

**VALERIE HAMMOND**

**CHIMERAS AND METAMORPHOSES**



**RDS GALLERY**

## **Chimeras and Metamorphoses: The Haunted Art of Valerie Hammond**

In Greek mythology, the fabled Chimera was, in Homer's words, 'a thing of immortal make, not human, lion-fronted and snake behind, a goat in the middle'. Since then, the notion of a chimera has been picked up by science to refer to a single organism composed of mixed genetic material.

The idea of one thing becoming another haunts Valerie Hammond's work. In one dry point etching the head of an owl is replaced by an owl moth; in a relief print the hindquarters of a deer sprout the feathers of a bird. These metamorphoses act as triggers for the release of personal associations – many of which involve archaic memory traces – that find expression in the condensed images arising from her unconscious.



One of the most striking examples of this symbol-making is the series of etchings titled 'Harpy', which, as in the ancient Greek myth, depict birds



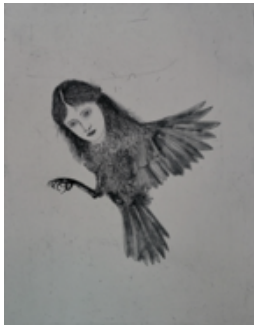
with the heads of maidens, the Harpies being female goddesses who sought vengeance against anyone who had sworn a false oath or had done an evil act. The idea for the series, Hammond explains, arose from seeing a beautiful dead dove in the streets of New York immediately after the presidential election of 2016, which seemed to her to represent the killing of hope in the #MeToo period. Having photographed and drawn the dove, in making a print of her drawing, Hammond found herself adding girls' heads to the bodies of birds to convert the motif into an expression of strength and transformation. The Harpies, in fact, are a 'gang of girls', in the artist's words, who are invested with power to punish wrongdoing.

All the elements in Hammond's mythology are deeply personal. The motif of a bird goes back to when she was an MFA student and found a dead bird at the door of her studio. She discovered that images of a bird

came back with the death of her mother, which is why her deer are feathered: after her mother had passed away, a little red deer would come up on the lawn of her house each morning, prompting her father to say, 'She's here.' Similarly, the image of a hare traces its origins to Ireland, the land of Hammond's ancestors, where there is a superstition that animals serve as temporary resting places for the dead.



Personal associations of this nature are further enriched by inspiration drawn from literature and the other arts. In investing her animal figures with associations relating to her mother, the artist was thinking of the madeleine in Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past*, and of how an object can trigger the memory of someone you have lost. The Harpies themselves reflect Hammond's experience of looking at photographs taken



by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, who, like Hammond in the present, worked with children, Hammond as a teacher of art, and Dodgson as a photographer. The heads of the Harpies resemble some of the girls Carroll photographed, with one of his models reminding Hammond of herself as a young girl.

Paradoxically, the symbolism of Hammond's images, which comes from the world of dreams (she keeps a dream diary), is expressed through a style marked by graphic realism. American artist Kiki Smith, who describes Hammond as 'a colleague, friend, co-teacher and companion', noted that 'she weaves her work amongst her domestic life, her teaching, her studio life and her children's exercises'. Her art is, thus, for Smith, located between 'the material world and the spirit world realms in our daily life'. Grounded in reality, Valerie Hammond's art nevertheless always aspires towards the possibility of something becoming other, providing a connection between the visible and invisible dimensions of our existence.

*Alistair Fox, December 2019*

*Women artists and printmakers have long been a huge influence on me.*  
Valerie Hammond

**Valerie Hammond** was born in Santa Maria, California. She received her MFA from the University of California at Berkeley, where she was awarded the Eisner Award. Her work is included in public and private collections such as the Walker Art Center, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Library of Congress, the Print Collection of the New York Public Library, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Progressive Art Collection, the Chazen Museum of Art, the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, the Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, and the Fidelity Art Collection. She has exhibited in solo shows and group exhibitions in the United States, Europe, China, New Zealand and India. Hammond is the recipient of awards and fellowships from the New York Foundation of the Arts, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Peter S. Reed Foundation. She currently lives in New York City.

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### **Artist Statement**

As an artist I have found that process has become a fundamental part of my work. In practice this means that I might have ideas about where my work is going, but often the physical process of the work informs what actually happens in my studio. I am interested in evoking sensation and making work which is corporeal in nature. While the figures and portraits may begin to point towards and to suggest sentiment, it is important to me that the work is not sentimental.

Provided by Valerie Hammond

**Alistair Fox** currently holds the position of Emeritus Professor, University of Otago. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 7 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and three volumes translated from French into English.

Images: *Owlmoth* (V. Hammond, 2019); *Harpy* [red] (V. Hammond, 2019); *Glorra* (V. Hammond, 2019); *Harpy* (V. Hammond, 2019).

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