

REVIEW

BUNNY MATTERS

by Christine Hemp

Poet Stanley Kunitz frequently admonished his students, “Follow your obsessions.” Many artists and writers spend a lifetime fixed on a certain shape or palette, a subject or place, a single relationship. Think of Updike; he got a whole lifetime of stories out of the little town where he grew up. Poet Sharon Olds spent years on poems preoccupied with her father.

Often during a career a visual artist will adopt an image—not necessarily a recognizable one—from his or her own life; usually it embodies the problem he or she is aching to solve in visual form. From Picasso’s guitars to Butterworth’s horses to Rodrigue’s Blue Dog, the repeated image is recast in each new work, slowly revealing something beyond the “thing” itself. (Recall Warhol’s Marilyn.)

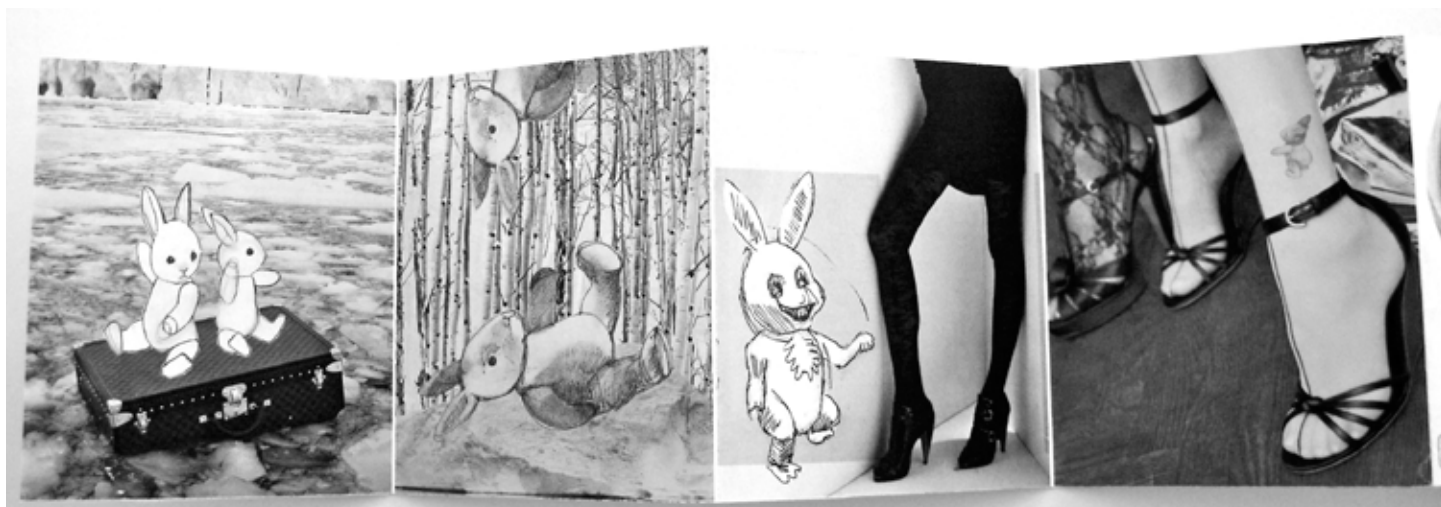
Artist Sas Colby has always taken an obsession to its fruition—or its resolve, whatever comes first. Perhaps because she began as a textile artist, her book art for many years was rampant with buttons (they still appear occasionally in her work), exploring and exhausting the notion (ahem) of opening and closure. Another phase in

the late 1990s fixated on what she called “bundles,” small assemblages made from found objects. Tied up with string, they embodied a kind of totemic “handkerchief tied on a stick”—small offerings, many of which she simply gave away. Recent paintings reflect a fascination with images of the Buddha and Mary together, a subtle marriage of East meets West.

The most mystifying and one of the most compelling of Colby’s icons, however, is her Bunny. She says her obsession with the image of a stuffed bunny began with the death of her husband in 1998, and that the image has taken her places she hadn’t anticipated: “An alter ego is defined as another side of oneself, a second self,” she says, “while an avatar is somebody who embodies, personifies, and is the manifestation of an idea or concept . . . In both instances, alter ego or avatar, they are someone we conjure up and imbue with considerable power beyond our normal abilities.”

Those familiar with Colby’s work were at first surprised by the childlike form, one that bordered on the sentimental. How could such a figure be imbued with the

Bunnies on Ice, 2009.
Printed on Hahnemuhle
Photo Rag in a first printing
of 12 signed and numbered
copies in a Plexiglass slip case.



“power” she describes? To answer this, just look at her newest venue for the Bunny: *Bunnies on Ice*, a limited edition accordion book 6.5 inches high by 88 inches wide. It includes 16 pages of images, digital archival prints on photo rag. Each signed book is housed in a Plexiglas slip case (this Bunny needed an enclosure.)

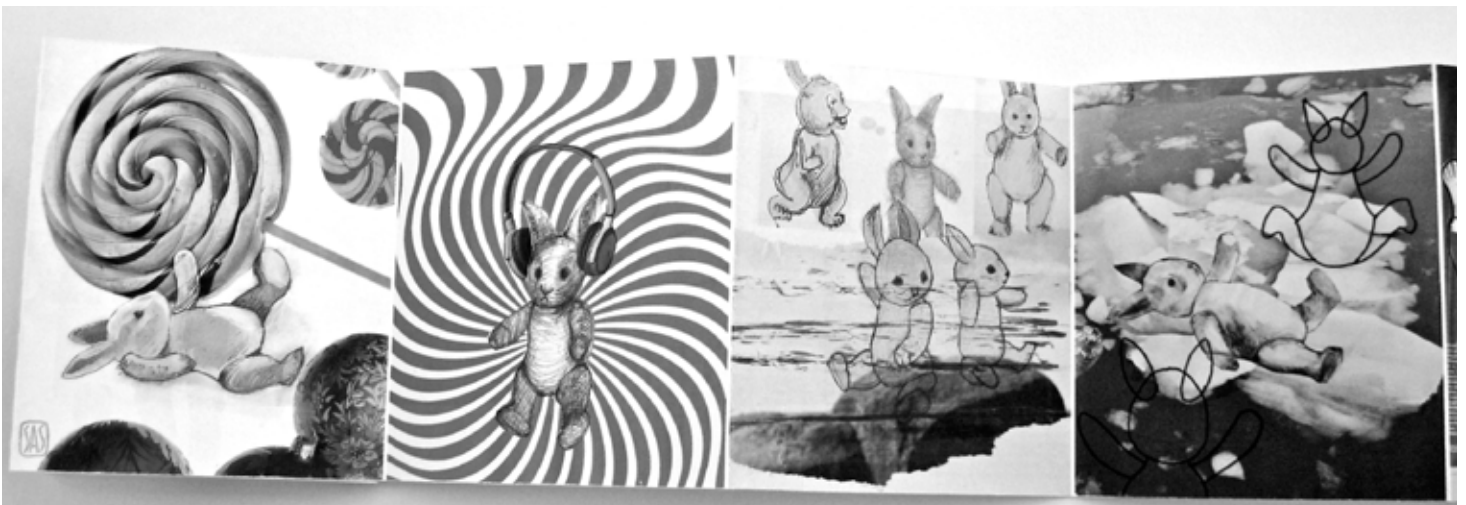
Of course even the *word* “bunny” conjures myriad associations: bunny hop, Playboy Bunny, dust bunny, bunny hill ski slope, Easter Bunny, etc. But sticking with an obsession ultimately reveals layers not perceived in the first go-around, and Colby hasn’t let go of her grip with this rabbit. Earlier manifestations of the Bunny—drawn with circles and lines over lines over and over again—embodied not only grief but a strange resilience, sometimes appearing in the content of otherwise unbunny paintings. Either sitting, standing, or walking, the bunny showed up in pieces like “Archeology,” a drawing with shellac and gesso, where the rabbit sits casually on the arm of a bare-breasted Snake Goddess from Crete who grips a snake in each hand. The cognitive dissonance makes for a startling composition. Another earlier rendition of the Bunny appeared in many of Colby’s paintings gilded in gold leaf wearing a halo.

As the Bunny has aged, however, he has

become more unnerving, morphing from the cozy children’s book character into what we could only call a Bad Bunny. And this one is downright scary. On one page of *Bunnies on Ice*, the sneering bunny looks up at a collaged image of a woman smoking a cigarette. He is smiling, the cigarette cleverly hanging at a diagonal across the picture plane so that the smoke looks as if it streaming from the bunny’s open mouth, the ash ready to fall.

Another page includes other collaged photos—this time the victorious Obama family on election night, 2008. Colby has included the Bunny in the crowd. He smiles along with them. But what makes it creepy is that Colby has altered the image and added dark glasses and bunny ears to all the Obamas, as if the Bunny’s influence goes beyond politics, beyond what we know as power.

To this viewer, the Bunny represents the underbelly, the shadow side of our conscious life. Take the page, for example, where three bunnies are walking across a beach. Two of the three are the softer, earlier versions of this Bunny figure (present in the earlier paintings). The Bad Bunny, however, shoulders his way in and laughs his hyena laugh while on a nearby rock two more innocent rabbits shrug with unknowing, as if they are mere reflections in the



water. The presence of the leering bunny suggests that the ideas of goodness, innocence, and happiness would not exist without the shadow, the tension of their opposite.

Colby knows the power of contradiction. The whole book is balanced by this tension between the Bad Bunny and the Good Bunny. Inserting them into borrowed images gives the whole piece a universal appeal as well as edge and authority. Borrowed images from magazines and books have always been a Colby trademark, but this time her own Bunny trumps them all. Take that page where the Leering Bunny is dwarfed—but not cowed!—by the pair of black-stocking women’s legs.

Sexuality, politics, the notion of childhood innocence (note the page where two innocent bunnies float down river on a metal trunk through the ice floes, shades of the Titanic)—all of these are addressed in this compact and powerful book. Each viewing takes us deeper into our own

psyches. After all, each of us contains both soft bunnies and bad bunnies.

Eighteenth-century poet and painter William Blake uncovered the power of opposites in all his work, particularly in “Songs of Innocence and Experience.” In these poems and paintings, he shed light on the underbelly of humankind. For each happy lamb there exists a hungry tiger. Colby, too, has illuminated this contradiction and, through her obsessions, has transformed that contradiction into a compelling, unnerving book. What makes *Bunnies on Ice* so successful is not only its humor, but the boldness in which Colby embraces the shadow. For each fuzzy toy leers a Bad Bunny. ☞

Poet and essayist Christine Hemp was a staff art writer for THE Magazine, Santa Fe’s Magazine for the Arts and her work has appeared in American Craft, Art & Auction, and ArtAccess Magazine.



Photos by Sas Colby.