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Caroline Wells Chandler, *Ergot Faery*, 2019, acrylic and wool fibers, 66 × 96".

Caroline Wells Chandler

GALERIE ERIC MOUCHET

About ten years ago, Caroline Wells Chandler was living in East Texas next door to his aging grandparents. The New York-based artist, who identifies as a “fluid non-binary transgender boi,” remembers feeling guilty about “ditching them” to work on a group of large-scale paintings he was then producing, and so, armed with balls of colored yarn purchased at Michaels, he started to crochet, which allowed him to hang out with the couple while working. Chandler continues to use a variation on the slip stitch to make exuberant hand-crocheted “drawings,” twelve of which were stapled to the gallery walls of his recent exhibition “St. Anthony’s Fire.” These shaped compositions—each with the weight and thickness of a warm blanket—were made comfortably on the artist’s lap in Queens, New York. Etymology informs this body of work: The word *queer* is drawn from the proto-Indo-European *twerkw*, which also relates to the Latin word *torquere*, meaning “to twist.” Accordingly, he uses a hook to twist a single strand of colored fiber, and figures torqued and bent into advanced yoga postures populate many of his recent works.

The exhibition’s title referenced one of Chandler’s favorite paintings, Matthias Grünewald’s sixteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece. Grünewald realized the triptych for a monastic hospital in Alsace, France, dedicated to treating ailments including ergotism, or Saint Anthony’s fire, a painful, hallucinatory condition caused by the ingestion of fungus-infested rye. Chandler is particularly intrigued by psychedelic readings of the work’s dramatic depictions of torture and suffering and of Christ’s exuberant transcendence. “I’m really interested in psychedelia’s relationship to queerness,” Chandler told me, “how both of those things pull you outside of normative culture.” At the entry of the exhibition, a crocheted drawing sharing the show’s title was lined up with *Electric Mayhem*, *Pink Lotus*, and *Skittles* (all works 2019). The figures in each of these vividly colored totemic works take the same Baddha Konasana, or butterfly pose. Their headless torsos radiate as if aflame, and their hybrid genitals—projecting phalluses overlaid with a labial fold—suggest pendulous organs worthy of the draping anatomy of a matriarch of the Russian baths described by Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* (2015).

Between the two doorways that link the gallery’s wide front room to a longer, narrower back space, Chandler’s dark red *Centaur* made a joking reference to homophobic ignorance. In Texas, the artist said, he would hear people say, “‘If they legalize gay marriage, then people will marry their horse,’ so I think the centaur is really funny. . . . I think of centaurs as children of forbidden love.” *Born Again* depicts a female body, its flesh a Klein blue, with breasts like mountain peaks of pink cotton candy, a spiky-gray-haired head popping out of its ass. Poking fun at the evangelical belief in spiritual rebirth, Chandler proposes humor as a powerful defense, laughter as a contagion.

Likewise, Chandler stapled *Elf with Panty Crown* low on the wall; its position comically destabilized the work, lowering our gaze and our expectations. For Chandler, “jubilation and happiness are radical,” as the artist Pascal Lièvre wrote in the press release; accordingly, his work flaunts a palette that is emphatically cheery, rich in fluorescent blends. The figures of *Fibonacci Swirl*—the work is a reference to the sun card in Pamela Colman Smith’s famous Rider-Waite tarot deck—expanded in an exuberant whirl that conjured a flaring sun, each figure bearing a wide smile. Meanwhile, hung high, Chandler’s *Ergot Faery* grinned madly in hot pink, extending a branch of rye speckled with black fibers; these signs of the hallucinatory fungus are an invitation to subversion.

— [Lillian Davies](#)

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