



# STRANGE GIRLS

MELISSA STERN

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*Drawing, Sculpture, Assemblage*

**MELISSA STERN**



# SUGAR and SPICE and EVERYTHING STRANGE

Meg Shiffler

I have known Melissa Stern for over twenty years, and she is a strange girl. But don't take my word for it. In this exhibition, she proposes that everyone is a strange girl, and encourages us to recognize it, accept it, and live it — if we don't already.

Let's assume that she is correct, and that every human on the planet is strange, then by default, we are living in a paradigm where strangeness is the norm. To be clear, Stern is not implying that strangeness is one thing, born of universal experiences that deny legacies that shape lives. Being beautifully and painfully strange acknowledges personal and collective, social and cultural experiences as well as the lonely and sometimes desperate inner workings of the individual psyche. Some of the coping mechanisms employed to deal with all of the strangeness inside and out include compassion, introspection, humor, faith, empathy, passion, and alternately jealousy, rage, shyness, and a wide range of political and social power plays. It is within the deep recognition of what it takes to live a strange and honest life, that Stern finds personal strength and inspiration for her work.

In the making of *Strange Girls*, Stern centers her interest in a sense of deeply ingrained psychological strangeness, and as a result, the raw honesty at the core of her work may place it in an emotional sphere that will not be easy for everyone to enter. She intentionally roots her practice in that tender spot, and then, for each new body of work, she devises ways to entice viewers to join her there by deploying an arsenal of seduction including luscious surfaces, sympathetic figures and darkly delicious humor. In the *Strange Girls* sculpture, *Vienna* (fig. 1), a lovely figurine of a young girl in a bright yellow dress beckons the viewer with a gentle gaze and silent music emanating from a squeezebox, and we approach tentatively. Does the girl know, as we do, that just below her feet there is river of darkness dragging down a head-like mound and the hook it's impaled on? The stark juxtaposition of the cheery, full-bodied child and the aggressive intervention with the forms below perfectly demonstrates the kind of psychological push and pull key to understanding Stern and her work.

Juxtapositions are particularly complicated when, as in the work *Vienna*, Stern incorporates found objects. Ceramic figurines, clips from vintage advertisements, and objects such as doll shoes and appendages appear in compositions with drawn and sculpted figures. These readymade compositional components are most often whole and perfect - perfect hands for the armless (*Dutch Shoes*, p. 29), perfect legs for bottomless torsos (*Gams*, p. 19), perfect hair for a bald woman (*Beehive*, fig. 2), one perfect eye for someone who needs it (*The Green Room*, p. 25) — heightening the peculiar nature of the figures they're attached to. This is the push. The pull is that we have established that strangeness is the norm, and these stitched together figures are unapologetic, stand tall, express complex emotions, embrace their add-ons, and often face the viewer, daring or imploring them to accept the broken fragments that don't fit, physically or psychologically, and then find ways to thrive.

When the collaged figures are whole, rather than body parts, they take up space in different ways. In *New Boyfriend* (p. 31), a bodiless yellow woman ferociously leers at her tiny, shirtless boyfriend, who seems to be at ease and detached from her rage. She's wound so tight that steam escapes her head in the form of letters spelling "pnzzzzz." He is complete, and she's ready to explode into a million pieces. It's logical to both desire and reject wholeness, yet she can't see that beyond his confident, oblivious exterior, deep in his ceramic heart, he too is fractured. Keep in mind that there are many ways to read the narratives present in Stern's work. Perhaps the woman isn't expressing anger, but instead she's in the throes of an overwhelming desire that will perhaps drive her to devour him. Throughout *Strange Girls*, full-bodied figures are present as complicated objects of desire and as representations of unattainable and completely fictional wholeness.

*Strange Girls* features drawings and sculpture, with drawings containing dimensional elements, and sculptures showcasing densely drawn surfaces. Stern has the masterful control and technical expertise to combine media such as clay, wood, charcoal, oil crayon, oil paint, paper, graphite, encaustic and more to create layered and wholly unique visual interest. With a background in anthropology, Stern regularly teaches courses on art and storytelling, and she is a voracious reader of fiction. It's no wonder that each work she creates can be interpreted through a myriad of narrative possibilities. In examining the cast of characters created for the *Strange Girls* story, it appears that figures in Stern's drawings are captured and pinned down in mid-action. The line work and compositional

energy imply that central figures are fleeting — willing to hold still and satisfy the gaze of the viewer for just a restless moment. The artist brings the viewer into the world of the drawings. On the other hand, the figures represented in Stern's sculptural work are lovingly formed and bound to their new location in our world. They're truly caught and put on display, which allows the viewer to settle into the works in deeply sympathetic and empathetic ways.

In recent years, Stern has had to overcome physical challenges that have impacted her mobility and caused pain. In the studio, her practice requires physical strength and dexterity — lifting blocks of clay and large sculptural works, wielding power tools, and working vigorously with mark-making media and hand tools to masterfully shape, adorn, work down and build up her 2D and 3D surfaces. She works quickly and confidently, pulling works from the kiln, culling and cutting images from vintage publications, tackling works on paper with the same focus and ferocity employed on sculptural media, and testing new techniques continuously. In *Strange Girls* we see figures with legs on their heads, feet crammed into wooden shoes, curled tails replacing lower bodies, and some are footless or armless — or both. These characters carry the artist's frustration with physical limitations, and at the same time they also bear the determination and perseverance Stern demonstrated as she continued her practice throughout her healing process.

One of Stern's injuries was sustained during her participation in the 2017 Women's March in Washington DC. Stern is politically active, a vocal advocate for human rights, and has demonstrated against policies and decisions made by the Trump administration. So, what does it mean to view her work at this moment in time? Most of the collaged elements come from the 1950s, when advertisers constructed a vision of an ideal woman and an ideal America centered around a very specific white, heteronormative, middle class, conservative consumer base — quaffed women in makeup and high heels scrubbing pots in starched aprons, sending their husbands out the door and into big new American cars. Viewed through this lens, the clips and ads incorporated into Stern's work, as humorous as they are at times, serve as a reminder of how dangerous it is to accept or embrace a veneer that denies political, social and personal legacies of oppression. In the piece, *Just Married* (p. 47), a smiling advertisement-man clutches hands with his grimacing hand-drawn mate as they face the future in a world crumbling around them. A person is trapped within a void in *Val Stroug* (fig. 3), and in *Gaze* (p. 35),

a bent figure with bound hands helplessly gazes at their own reflection. Although each work contains many narratives, at this moment of political divide, as policies protecting human rights hang in the balance and each new day reveals corruption upon corruption, pieces like these reflect the frustration, fear and helplessness felt by many. Additionally, the violent and darkly humorous punch executed in *K.O.* (p. 33), may serve as a release valve for built up anger and tension.

*Strange Girls* also addresses complexities of interpersonal relationships and the difficulties of effective communication — ongoing investigations in Stern's broader practice. Marriage, parenthood and friendship are relationship frames in which she explores vulnerability, guilt, love, fear, gratitude, passion, hostility, jealousy and more. Relationships are hard work, and the small ranger in *Tug* (p. 13), has just caught the leg of someone large and clearly hard to handle. Although he doesn't seem well equipped to deal with such a challenge, it's not wise to underestimate strength and fortitude. And yet, he may be trying to pull his mate in a direction they're clearly not moving in. In *New Shoe* (fig. 4), a figure has lost their left foot, yet gently carries a child or tiny partner in a pink shoe situated in the crook of an arm that's hanging by wire. The loving care exhibited by this broken, and tentatively put back together caretaker, is heart wrenching and ultimately relatable. Is there anyone who hasn't sacrificed, even a little, in order to reap the benefits of giving and receiving love?

The point at which relationships solidify is when we trust enough to truly expose our strangeness and bring it into dialogue with the strangeness of another. In Stern's work, characters within her compositions are laid bare, and every work provides the opportunity for the strangeness within it to meet the strangeness of those witnessing it. Stern's mature and brilliant *Strange Girls* strategically invites viewers to enter into self-reflection by acknowledging vulnerable bits and pieces of themselves, and then, as illustrated in the wall work *Squad* (p. 51), join hands with all the other strange girls in the world, and take on whatever comes next.

### Meg Shiffler

Director and Chief Curator, San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries  
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### Works Cited in Essay (Not Pictured in Catalogue)



Fig. 1  
**Vienna**  
Clay, paint, object  
21" x 7" x 3.5" 2016



Fig. 2  
**Beehive**  
Clay, oil paint, paper,  
oil stick, papier-mache  
30" x 10" x 10" 2018



Fig. 2  
**Val Stroug**  
Photograph, oil stick, oil paint,  
wood, metal, object, graphite  
17 x 12.5 x 1.75" 2018



Fig. 4  
**New Shoe**  
Clay, metal, object, wood  
30" x 9" x 11.5" 2018

## ABOUT STRANGE GIRLS...

We are all strange girls.

We all harbor some memory of feeling like an outsider, a stranger.

These feelings were most acute growing up: never quite getting with the program, never feeling quite in step with the cool kids.

"What if people don't like me?"

Many of the dramas in these pieces are based on feelings that girls grow up with.

But being a strange girl can transcend gender.

Anyone who views this work will find a memory or story from their own life that resonates.

"Girlhood," in the context of this show, is a state of being and a state of mind.

It is one marked by being the other simply by virtue of being, femininity conflated with all that is weird and wrong across cultures.

I invite you to be the strange girl that you are.

My sometimes goofy figures live in a dream world,

cower in relationships

or stand tall in the face of adversity.

Some people think they're funny which is always interesting and never wrong.

My stories are full of the flotsam of memory, the jetsam of popular culture.

My objects try to reconcile the odd ways in which people navigate their adjacent worlds.

One-on-one relationships, family groupings, schoolyard politics — the intimacy, the loneliness, the humor, the oddity of various combinations of humans, large and small.

To be strange is to be unique, to be in natural opposition to the norm.

Be a strange girl because you already are.

**Melissa Stern**

August 2018



**New Nose**

Clay, oil stick, oil paint, charcoal. 26 x 24 x 2.5 inches. 2018



**Fishnets**  
Collage, graphite, oil stick. 18 x 12 x 1.5 inches. 2017



**Stiff**

Clay, ink, fabric, encaustic, wood, thread, needle, crayon. 29 x 13 x 8 inches. 2018



**Mix and Match**

Clay, oil paint, paper, fabric, wood. 12.5 x 13.5 x 2 inches. 2018



**Marriage**  
Graphite, pastel, collage. 17 x 18 inches. 2012



**Loose Lips**  
Clay, wood, oil stick. 19 x 19 x 3 inches. 2018



**Tug**  
Wood, clay, plastic, paper, stocking, paint. 26 x 16 x 1.5 inches. 2018



**Wig Shop**

Clay, wood, oil stick, ink, horse hair, rubber, steel. 30.5 x 30.5 x 6.5 inches. 2018



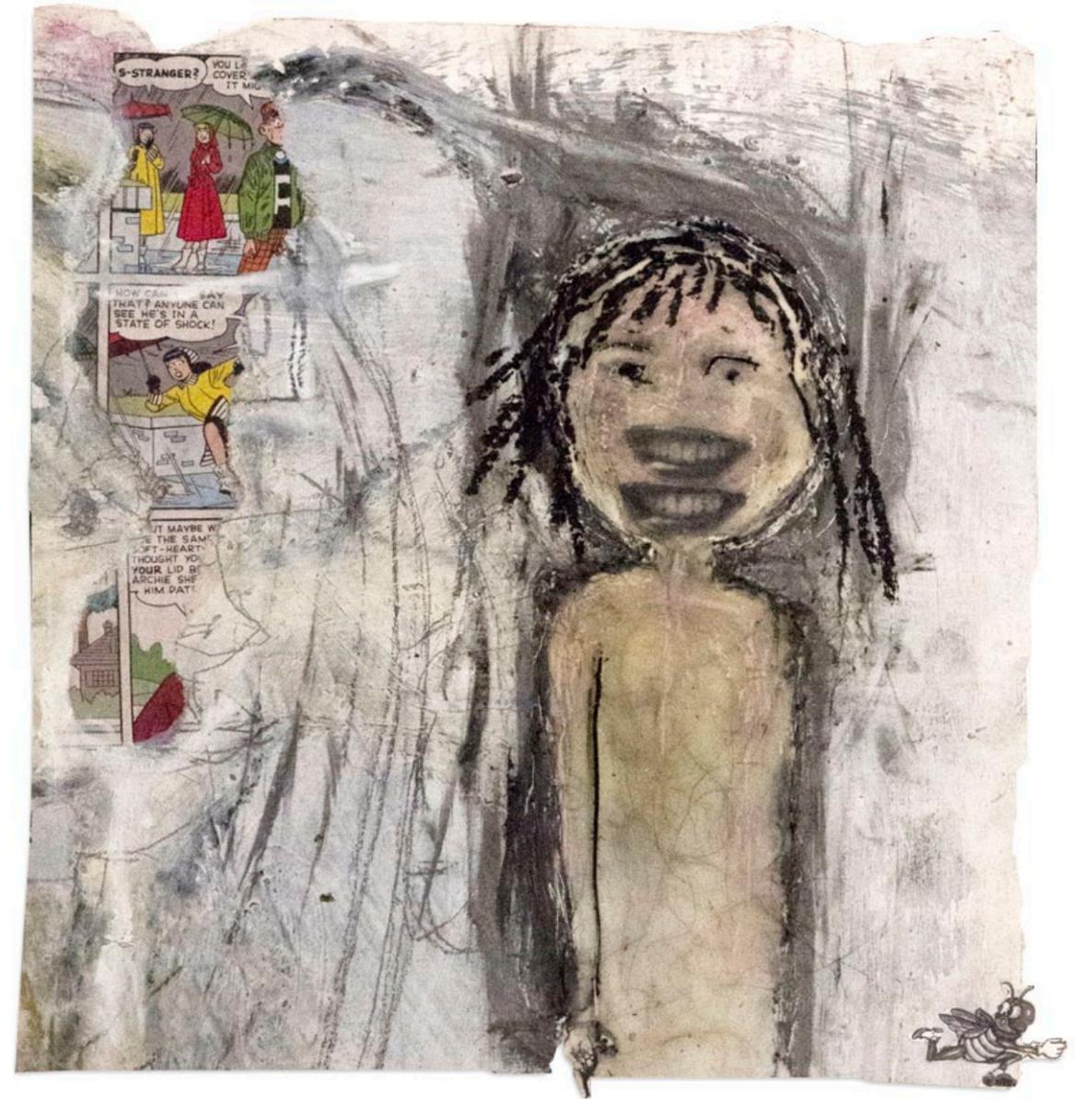
**Pink Leg**  
Wood, clay, oil paint, encaustic. 24.5 x 11 x 5 inches. 2018



**Gams**  
Graphite, ink, pastel, collage. 15.5 x 24.75 inches. 2017



**Runaway**  
Clay, wood, resin, paint. 34 x 12 x 7 inches. 2018



**The New Girl**

Pastel, oil stick, pencil, encaustic, collage. 9 x 9 inches. 2015



**The Green Room**

Oil paint, oil stick, collage, clay, graphite. 20 x 20 x 2 inches. 2017



**Strange Girls**  
Oil, acrylic, ink, collage, pastel, colored pencil. 29.75 x 37 inches.  
2009



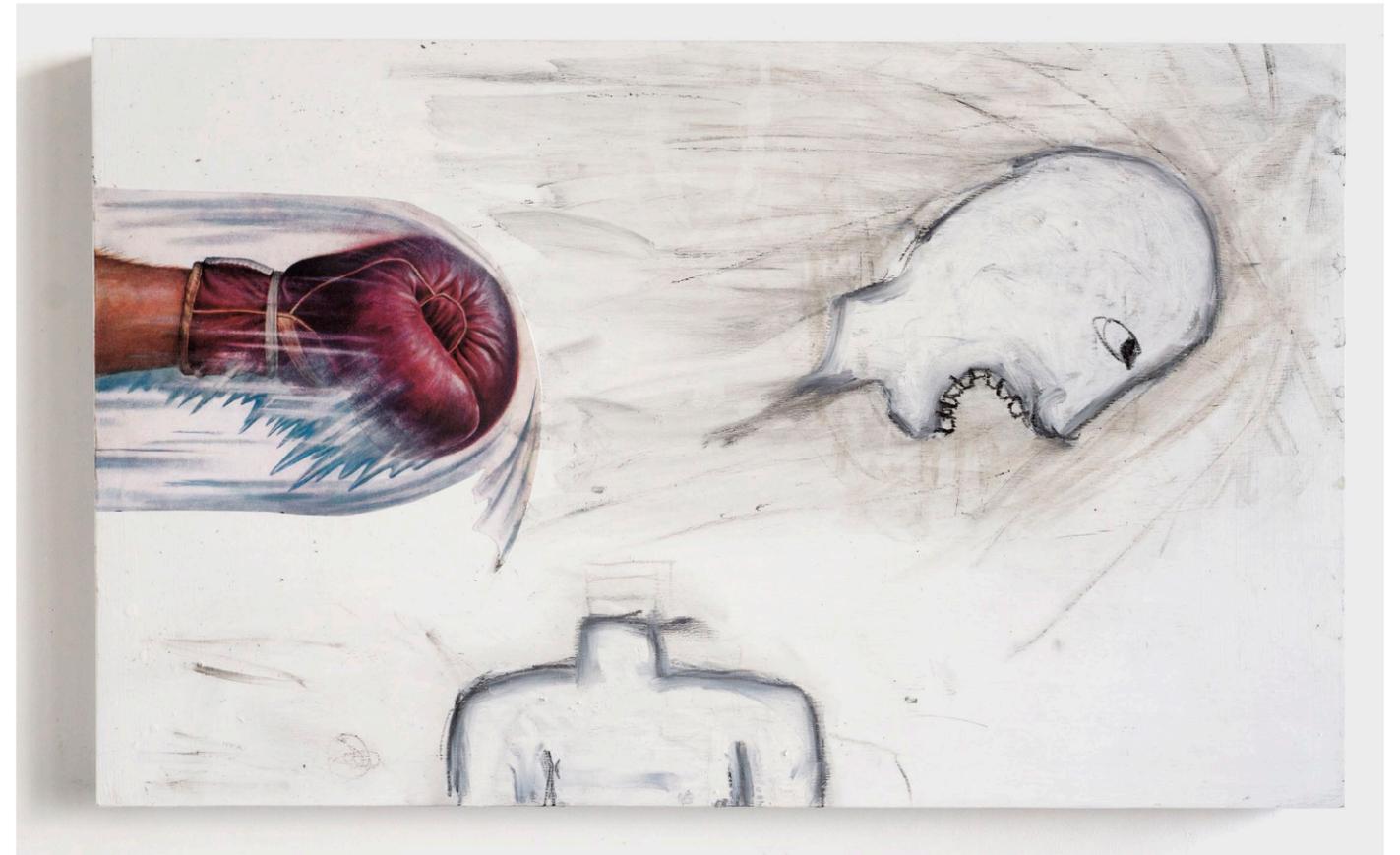
**Dutch Shoes**

Clay, wood, objects, charcoal, oil stick, graphite. 27 x 10 x 6.75 inches.  
2018



**New Boyfriend**

Paint, collage, graphite, objects. 10 x 9 x 2 inches. 2017



**K.O.**  
Collage, oil stick, charcoal, wood. 16 x 26 x 2.5 inches. 2017



**Gaze**  
Clay, wood, mirror, string.  
25 x 7 x 10 inches. 2018



**Modest**

Wood, clay, paper, encaustic. 16 x 5.5 x 4 inches. 2018



**Three Gals**

Wood, clay, objects, paper, paint. 9.5 x 13.5 x 5 inches. 2018



**First Date**

Wood, clay, paper, plastic, oil stick, encaustic. 21 x 20 x 1.75 inches.  
2018

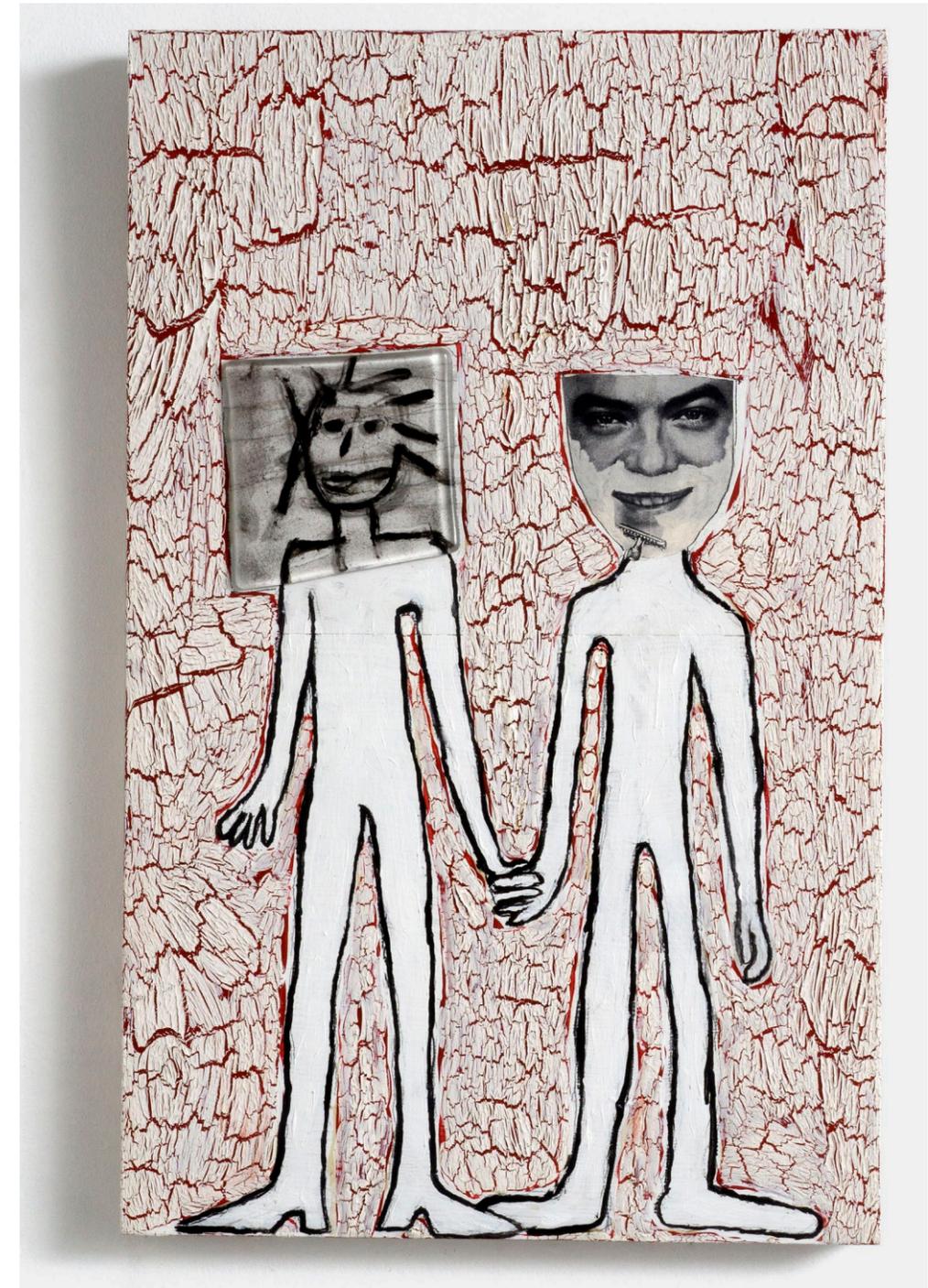


**Pas de Deux**  
Graphite, colored pencil, collage. 11.5 x 9 inches. 2011



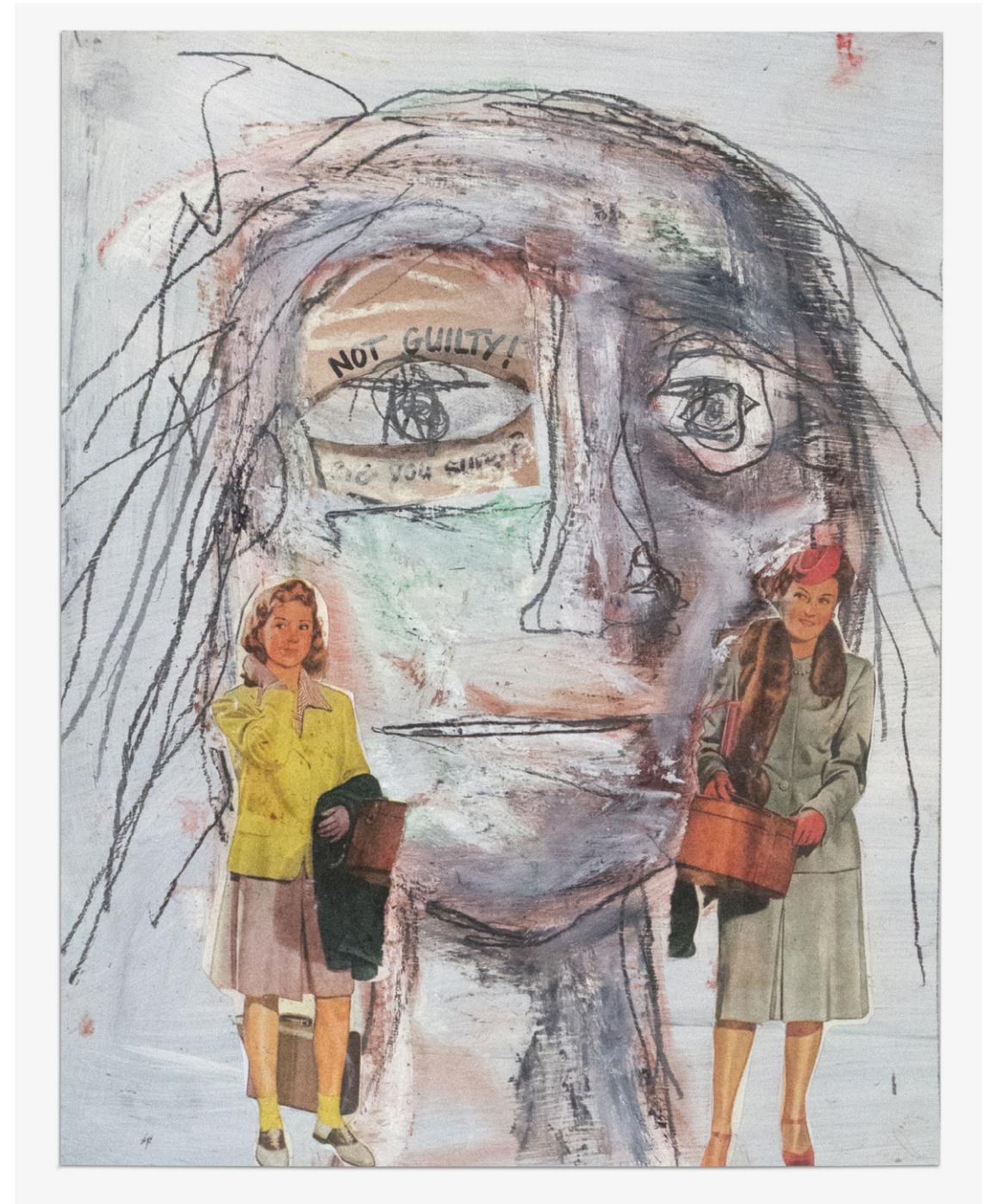
**Partners**

Pastel, graphite, collage. 12 x 9.5 inches. 2011

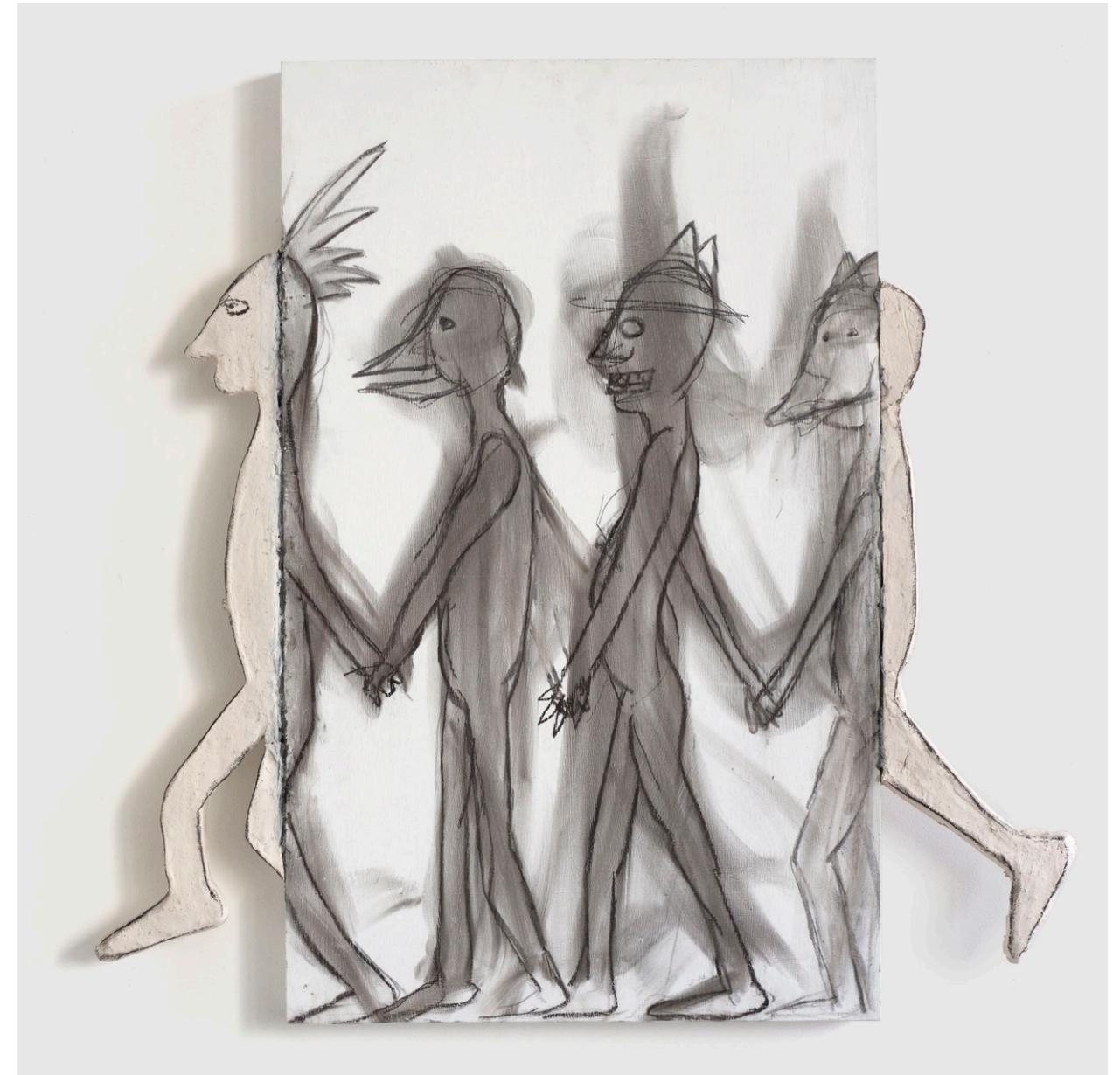


**Just Married**

Wood, glass, paint, paper. 16 x 10 x 1 inches. 2018



**Guilt**  
Graphite, pastel, collage. 12.5 x 9.75 inches. 2012



**Squad**  
Wood, clay, charcoal. 26.5 x 26 x 2 inches. 2018



*All photos by Kevin Thomasson*

[www.melissa-stern.com](http://www.melissa-stern.com)

[www.thetalkingcureproject.com](http://www.thetalkingcureproject.com)

[www.speakingintongues.melissa-stern.com](http://www.speakingintongues.melissa-stern.com)

Loose lips, sink ships.



*Photo by Melissa Stern*