

Roe Rosen's Martyrs: Wicked Hagiographies

Edna Goldstaub-Dainotto

A Flamboyant Lack of Economy

Roe Rosen's Martyrs series is confounding in its overflow of visual information. The regularity of size and the uniformity of the mandorla almost immediately surrender to a cacophony of painterly styles and subject matter. Anne Kastorp, the artist's uptight alter-ego and imaginary commentator on the series, sounds irritated by this "flamboyant lack of economy."¹ Where she expects art to "apply itself to grueling, timely topics and to poignantly address the urgent questions posited by current discourse" she finds undisciplined conundrums. Her intense reaction doubles as the flip side of the artist's statement of intentions. Emphatically resisting the option of a linear—didactic or moralistic—interpretation, Rosen constructs his work from blocks of meaning and immediately turns and kicks his own structure. The signification he builds from fragments of historical allusions collapses by subversive elements or by copious, seemingly incongruous information; the virtue of painterly style is questioned by scribbles and spatial relationships that belie perspectival rules; the standards of coloration are ridiculed by the use of "wrong" colors; lofty subject matter is pulled down by imprudent vulgarity.

This freakish side show begins with a hanged monkey followed by a bearded woman, then a baby threatened by a pair of scissors, a wolf perched on a tree against a lilac sky, caricatured figures, a fantastic comic strip. A painting titled *Martyr's City Plan* implies by both its title and chart-like configuration an indexical function. Yet, the befuddled viewer who approaches it for help, finds only a succession of torture devices and vignettes, along with an inexplicable, lascivious display. Resorting to finding one's way in the painting, *Martyr's Route*, is likewise disillusioning. The picture, depicting fish leaping from a bed of water to a bed of clouds, when turned and viewed upside-down still yields the same result: fish swimming—like the viewer in search for a cogent meaning—in a perpetual, circular route. The painting of *Proto-Martyr Stephen*, the biblical archetype for later martyrs, the viewer might hope, can shed light on the fundamentals of representing martyrs. Again, frustration. A figure of dubious gender is sprawled, as if in a womb. Points marked on its body, like in a Chinese medical chart, are connected with lines, but those lead nowhere. A host of animals and objects that are superimposed on the martyr's body—articles of potential hazard (a knife, scissors, a boiling pot), others signifying transmission or transportation (a telephone, a television, an envelope, a boat)—appear to establish a lexicon of references, yet the eclectic nature of the objects turns it into a travesty of order.

Rosen floods his paintings with a constant ebb of nagging symbols. While some are easily recognizable to the connoisseur of western art—Martyr Agatha, the Sicilian virgin, holding her breasts on a tray; Martyr Barbara, the imprisoned virgin, hugging her tower—most others are transformations of images culled from esoteric sources, almost impossible to decipher without help. A withered plant stemming from a flower pot, which appears in *Martyr Christopher*, and, in miniature form, in *Seven Sleeping Martyrs* and *Protomartyr Stephen*, is a pitiable echo of the tree of Jesse;² a rooster with its head locked in a box in two corners of *Martyr Vitus* is derived from medieval illustrations of the conquered Satan; the dancing figures in the two other corners of the same painting are adapted from 19th century photographs of a patient of chorea, a nervous disorder also known as *St. Vitus dance*. Steeped in this abundance of obscure information and uncracked codes, deprived of the privilege to easily label and identify, the viewer is left in a state of continuous suspension.

The Style Department Store

The Greenbergian vision of modernism, in the words of Robert Storr, "lay in the purification and the self-referentiality of artistic means and ends. The modernist project hence consisted of the progressive elimination of the influence of one medium upon another and the gradual reduction of each to its 'essential properties and possibilities.'"³ Art after modernism tosses aside this monolithic structure, as Jane Yellowlees

1. Anne Kastorp. *The Fake Martyr: Essay and Lexical Reference to Roe Rosen's Martyr Paintings*, unpublished Essay, 1993.

2. The Tree of Jesse, a figural chart of Christ's ancestry is depicted in Medieval art as a genealogical tree budding out of Jesse's loins. The connection is made explicit in a drawing from Rosen's artist book *Lucy*. In it, the protagonist assumes Jesse's conventional posture, lying on his side, only in this case a flower pot emerges from his groin instead of the tree.

Douglas puts it, by "rejecting the objective paradigm as the great 'either/or' and embracing, instead, the 'and/and/and.'"⁴

For Thomas Lawson, outlining the range of possibilities for artists in the 1980s, this and/and/and/ paradigm "boils down to a question of faith."⁵ He writes: "Young artists concerned with pictures and picture-making, rather than sculpture and the lively arts, are faced now with a bewildering choice. They can continue to believe in the traditional institutions of culture, most conveniently identified with easel painting, and in effect register a blind contentment with the way things are. They can dabble in 'pluralism', that last holdout of an exhausted modernism, choosing from an assortment of attractive labels.... Such is the confused situation today, and everyone seems to be getting rather shrill about this." The "pluralism" Lawson dismisses becomes, in Rosen's confident hand, a strategy that eloquently utilizes an array of styles, while keeping an ironic distance by irreverently compromising their integrity, and by confronting them with their opposites. And so, we end up with both options of many artistic polarities: cool and emphatic; hermetic and open-ended; self referential as well as lexical/cultural; morose and humorous; ascetic and promiscuous; linear and painterly; genuine invention and revision of conventional styles; nature and artifice; high art and popular culture, even kitsch; art and craft; intimacy and detachment; figuration and abstraction.

At the realistic end of the pole, several portraits—frontal and confrontational—are painted from life, mostly of Rosen's friends and relatives. Like traditional depictions of martyrs, they include the saint's attributes or allusions to his or her martyrdom. So *Martyr Cassian*, a portrait of the artist Lynton Wells, Rosen's former teacher, is at once a specific likeness and a macabre emblem of a teacher, as indicated by a blackboard with meticulous penmanship exercises in Hebrew. Cassian's martyrdom—stabbed to death by his students' iron pens—is alluded to by the sharp instrument piercing his arm. Yet, like the babble of Hebrew letters in the background and the weapon that seems suspended over Cassian's wrist, lurid, incongruous elements infiltrate these realistic renderings, thus mocking their apparent candor.

Abstraction creeps into figuration, often in the textures of the background of the figures. In the *Fake Martyr*, for instance, the hanged monkey is enveloped by a modulated field of luminous blue, with wound-like spots of red, perhaps mimicking the works of artists who have reinvented abstract painting in the 1980s as a metaphor for disease, such as Ross Bleckner and Moira Dryer. A different use of abstraction can be found in *Martyr Lawrence*. The grill on which the saint had been martyred is transformed in Rosen's work into a Pointillist/Expressionist/Fauvist flame-like rug. In some cases, imagery that looks spontaneous and abstract reveals shape and meaning on closer inspection. In *Martyr Agatha 1*, the amorphous blue field in which the martyr floats, framed by a black and gold pattern, turns out to be a dish, flanked by a fork and a knife. In *Seven Sleeping martyrs*, almost imperceptible tiny forms appear on the ground level, outside of the womb-like cave in which the saints sleep. A closer look at these forms reveals a Lilliputian universe: tanks, trees, a plant.

The art historical sources for the Martyrs range from Old Master portraiture to martyrs' portraits and scenes from their lives, to medieval illuminations. Rosen's recourse to the rigid, restrained renderings of the middle ages enhances the deadpan expressions of the martyrs; their psychological detachment never betrays an awareness of their ordeal. The paintings also make ample references to art of our century: machinery whose ability to function is doubtful, such as in the works of Duchamp, Picabia, and Tinguely, is invoked by the menacing dental equipment in *Martyr Apollonia*. Surrealism is summoned throughout the series, both in the disturbing juxtapositions of unrelated, disjointed elements and in the frequent gender transformations. The paintings convert the ghost of Pop Art by using everyday objects as idiosyncratically theological symbols: a gigantic refrigerator sealing the cave where the seven sleeping martyrs are frozen in time; a jar of bleaching cream placed beside the immaculate Martyr Agnes; a TV set radiating in *Martyr Barbara I* and in *Martyr Margaret*. The ironic reinvention of history evokes the faux-historical reinventions of Mark Tansey and Komar and Melamid. Like discarded items in a junkyard, rescued by a skillful designer to furnish a fashionable living room, Rosen's melange of styles constitutes an existence of elegant discomfort.

While the (un)easy chair of modernism cannot contain the irreverence of Rosen's art, postmodernism turns out to be a stiff, uncomfortable sofa. The elements borrowed are ever restless and shifting. The mandorla,

3. Robert Storr, "No Joy in Mudville," Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, eds. *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High & Low* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 162.

4. Jane Yellowlees Douglas, "The Act of Reading: The WOE Beginners' Guide to Dissection," *Writing on the Edge*, 2 (2) (University of California at Davis, June 1991).

5. Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting." Brian Wallis, ed. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 153.

that embraces—or excludes—the imagery in each painting, for example, turns into a subterranean cavity in which the *Seven Sleeping Martyrs* lie. In *Martyr Catherine 2* it becomes a spiky torture wheel, while losing its contours to leafy silhouette in *The Hidden Martyr*. Turning diagonally in *Protomartyr Stephen*, the oval becomes a uterus for a martyr waiting to be born.

Appropriation, a flagpole of postmodernism, is justified by the repeated declarations of the death of painting; Rosen's art rescues painting from its reputed fate, endowing it, instead, with more lives than the death sentences it has endured. His profuse borrowing is not a cynical admission of defeat, but, rather, a positive, and, dare I say, life affirming belief in painting's persistent vitality. Beneath the cacophony of borrowed styles lies the unmistakable mark of the artist's hand.

The Martyr in the Mirror

The mandorla is the almond-shape that frames medieval holy scenes, and carries allusions to a seed or a womb.⁶ Replacing the rectangular "window to the world" format, the oval evokes a sense of voyeurism.⁷ The form also brings to mind a mirror, the fickle vehicle of reflection or distancing: one cannot be sure whether the stare of the subject is directed at him or her, or if he or she is intruding upon an act of narcissistic gaze.

Mirrors have also been perceived as devices for the empowerment of the self. The evil queen in *Snow White* derived her sense of identity from the magic mirror that affirmed her superior beauty daily. Lacan views the mirror stage, that magical station in the child's formation, as the beginning of an awareness of one's body: "This act... immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates—the child's own body, and the persons and things, around him."⁸ In a description of a mirror experiment with a one-year-old child conducted by Arnold Gesell in 1934, Erik Erikson describes similar interaction between child and mirror, except that in Gesell's experiment, documented with a series of photographs, the child has an erection.⁹ Rosen's youthful martyrs, emancipated from the oppressive burden of art historical didactic command, observe their liberated reflection in the mirror of the mandorla. The release of sexual charge that follows this narcissistic gratification yields exuberant acts of sexuality, from Martyr Lawrence's shameless erection, to Martyr Perpetua's copulation with the devil.

It is through the allusion to reflection that several dramatic self-portraits included in this series join a curious little genre in the history of art: the self portrait of the artist as a martyr. In 1840, Hippolyte Bayard, who finished a dishonorable third in the race for the inventions of photography, fashioned his *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*, as a sweet-and-sour ironic comment on his feelings of rejection from the pantheon of photography. Shirtless, his eyes closed, the striking whiteness of his torso contrasts with his tanned face and hands. A straw hat hangs on the wall beside him is a sad joke on the halo motif. Paul Gauguin painted himself as Christ (*Self Portrait*, 1889), in the garden of Gethsemane that doubles as Eden, complete with a serpent and a couple of apples. Cast as a floating, haloed head, his eyes averted, the artist is the epitome of isolation and disillusionment. In the self-portrait *Goya Attended by Doctor Arrieta* (1820), Goya uses the compositional conventions of the Pietà, depicting himself pale and powerless in the arms of his doctor, his eyes glazed with pain and exhaustion. As Michael Fried notes, taking his cue from Courbet's self-portrait as a dying victim (*The Wounded Man*, 1844-45), in which the painter languishes under a tree, his eyes closed, this sort of self representation obliterates the distinction between the pictorial space and the viewer's space: "A beholder literally drawn into the painting, made physically one with it, would no longer be a beholder in any conventional sense of the term."¹⁰ Yet, while the viewer is drawn into the space of the work to share the suffering of the artist/subject, the invitation stops short by the disconcerting fact that the subject's/artist's eyes are closed, averted, or unfocused. The artist "tricks" the viewer not only by revoking a promised intimacy, but also by pretending the picture is not a self-portrait—since how can one paint oneself with the eyes closed?¹¹

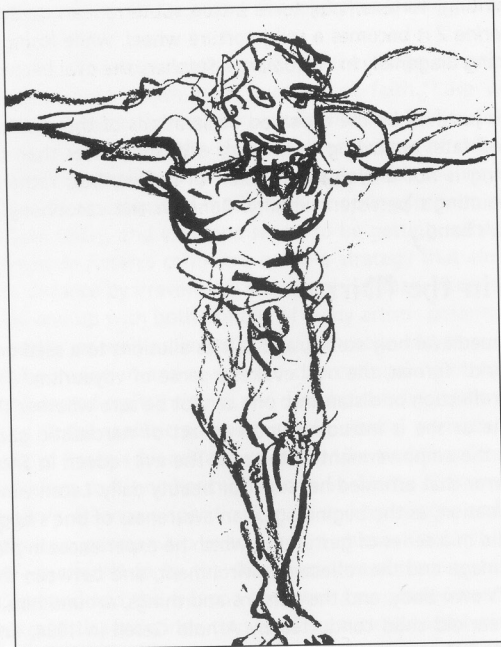
6. Gertrude Grace Sill, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Collier Books), 1975, p.60.

7. The stronghold of the rectangular format in the history of art is such that every employment of a rounded frame brings on connotations of peeking, rather than viewing: when Ingres first painted his late, voyeuristic extravaganza, *The Turkish Bath*, he painted it in a square format. Later, he changed it into a tondo—a peephole—clearly enhancing the viewer's feeling that he is looking into a wonderfully forbidden world.

8. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p.1.

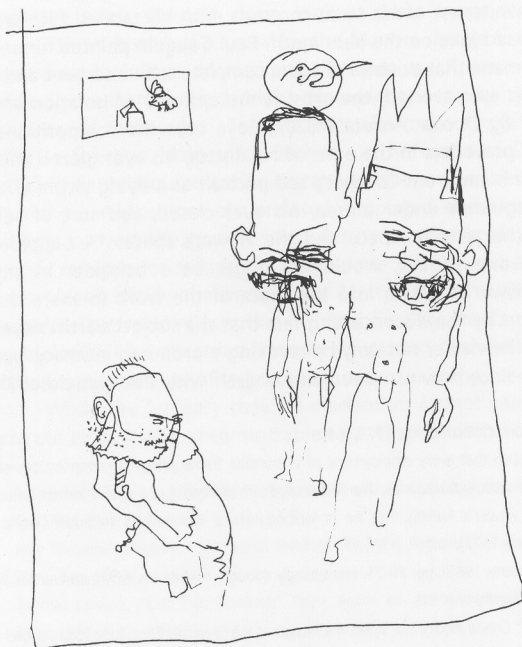
9. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), pp. 70-71. Interestingly enough, the photos where an erection is in evidence were not published in the book, only shown to Erikson privately.

10. Michael Fried, "The Structure of Beholding in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Chicago: at the University Press, June 1983), p. 665.



Willem de Kooning
Blind Drawing, 1966

ווילם דה־קונינג
רישום עיוור, 1966



Roe Rosen
Blind drawing from the book *The Blind Merchant*,
1991-92

רועי רוזן
רישום עיוור מתוך הספר הסוחר העיוור, 1991-92

Rosen's self-portraits as a martyr do not play the bashful eyes closed/averted/glazed game of their historical predecessors. Although intimacy is neither granted nor promised, the invitation to see is wide open. To be sure, his martyrs carry an extra set of eyes. *Martyr Agatha*, whose eyes are wiped off, is compensated not only by a pair of spectacles, but also with an extra pair of eyes in a face that is clumsily formed from blots of black on the blue ground; *Martyr Lucy*, staring straight at the viewer (or in the mirror), presents an additional pair of eyes floating in a bowl. Standing in a mock-formal posture as a waitress, attired with a little girl's dress, the blessed patroness of eyesight defies the romantic and sometimes melodramatic vision of religious sufferers. A faint drawing of an umbrella hovers above her head as a halo, reminiscent of the ironic hat/halo in Bayard's self portrait. The waitress is surrounded by painful reminders of her past 'career' as a martyr: four crude drawings illustrate Lucy, naked, spurning a suitor; sprawled in a brothel whose clients have gone blind from gazing at her nakedness; her body in flames; and, finally, with a sword piercing her throat. While these lewd vignettes can be explained as iconographic footnotes to the story of her martyrdom, another interpretation is possible: looking at herself in the mirror unleashes in Lucy the twin forces of sexuality and anguish. While her "official" role as the giver of eyesight is accomplished by the ceremonious offering of the eyes, her fantasies are acted out in the margins.

It is not only the mirror that can unleash sexual fantasies. A similar effect can be achieved by denying oneself of sight altogether. A little-known body of work by Willem de Kooning is a case in point. In 1966, the artist made a series of blind drawings on the subject of Christ on the cross. The artist closed his eyes and turned inward to depict the crucifixion. His Christ is hallucinatory, quivering, laughable. He is surrounded by loose women—naked, splayed, grimacing. Does the artist, eyes closed, attempt to capture the delusions of the divine sacrificial lamb? If so, there is more than a casual connection between two artists who amuse themselves by drawing with their eyes closed: In 1992, Rosen created an artist book, *The Blind Merchant*, which comprises Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, an additional "parasitic" text written by the artist, and drawings. Every time Shylock appears on-stage, Rosen drew with his eyes closed. The blind drawings give the viewer a sense of the blind man's approximated visual perception, but also simulate an insight into the psyche of a Jewish, martyr-like foreigner in a Christian city. Seen again in the context of Rosen's Martyrs paintings, De Kooning's Christ, indulging in wild fantasies, bears a strong affinity to Rosen's Christ in *Martyr Perpetua I*, ejaculating among the blurry visions of monstrous animals.¹²

Mirroring and blindness are also brought to mind by *Martyr Lucy's* gouged eyes, offered in a bowl. Their graphic presentation reminds me of Georges Bataille's pornographic novel *Story of the Eye*. After the slaying of a bull in a thrilling bullfight, its skinned testicles, looking like eyeballs, are delivered to Simone, the book's spunky heroine. In plain sight of everyone in the arena, she puts one in her mouth, the other in her vagina, and reaches orgasm at the moment the matador's eye is pierced by the horn of another bull.¹³ Elsewhere in the novel, Simone, helped by her accomplices, rapes and strangles a priest, who ejaculates at the moment of expiration. She then places his gouged eyeball in her vagina, and the eye stares at the narrator in a bizarre *tableau vivant*.¹⁴ In *WC*, a story Bataille wrote a year before *Story of the Eye* and destroyed, there is "a drawing...show[ing] an eye: the scaffold's eye. Solitary, solar, bristling with lashes, it gazed from the lunette of a guillotine. The drawing was named *The Eternal Return*, and its horrible machine was the crossbeam, gymnastic gallows, portico."¹⁵

Like Simone, Lucy participates in diverse acts of sado-masochistic pursuits: she takes the role of the aggressor as she beats up her kneeling suitor with a broom in one scene, and has her throat pierced in another. All the while, the viewer's gaze—the scaffold's eye—looms, taking everything in. The eye in Bataille's world is a transient object and a cluster of metaphors: it represents the gaze of the narrator/voyeur and the reader/voyeur;

11. Derrida, pondering about this paradox, observes: "One can also, on the other hand, surprise that which does not let itself be surprised; one can draw the eyes closed: in an ecstatic vision, in prayer or sleep in the mask of the dead or wounded man;" (Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 72.

12. Blind drawings have also been employed by contemporary artists such as Robert Morris and William Anastasi. The difference, however, is that in both those cases the emphasis is put on a process leading to abstraction, rather than the task of realistic, figurative depiction, through the paradoxical attempt to see blindly.

13. Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987), pp. 62-64.

14. *Ibid.*, 79-84. The theme of martyrdom is yet another tie between Bataille's description of the priest's murder and Rosen's martyrs: "Something like an absurd joy began to open his mouth, he crossed his arms over his naked chest and finally gazed at us with ecstatic eyes. "Martyrdom..." A bizarre hope of purification has come to the wretch, illuminating his eyes." (P. 79).

15. *Ibid.*, 98.

it is a symbol of both generative energy and death. Likewise, in the intercourse between Rosen and his viewers, the eye shifts meanings. The pair of eyes, presented by Lucy, translates metaphorically to the artist's own vision offered to the viewer, thereby reinterpreting the art historical genre of martyrs' legends into an eccentric, contemporary creation. The martyrs' gaze in the mirror, releasing libidinal powers, doubles as the viewer's voyeuristic participation.

A crafty manipulator of vision, the monkey—*The Fake Martyr*—heads the pack of Rosen's Martyrs. Engrossed with sex and death,¹⁶ cunningly mimicking nature and martyrdom, he thus sets the tone for the series. Anne Kastorp writes: "Traditionally the monkey, like the mirror, stands for the visual arts, painting, the painter...Unlike the mirror, however, the monkey invariably conveys a denigrating attitude: the visual arts ape nature, and remain always an ape in relation to her."¹⁷ As the artist's wicked double in the Martyrs series, the monkey establishes the fake, sordid premises that characterize the paintings. As the artist's surrogate, he takes part in an absurd game of mimesis whose players move in a perpetual hallucinatory circle conflating the Platonic division between the heavenly idea, the earthly object, and the lowly representation: the monkey stands in for the artist, mimicking not only nature but also God: His penis erect as he pretends to choke to death, the Fake Martyr feigns the figure of Christ, hidden in the Rorschach-like blotches hovering in the background of *Martyr Perpetua 1*. Suspended from an imaginary cross and appropriately adorned with a crown of thorns, Christ emits a powerful spray of his blessed seed before returning to his heavenly father.

"Rorschach himself," Ernst Gombrich writes, "stressed that there is only a difference of degree between ordinary perception, the filing of impressions in our mind, and the interpretations due to 'projection'. When we are aware of the process of filing we say we 'interpret', where we are not we say 'we see'."¹⁸ Rosen's clever manipulation of the viewer's gaze toys with this ambiguous process of projection and interpretation. Looking at *Martyr Perpetua I*, the viewer can easily decipher animals—a dog, a swan. The realization that the space between the blots conceals the ejaculating Christ comes as a delayed, rude surprise, perhaps causing the viewer to fear that the revelation is a projection of his/her own sacrilegious imagination. The viewer can, of course, blame these blasphemous thoughts on the monkey, in whose hands the sacred deeds of the martyrs turn into the material of parody, and embarrassment.

Dirty Children

The universe of Rosen's martyrs is permeated with a dark domain of childhood, tainted by danger, betrayal, and sexuality. *Martyr Agnes*, an adolescent marriage refusenik who was stabbed in the throat for her Christian zeal, is represented here as a defenseless baby threatened by a giant pair of scissors in a snapshot laid on a nursery rug that carries a repetitive design of her namesake—the lamb (*Agnus*).¹⁹ A jar of *Creme Bleach* nearby appears as an ironic comment on her purity. Several martyrs are depicted as sexualized children. In *Martyr Dymna*, the "authoritative" rendering of the adolescent martyr's rape by her father is overdrawn with red scribble that brings to mind children's drawings psychologists often use to bring out unspeakable domestic acts. The scrawled words, "Dympna" and "Pa" identify the protagonists. *Martyr Lawrence* is portrayed as an eager child with a conspicuous erection.²⁰ Playfully disguised in the foliage of a forest complete with a docile wolf, the *Hidden Martyr* is cooked in a large pot, in a painting reminiscent of visual riddles in children's magazines challenging the young readers to find a hidden figure in an intricate background, and also evokes illustrations for fairy tales.

Indeed, fairy tales provide the Martyr series with a rich and subversive context. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim writes: "In practically every fairy tale good and evil are given body in the form of some figures and their actions, as good and evil are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in every man. It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires the struggle to solve it."²¹ The programmatic structure and the didacticism of fairy tales are often found in traditional stories of the

16. In addition to symbolizing lust and sin, the monkey also personifies the devil in Christian iconography (Sill, p. 16.).

17. Anne Kastorp, *The Fake Martyr*.

18. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 105.

19. The lamb is a symbol of Christ, and so, Agnes and her beloved are finally united on the nursery floor.

20. In Rosen's artist book *Lucy*, and in a new series of paintings, *Workers*, the protagonist is a child with a permanent erection, whose face is based on a childhood snapshot of the artist. In both bodies of work, the youthful hero goes about the business of life with his inappropriate erection, as an embarrassing, ironic comment on adult life.

21. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p.7.

martyrs. Yet, while crossing these two folk genres, Rosen corrupts both in the process, placing his martyrs in an ominous, beguiling twilight zone. Pedagogy is inverted into irony.

The artist endows his self-portrait as *Martyr Barbara* with an additional identity as the Grimm Brothers' heroine *Rapunzel*. The doubling is based on some striking similarities in the two stories.²² Both Barbara and Rapunzel are imprisoned in a secluded tower by a jealous parent figure.²³ Both develop a secret passion which they pursue despite their isolation, and both are severely punished for that devotion. The heroines are eventually united with the object of their attachment: Barbara gives Christ the ultimate gift—her life; Rapunzel gives her prince his sight back when her tears fall on his blinded eyes. Thus the protagonist—the artist in disguise—is once again a negotiator of eyesight, and by extension, of potency. *Martyr Barbara* is tar-faced, her bald head is adorned with a huge, girlish bow. Against the background of a silhouetted forest, perhaps an allusion to the prince's desperate voyage, Barbara/Rapunzel stands, anxious. She embraces a phallic tower, but one that is topped with a nipple: having escaped imprisonment, she now faces a fate of gender confusion.

One of the most revered saints of the Middle Ages, a daughter of a pagan priest, Martyr Margaret converted into Christianity and rejected the advances of a high official (in some versions, a king). Denounced as a Christian, she was put in prison, and, while there, was visited by Satan in the guise of a dragon. It swallowed her, but she pierced his stomach with a cross and sprang out, miraculously unharmed. The theme of being swallowed by a beast/whale/dragon and emerging alive is, of course, present in many myths, from Cronus's children to Jonah and Pinocchio. The deliverance is a metaphor of rebirth, a new lease on life.²⁴ Rosen's *Martyr Margaret II* is a comic-strip-like succession which combines episodes from the story of her life with the Brothers Grimm's *Little Red Riding Hood*. The line drawing, the dramatic interaction between a man and a woman, the violence, as well as the cosmic dimension of the story, play upon conventions of comic strip. Yet, the genre's implication of linear narrative is undermined by the made-up, composite story in Rosen's painting. At the top, Margaret rejects the king, who has a wolf's head and a prominent erection while the heroine, naked and posed suggestively, is far from being the chaste, unsuspecting virgin of either tale. At the center of the painting, the dragon doubles as the big bad wolf, with the saint in its belly. At the bottom, Margaret, again in a libertine position, presides over the wolf/dragon, now dead at her feet. In Rosen's compound invention, gender reassignments abound. Margaret forsakes the traditional role of female sexual passivity, becoming an equal partner in an overtly sexual interaction. The dragon/wolf, impregnated with the heroine, temporarily takes on a female role. Having conquered Satan, Margaret is reminiscent of a horse-less St. George, victorious over the dead dragon, her masculine lance piercing his body.

Rosen's manipulations explicitly deny the didactic binary poles of good and bad prescribed by Bettelheim to the fairy tales, just as they defy the conventions of the martyrs' legends. Instead of "giv[ing] conscious credence and body to id pressures and show[ing] ways to satisfy those that are in line with ego and superego requirements,"²⁵ which is the effect Bettelheim rooted for, the resulting message of *Martyr Margaret* is an overwhelming triumph of the id.

Ecstatic Anguish

In early Christianity and through the Middle Ages, sexuality was harshly suppressed,²⁶ but did not disappear entirely from artistic representations. As Bataille observes, "The Middle Ages assigned a place to

22. Barbara, a beautiful maiden, was locked in a tower by her pagan father. There she became a Christian, and her father, upon finding out, beheaded her. Rapunzel was raised by a sorceress who, when the girl was twelve, locked her in a tower. Like many heroines of fairy tales, the girl fell in love with a wandering prince who would enter the tower climbing on her long hair. When the jealous witch found out, she cut the hair and banished Rapunzel to the wilderness. The prince fell off the tower, his eyes were blinded by thorns, and, after much roaming, found his love, who restored his eyesight with her grateful tears.

23. The sexual suggestion of a jealous parent wishing to save a daughter's sexuality for himself/herself, is enhanced in Anne Sexton's adaptation of the fairy tale: the relationship between Rapunzel and the witch is transformed into an incestuous affair between a girl and an aging aunt: "they would play rummy/ or lie on the couch/ and touch and touch/ Old breast against young breast (Sexton, *The Complete Poems* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981], p.245). In 1982, Rosen made a series of paintings based on Sexton's *Transformations*.

24. Jonah, for this reason, symbolized a prefiguration of Christ's death and resurrection in early Christian iconography.

25. Bettelheim, p. 7.

26. For a discussion of sexual renunciation in early Christianity see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); especially chapter 2—"From apostle to apologist: Sexual Order and Sexual Renunciation in the Early Church."

eroticism in painting; it relegated it to hell.... Only representations of hell—only repulsive images of sin—could furnish it a place."²⁷ The Last Judgment scene in Giotto's *Arena Chapel* is exemplary. Four sinners are hanged by the parts of their body that generated sin: a man and a woman are hanged by their genitals, another man by his tongue, and a woman is suspended by the hair. Nearby, another offender is castrated by a demon.

One domain, however, where righteousness and sexuality do meet is the stories of the martyrs. In martyrology, sexual humiliation and abuse join the feast of torture and death as a part of the heroic ordeal in the name of Christ. While viewing some old photographs depicting execution by dismemberment, Bataille experienced the following epiphany: "What I suddenly saw ... was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror ... only an interminable detour allows us to reach that instant where the contraries seem visibly conjoined, where the religious horror disclosed in sacrifice becomes linked to the abyss of eroticism, to the last shuddering tears that eroticism alone can illuminate."²⁸

Inverting the conjoining of ecstasy and horror observed by Bataille, Rosen denies his female martyrs both the suffering of rape and the anguish of torture, and thus sends them right back to hell. He also betrays two related art historical conventions: rape and torture of martyrs. The depiction of rape in the history of art is spectacularly vigorous: limbs flailing, faces distorted, garments tossed in disarray. From the *Rape of the Sabines* to the attempted rape of Joseph by Potiphar's Wife, the struggle endows the paintings with a dynamic composition and a stern normative tone, not to mention the rush of titillation granted the eager viewer. In representations of martyrs enduring bizarre procedures, such as St. Bartholomew being flayed alive or Agatha's undergoing a brutal mastectomy, the expression of victims is almost universally one of resignation or mute ecstasy—hands held together in prayer, eyes turned up to heaven. Rosen's rape scenes reject both the *Sturm und Drang* of traditional depictions of rape and the calm surrender to painful death. His martyrs remain self-possessed as they are being assaulted. Moreover, they are equal partners in the sexual rampage, sometimes even the aggressors. Rosen's female martyrs shamelessly expose their sexuality. In a feast of sex and death, Margaret happily seduces the king, Perpetua copulates with the devil while stabbing him, Lucy spreads her legs in the brothel. Even Christ himself ejaculates from the cross.

While their sexual explicitness and relentless repetition may place Rosen's paintings in the realm of pornography, they resist eroticism. Their incongruous, awkward, and often funny, rendering empties them of sensual thrill. Since voyeurism signifies impotence—the voyeur can only reach coitus through this specific sexual practice—the viewer of these paintings remains limp. Deirdra English's assertion that "art, like pornography itself, is fantasy without action"²⁹ holds true in the Martyr series. The viewer, looking in the mirror held up by the monkey, whose bold erection had constituted a promise, finds there an impotent, frustrated voyeur.

Yet, it is precisely through their orgasmic endeavors that Rosen's martyrs become tools of redemption. According to Kabbalistic thinking, the Messiah will be induced either as a result of total righteousness, or once complete evil has triumphed. Walter Benjamin has phrased a similar thought: "Just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the messianic kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach."³⁰ As the virtuousness of religious do-gooders—and martyrs amongst them—has failed to bring on a perfect world, the artist leads his martyrs in a lustful, narcissistic crusade toward salvation. And Rosen achieves an artistic redemption of his own: though he turns venerated chapters in Western history into pastiche, he actually deals with history in a way that reintroduces a questioning of the very notion of history. By subversive reworking of art historical styles he gives those styles a new life and forces them to talk to one another. Let us look again at the mirror the artist holds to our face: through this magic looking glass we glimpse at a dark room in which Rosen's martyrs sit around an oval table with other apparitions of artistic creation. Medieval saints stretch their stiff bodies to commune with their brothers and sisters in *Martyr's City Plan*, while Mat Mullican's signs protest, claiming the indexical upper-hand; Duchamp's Bride exchanges technical tips with *Martyr Apollonia*; Chris Burden, still crucified on his *Volkswagen*, winks at Christ in *Martyr Perpetua*; Cindy Sherman stares coldly at *Martyr Eugenia*, so skillfully disguised as a man; Komar and Melamid, young pioneers dressed in shorts, giggle at the sight of *Martyr Agatha's* breasts; juvenile illustrations from a fairy tale frown at *Martyr Barbara*, who frowns back; Matthew Barney flexes his muscles

27. Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), p. 82.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

29. Quoted in: Lucy Lippard, "Sex and Death and Shock and Schlock: A Long Review of 'The Time Square Show.'" Howard Risatti, ed. *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 82.

30. Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political fragment," *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 312.