

# Soft Opening

Sara Knowland

Mostly Women

3 April - 4 May 2019

Opening reception Saturday 6 April 6-8.30pm

4 Herald Street, London E2 6JT

In *Mostly Women*, Sara Knowland presents three paintings, each depicting a green-faced witch in a state of motion, rushing through a half interior, half exterior landscape. Signifying a continuing interest in feminist voices, for Knowland, the figure of the witch proves useful in examining female-ness, its depiction and expression. The use of the humorous cartoon of the Wicked Witch of the West with her buckled hat, purplish clothing and emerald skin engages a universally recognisable motif of a shapeshifting figure that oscillates between good and evil, between human and creature, between male and female.

Cartoons themselves operate within a strangely ineffable non-space, interrogated and reinforced in these paintings by Knowland's uncomfortable compositional arrangement and conflation of spatial depth. Complicating the flatness of the visual language of the cartoon, Knowland viscerally paints the rawness of emotion, rage, and lustiness onto her canvases, animating her figures into near three-dimensionality. The grotesque pervades as tongues, teeth and flesh stimulate slippages into a mischievous meatiness.

Interested in the connotations carried by the word "West," this cartoon figure affords Knowland the opportunity to invoke our current agitated contemporary experience in her work. In recent months, allusions to witch hunts and burnings have permeated political metaphor and reinforce a worryingly still-prevalent misogynistic patriarchy. Historically - in fairytale, literature and cinema - the villainous witch character does not fulfil the physical, emotional or behavioural expectations of women, therefore remaining unable to represent either feminine or masculine.

The exhibition borrows its title from a solo presentation of work by the Dutch American abstract expressionist painter Willem de Kooning that was held at Gagosian Gallery in New York in 2000. Besides further problematising gender binaries, this title makes evident the complicated relationship Knowland maintains to this particular series of work, still generative to her practice despite its embedded misogyny. In each painting, Knowland begins with an art historical reference - seen in pictorial devices or expressivity - into which she inserts an agitator, in this case the cartoon witch. Both "Hunt" and "Landscape" contain semi-architectural structures that feel akin to those built by British artist Francis Bacon in his compositions notorious for introducing an expression of the inner torture of the human psyche, projected into the pictorial space of the image. Existing between gender, for Knowland the witch that harries through these structures, becomes a dynamic character and device through which she can inhabit, celebrate, play within, and infect certain moments in the history of painting.

On Sunday 28 April, curator Jo Harrison will host a reading group and discussion, looking at 'The Great Witch-Hunt in Europe' from Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation). Please contact the gallery for more information and to RSVP.

**Sara Knowland** (b. 1981 Oxford, UK) completed her BA (Hons) in Fine Art (Painting) at The Slade School of Art, UCL London in 2007 before achieving her Post Graduate Diploma in Fine Art at RA Schools, Royal Academy of Arts, London in 2011. Solo and two-person exhibitions include *Mostly Women* at Soft Opening, London (2019), *Bare Mountain* (with Frances Drayson) at The Weston Studio, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2018), *FORTY THIRTY THREE* at Lima Zulu, London (2017) and *Deep Pile, Soft Trim* at Royal Academy of Arts, London (2012). Group exhibitions include *Silent Tourist* (curated by Tom Worsfold) at Mackintosh Lane, London (2019, forthcoming), *28th December 1980* at Asylum Studios, Norwich (2018), *Let's See Where We Were? In The Pit Of Despair*, at De Ateliers, Amsterdam (2017), *Shadows and Monsters*, at Studio 7, Gasworks Studios, London (2017), *Herald Patch* at Plaza Plaza, London (2015), *Congratulations on your ugly handwriting*, at CURA, Rome (2014), *Politics*, at Arcade Fine Arts, London (2013) and *Courtship of the Peoples* at Simon Oldfield Gallery, London (2012). In 2015 she curated *Stay Illusion* with Eoin Donnelly which featured work from Adam Chodzko, Erin Shireff, Klaus Vom Bruch and experiments with Ted Serios from the Jules Eisenbud archive at Tenpm, Copenhagen and in 2014 she curated *A Speculum that Shines* with Eoin Donnelly, featuring work from Alistair Mackinven, Dawn Mellor, John Russell, Paul Sharits and Cathy Wilkes at Rowing Gallery, London. Knowland lives and works in London.

### **List of works**

From left to right:

Landscape, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
240 x 210 cm

Janus, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
150 x 120 cm

Hunt, 2018  
Oil on canvas  
220 x 170 cm

In office:

Metaphor, 2019  
Collage on paper, perspex  
30 x 24 x 3.5 cm