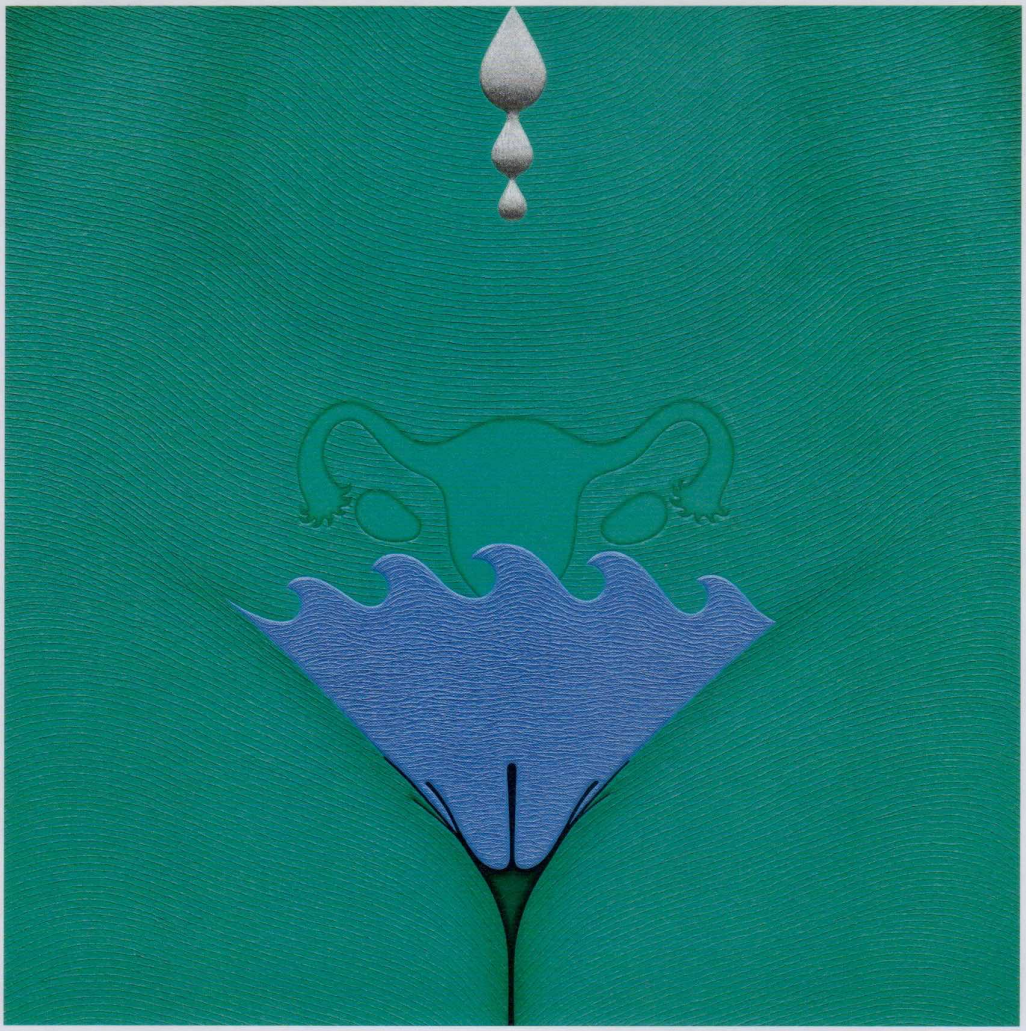
THE SOFT AND THE HARD

A powerful brew of feminist symbolism, personal narrative and practical magic in the sculptural relief paintings of LINDA STARK *by Jonathan Griffin*

Self-Portrait with Ray, 2017, oil on canvas over panel, 91 × 91 × 8 cm. All images courtesy: the artist; photographs: Brian Forrest



Fixed Wave, 2011, oil on canvas over panel, 41 × 41 × 5 cm.

HANGING IN LINDA STARK'S STUDIO, earlier this year, were four square oil paintings of cats. Only one painting showed the entire animal; in the other three, feline heads floated disembodied, like portentous apparitions. In *Self-Portrait with Ray* (2017), the eponymous grey tabby's head appears life-sized, inside a pink disc located at the precise centre of the canvas and also at the centre of the artist's forehead, like a third eye. Both Ray and Stark look straight at us; Stark's eyes are rimmed with white tears.

All these paintings, though charming and gently humorous, derive from intense grief. Each of these cats is dead. By painting them, Stark professes to work through her loss, to 'open a portal into their presence'. That might explain why, in *Bastet* (2016) and *Tesla* (2017), as with their progenitor *Samantha* (2005), the cat heads appear at the centres of luminous flowers. Or why the salmon-coloured orb containing *Ray* (2017) emanates a rippling black surface that took Stark months to build up into a thick crust using fine brushes. The wizened Bastet, like her ancient Egyptian goddess namesake, wears a gold ring in one ear. Throughout history, and across cultures, cats have been symbols and avatars: in Egypt, Bastet was associated with women's fertility, childbirth and the protection of the home. In contemporary America, the stereotypical 'cat lady' is presumed to be elderly and single, while kittens are supposedly the preserve of little girls.

Since the mid 1980s, Stark has been making meticulous drawings and paintings that incorporate clichés and symbols in an attempt to isolate a deeply personal, even autobiographical, encounter with the obdurate structures of society and culture. Her paintings are, in various senses, about a meeting of the soft and the hard. Sharp-edged, graphic forms encase realist renderings and vaporous gradients, and flawlessly flat fields contrast with textures so heavily built up that they assume the presence of sculptural reliefs. Alongside the cat paintings in Stark's studio were three paintings of hearts: Stark considers *Tell Tale Heart* (2016), an upside-down red heart painted thickly onto camouflage fabric, to be an antiwar statement; beside it, *Purple Heart* (2018) is a faithful rendering of the medal given to wounded or killed US soldiers, but with tiny daisies embedded in the purple paint around George Washington's profile – a subtle but significant subversion that recalls the emblem of 1960s and '70s flower power pacifism.

Stark was only 13 years old in the heady summer of 1969, so we can assume that she regards the flower symbol

Spectacled Cobra, 2005, oil on canvas over panel, 91 × 91 × 8 cm

with some degree of detachment. She rarely shows her hand when it comes to her private relationship to the often-provocative content in her paintings. In *Stigmata* (2011), for instance, a relief map of the artist's palm has been branded with the word 'feminist'. More than a declaration of allegiance, the work feels like the revelation of a wound: something necessary but borne regretfully, painfully. (It is probably coincidental that the lines on her palm bear an uncanny resemblance to a map of the major freeways in Los Angeles – the city where Stark has lived since the late 1980s.) Another painting, *Ruins* (2008), depicts Stonehenge beneath a sickly pink sky and a fat, low moon; the site of ancient metaphysical power is reduced to a logo, which Stark combines with a heavy carved wooden necklace, slung from the top of the canvas. The resulting assemblage occurred to the artist when one day she wore a vintage Stonehenge blouse with some tacky pink beads, probably made for the Mexican tourist market.

It feels inappropriate to sniff for irony in Stark's paintings, not because they don't contain plenty of self-effacing humour and hedged meaning, but because their intensely worked surfaces and shameless beauty seem to speak more of belief, even hopefulness, than bitter scepticism. In 2007, Stark made a series of 'Potion Paintings and Drawings', based on spells she drew from various occult traditions. Each painting is nine inches square and features the actual ingredients for the potion (mistletoe, clover, quartz, valerian root, frankincense and so on) embalmed beneath glutinous ribbons of paint laid over each other in a careful rotation. The works recall previous paintings made in a similar manner, except that in this particular series, diagrammatic keys for the ingredients, and their supposed effects, are provided as pendants to each painting. Stark cannot tell you whether *Egyptian Love Spell* or *Leprechaun's Gold Formula* or *Gypsy Love Potion* (all 2007) will have any effect if you hang them in your house. But neither can she tell you that they will not.

Practical magic, in Los Angeles, is part of daily experience in a way I've seldom encountered anywhere else in the Western world. Throughout the city, psychics dispense their services next to off-licences and cafes. Not only in *botánicas* but also in most convenience stores, you can buy Santería candles with spells printed on their glass jars. Sage smudge sticks and crystals are available in my nearest supermarket next to the toothpaste section. Even though

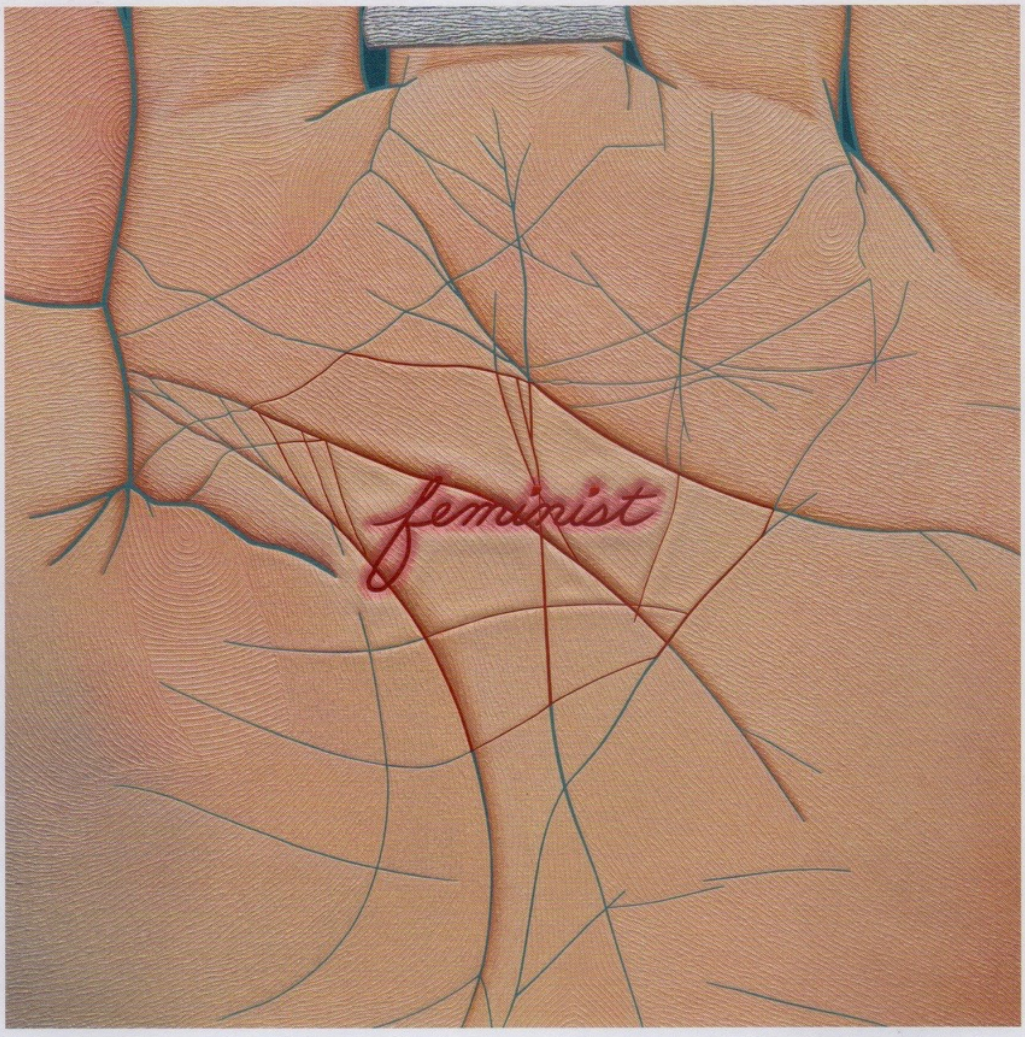
Bastet, 2016, oil on canvas over panel, 91 × 91 × 5 cm

magic is by no means practised by the majority, it is generally accepted without judgement or cynicism as a fact of life.

Stark has studied widely the traditions and methodologies of practical magic. When she set out to teach herself palmistry, she discovered that the literature on the method is highly contradictory. She concluded that in order to practise the technique successfully, you would have to be clairvoyant. There is no doubt, however, that Stark performs a kind of sorcery within her art, transmogrifying paint on canvas into a panoply of other substances: skin, wax, amber, ribbon, thread, blood, rippling water, tears. Her technique is not to be mistaken for illusory representation; instead, the material of paint itself appears alchemically altered, or transubstantiated. With minimal additives, she weaves it in thick bands, or stipples it into a surface resembling skin or leather. Sometimes her paintings have raised nipples or a bellybutton. Most unnervingly, as in *Fountain I* (1992), paint gushes from her paintings in torrents, coagulating in drips on the canvases' lowest edges.

To say that, in Stark's work, the painting is a (gendered) body and the paint its skin is to admit that bodies can also be signs or symbols. This we know from the visual art of diverse religious faiths, especially from the legacy of Orthodox Christian icon painting, a sacred hieratic tradition that haunts many of Stark's pictures. Icon painting, which developed in an age before most congregants could read scripture, was intended to be deciphered as an arrangement of signs. The bodies of Christ and the saints are abstracted into essentialized forms, identifiable by particular symbols (such as weeping stigmata), while the very finest examples also project a vivid realism.

Stark's work orchestrates a comparable collision of the universal and the specific, the symbolic and the autobiographic, the abstract and the realist, culture and nature. The female reproductive system – or, rather, its instantly recognizable outline – appears in several of her pictures, like a universal logo for a host of women's issues. (Stark's first version of this motif derived from a diagram in the 1973 feminist handbook *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.) In the painting *Fixed Wave* (2011), the embossed uterus commands the centre of a painting of a woman's groin. While her skin is turquoise and her wavy pubic hair lilac-blue, contoured ridges over the woman's legs and belly lend the painting a sense of immediacy and intimate specificity. This is not just any body; it's somebody.



Stigmata, 2011, oil on canvas over panel, 91 × 91 × 8 cm

The painting is funny, too. Stark told me that, in order for a painting to be successful, it needs to laugh at her. This muted but persistent quality in her work is perhaps easiest to understand as a consequence of the inevitable doubt, or mystery, that attends each painted statement – and which, crucially, undermines her work's sense of precision, commitment and mastery. My favourite painting by Stark is also one of her funniest: a raised, textured form on a sky-blue ground that resembles a yellow strawberry with a tail. At first, it appears that the artist has painted onto it a maniacal smiley face, in black and white, like a clown's makeup. The work's title clues us in: *Spectacled Cobra* (2005) is, in fact, the back of a serpent's flared hood. Google Image Search helps too; the spectacled cobra does indeed have defensive markings that preposterously resemble a smiley face. (How did evolution conclude that an emoji was the most effective method for deterring predators?)

Spectacled Cobra is an object lesson in the way that the anthropocentric world of signs is interlaced with – and inevitably confounded by – the so-called 'natural world' of non-human phenomena. Animals, plants, even the sun and the moon, all ultimately shrug off the codes and symbolic meanings that are imposed on them by human culture. A sunset may be a cliché, but the sun doesn't care. Neither does a cat. The question of whether a human body can similarly transcend the constraints of codification is one that has more immediate and troubling ramifications for all of us, one that Stark's work leaves tantalizingly unanswered ●

1 Masakazu Konishi, 'How The Owl Tracks Its Prey', in *American Scientist*, Vol. 61, No. 4, July–August 1973, pp. 414–424

JONATHAN GRIFFIN *is a writer and contributing editor to* frieze, *based in Los Angeles, USA.*

LINDA STARK *is an artist based in Los Angeles, USA. In 2017, she had a solo exhibition at Jenny's, Los Angeles, and was included in group exhibitions at Karma International, Los Angeles, the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, USA, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, USA, and the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. This summer, her work will be featured in 'Made in L.A.' at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.*