and hurtful bunch of otherwise lovely young ladies, all cavorting together and all deeply alone.

Hawk draws not exclusively but often from fairy tales about young girls in which the fair maidens do not fare particularly well. They are as often victims as victimizers, their cool countenance subtly inflected with menace.

Ostensibly what Terzian has assembled in her delightful gallery are paintings of girlhood pleasures – jumping rope, dancing, hiking, a distaff sojourn on a placid lake.

But there is something sinister in all of these images, which Hawk achieves largely through vegetation so sinuous that it seems anthropomorphic. That largely stems from Hawk's dedication to vintage fairy tales in which the world is encircled by poisonous trees and serpentine trees that look intent on choking passers-by.

What is missing in all of these works is consolation. It's not so much that the girls seem the spiteful, catty lasses of "Mean Girls." It's that in their own confusion and wariness, they are devoid of empathy. The lack of it – on their vacant faces – lends an ominous power to these works. In the midst of cruelty and intimidation, one's best defense appears to be callousness. In "Two Sisters (Murder Ballad No. 2)", two blondes in white dresses and black Mary Jane shoes paddle across a placid lake. On the small island behind them, one girl in black collects logs, another, also in black, stares into the deep and another, again in black, plays the violin.

None of them look at one another. All seem lost in their own world. The two sisters seem less loving than worried (one) and treacherous (the other.)

This beautifully composed scene is an inversion of serenity. Hawk is drawing from a 17th century ballad in which an older sister, churning with sexual jealousy, drowns her younger sister. When the body shows up, someone makes the corpse into a musical instrument, which sings the murderous tale.

Hawk dives deep into the past and surfaces in a present that is still clothed in yesterday's fashions. It is as if teenage girls are not so much encumbered by one another, as by the heavy cloak of the past. Hawk's girls are typically clothed in knee-length skirts of vibrant hues of turquoise and lemon yellow, lime green and cantaloupe orange. They wear white blouses with peter pan collars and Mary Jane shoes. These are girls plucked out of another era whose envy, bullying, malice are neither new nor tempered.

Among her most challenging works is "Sally Cry," in which seven girls stand against a schoolyard black top and stare balefully at a girl collapsed in tears in the middle of them. None of the seven move. All of them are painted in blithe, Necco-wafer pastels. But Hawk has made careful notes of their shadows, looming insolently around them.

It's a painful image, made moreso by the expressions on the tormentors' faces, which range from placidity to apathy, a reminder of Elie Wiesel's remark that "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

A palpable sense of existential angst pervades these images. These girls – whether on a night hike or twirling playfully on a school ground or spending an afternoon in a park – do not make eye contact. They are as zombie-like as the radium-infected workers in "Glow in The Dark."

A beautiful scene like "Late Afternoon" features three girls sitting on a black-and-red blanket on a lush verdant field that Hawk has articulated with expressive moss, jade, hunter and olive greens. The girls themselves, in Bermuda blue, teal and canary yellow skirts are outward-looking and disconnected.

The girls do not touch. They do not speak. They do not stare. They are all in their own worlds, perhaps terrified of sharing what those worlds look like.

In another of the oddest works, "Terra," which could be an anthem to climate change activism, two girls are poised in a cold, peculiar landscape. One, in red coat and white tights, peers outward in a pout, hands stuffed into her overlarge pockets.

The other girl kneels into a jigsaw-like landscape of rock, or, perhaps ice, and peers into small blue pools of water. Of all the girls in Hawk's oeuvre, this is the only one who looks happy. Curious about what she is seeing, heedless of the weather, the girl kneels into the gray earth, magnetized by the water, enthralled with something other than herself. As her black hair brushes the earth, the hint of a smile emerges.