

Warmblood

Vicky Sabourin

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Stones in My Belly

Daniella Sanader

In some early versions of the tale, after Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are saved from the evil wolf's belly—sliced open by their rescuing Woodsman—they fill his stomach with stones. As he tries to flee, the weight of the stones causes him to collapse and die. Of course, there are other, darker versions where Little Red and her grandmother are not rescued at all.

In Angela Carter's short story "The Werewolf"—published in her 1979 feminist-revisionist fairy tale anthology *The Bloody Chamber*—the grandmother in peril is exchanged for a character of a sinister sort. After being attacked by a wolf in the woods and chopping off its front paw in retaliation, Little Red arrives at her grandmother's home to discover the old woman deathly ill in bed, a bloody arm where her hand used to be. Revealed as a witch, Little Red and her neighbours force the old woman out of her home and into the forest. They stone her to death.

Warmblood, Vicky Sabourin's exhibition at Hamilton Artists' Inc., shares its name with a performance where the Montreal-based artist submits herself to these same transformative forces of fairy tales. A life-sized horse made from felted wool lies in the gallery, next to a pile of dirt and a large black and white photograph of a grave dug in a forest floor. Much of Sabourin's practice involves this interplay of object, image, and setting; her environments staged like large-scale dioramas where the physical meets the representational meets the fantastical. Yet every setting needs its character: to activate her projects, Sabourin performs in her constructed worlds.

For *Warmblood*, she kneels beside the fallen horse, slowly removing stones from its belly. Once the horse is emptied, its felted skin sagging to the floor, Sabourin crawls inside. She remains ensconced in its skin for almost thirty minutes, her breathing re-animating the horse's once-hollow body. Once she crawls out, seemingly dazed and bewildered, she returns the stones to its stomach, the cycle complete.

The versions of Little Red Riding Hood mentioned above are undeniably dark and violent, yet they also speak to the seductive terror and beauty of change. As Sabourin rests inside her felted horse, her too-human legs still visible outside of her newly animal body, she remains in a jarring liminal moment: both animal and human, yet neither. How separate are these states of being, truly? Carter's werewolf-witch was cast out by her community, ostracized for ignoring these divides between living creatures. In these stories, animal violence is punished with human violence: so much for that distinction. For Sabourin, these transformative moments between human and animal are reconfigured as opportunities for intimacy and care. Shrouded within the belly of a horse, she is granted protection and security, while also re-animating its otherwise still form. As she returns the stones to the horse's body and leaves the gallery, her installation remains fundamentally unchanged. Sabourin's performance might be complete, yet the potential of the gesture is ongoing. Will she return and perform these ritualized actions again? Care—feeding, nurturing, holding one close—is an exercise of routine and repetition, of building up trust.

Enacting care finds new forms in *The Iridescent*s, Sabourin's second project at Hamilton Artists' Inc. The installation features a flock of felted pigeons, and Sabourin performs with her birds by repeatedly feeding them small golden pebbles. When she is not present, the gallery includes a cast of her hands holding a mound of the stones-



turned-birdfeed, a reflection of the gesture. It may feel unbalanced to transition from a large, imposing horse to these small birds considered by many as nuisances to city life, but Sabourin's work reminds us that these animals have more in common than we would have initially supposed. Both carry complex webs of cultural association: valor, disgust, power, wildness, control, wealth, shame. Both have been transplanted across terrains and ecosystems for the benefit of human industry. Both seem reliant on humans yet remain completely capable of thriving without us. Displayed in the gallery, Sabourin's animals are given equal significance. Dramatically lit and rendered in felted wool, both create opportunities for uncanny and fantastical forms of intimacy.

Yet, as she engages with these creatures, what do we make of Sabourin? To care and to nurture are culturally feminine gestures, and her gestures in each performance reflect the limited scope of personas available to women in story-telling and myth. A maiden cares for a horse in the forest; a crone feeds pigeons in the urban wilderness. Sabourin deftly shifts between these figures, revealing the fallacies that built them. Fairy tales are replete with women branded either chaste and pure or excessive, grotesque, and fearful. Typically, there is no middle ground between sweet Little Red and her witch-werewolf grandmother. Yet at the end of Carter's story, when Little Red chooses to live in her grandmother's house, can we be sure that she won't ultimately meet a similar fate? Sabourin uses her work to tap into these transformative powers: the terrifying yet beautiful connective tissues between human and animal, maiden and crone. Throughout the exhibition *Warmblood*, she is both, yet neither; somehow more, and something else entirely.



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Vicky Sabourin is a Montreal based artist. She completed her MFA at Concordia University and received her BFA from Université Laval and l'École Supérieur des Beaux Arts de Marseille. Her work has been shown in galleries, artist run centers and museums in Canada, the United States, France, Italy and Portugal and has performed in festivals including Contaminate 3 Live Art Festival in Boston, MA. She has received grants from the Canada Art Council (CAC) and Québec Art Council (CALQ). In 2014 she was nominated for the Pierre Ayot award.

Cover: Vicky Sabourin, *Warmblood*, 2016, performance documentation, Hamilton Artists Inc. photo: Caitlin Sutherland
Interior: Vicky Sabourin, *The Iridescents*, 2016. Installation view, Hamilton Artists Inc. photo: Caitlin Sutherland

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