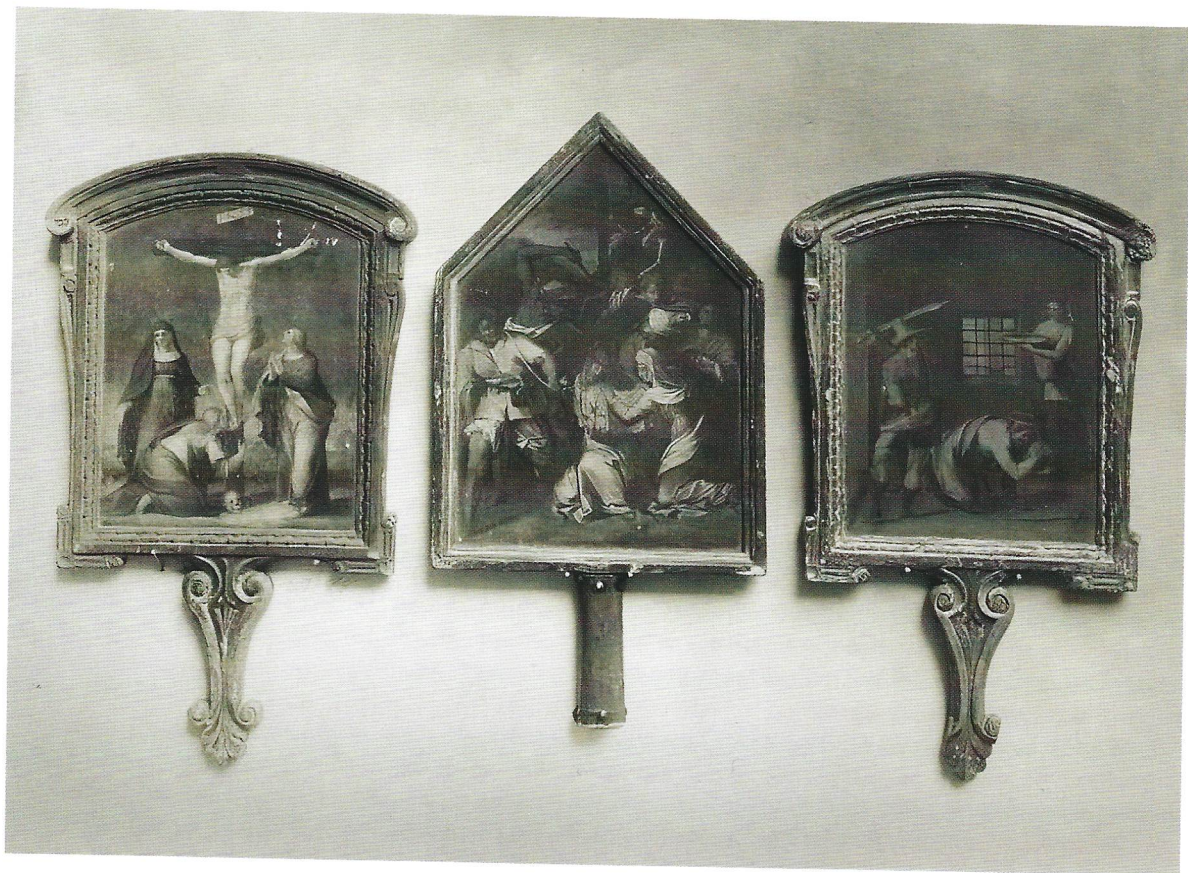


MARK RYDEN

YAKALINA SECRETS





ARTIFACTS OF THE SACRED AND PROFANE

"It is not far—as the crow flies—from cloud to man; it is not far—by images—from man to what he sees, from the nature of real things to the nature of imagined things. They are of equal value."¹
—Paul Éluard

If you feel the need for a companion to accompany you through Mark Ryden's mystical *Animal Secrets*, Ryden has painted a guide for you: the *Fratello della Tavoletta*. He is a pink-on-pink portrait of a brother of the Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato. The *fratello* is clad in a hooded cassock. In one hand he grasps a strange painting on a paddle; in the other he holds a lantern to light the way. To where? In Ryden's work, viewers are always welcomed on a journey to an alternate reality, a numinous world where imagination coincides with nature.

Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy, the remit of the Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato was to provide comfort and solace to those condemned to death. The monks did this, in part, by providing a sacred image for the *afflitto* to gaze upon in preparation for his/her demise. The friars were tasked to carry a *tavoletta* before the face of the *afflitto*—in the *afflitto*'s cell on the night before the execution, during the solemn march to the scaffold, and until the moment the soul departed this earth. The *tavolette* were painted on panels with a handle. On one side there would be a scene from the Passion of Christ; on the other side, a scene of martyrdom that more or less equaled the crime for which the *afflitto* would be punished. That's a formidable idea, isn't it? Not only to think that an entire *compagnia* would organize to ease the suffering of a person fated to such an end, but even more so the idea that a *picture* would be the primary tool of solace. This is the power of image: its potential to transmogrify into emotion.

The idea of the *tavoletta* piqued Ryden's interest as a trope to explore in several paintings in the *Animal Secrets* series. Why? Perhaps it is because Ryden has long explored the idea that a painting is an object—he frequently emphasizes this by designing elaborate frames for specific images, essentially employing sculpture to enrobe the central picture (the frame surrounding *Siren* is an excellent example of this). Ryden carefully designs these frames as assiduously as he crafts the central image, specifying the carving, polychroming, and gilding. But I think that the foil of the handled panel painting underscores the sacred nature of Ryden's image.

In *Animal Secrets*, Ryden has created four contemporary *tavolette*: *Tavoletta Rosa*, *Tavoletta Azzurri*, *Tavoletta Bionda*, and *Tavoletta Bruna*. The titles, of course, refer to the Italian roots of this ancient practice. The framework around Ryden's *tavolette* look remarkably similar to the Renaissance versions; original examples exist, and Ryden did a good job of evoking them. Ryden's icons are mounted into ornate frames, surrounded by egg-and-dart molding, rosettes, and spirals. The handles, here, are merely a decorative historical attribute—the contemporary viewer is unlikely to connect the format to the melancholic use of the Italian *tavoletta*. But I do think viewers will think of this: a handheld mirror. Today a mirror is a common household item, but throughout the distant past, in both Eastern and Western cultures, a mirror was believed to be magical; in fact, the English word derives from the Latin *mirare*, which is also the root of the word *miracle*. Symbolically, mirrors were believed to connect humans with the spirit realm, as either a portal or an aid for navigating the underworld. In this vein, Ryden's mirrorlike forms are held up to the viewer as an invitation into the subconscious. If Ryden's *tavolette* are simultaneously "mirrors," then whose likeness gazes back at the beholder?

The rosa, azzurri, bionda, and bruna portraits that stare back at us are polar opposite of dour images associated with death. In fact, the pink, blue, blonde, and brown busts depict gleefully happy creatures. Each figure has the face similar to Ryden's



OPPOSITE

Sixteenth-century comforter's tablets, Church of San Giovanni Decollato, Rome

TOP

Brotherhood of St. John the Beheaded

classic Yak character, with bright button eyes and rosy cheeks. Their faces are framed with shiny, gossamer hair arranged in flowing locks and bouncy curls accessorized by lustrous satin ribbon. Is it some version of us whom we see when we look into Ryden's fanciful "mirrors"? If so, Ryden imagines for us qualia of pure bliss.

Animal Secrets is populated by many other marvelous beings. The painting titled *163*^{II} is another portrait housed in a highly decorative frame, in this case an architectural structure resembling a stand-alone reliquary. Again, the framework is as important as the picture. The black stanchion is sumptuously adorned with gold appointments—a bee, an all-seeing eye, and a column of the five Platonic solids, all symbols that frequently adorn Ryden's works. (On the verso of *163* is a painted merkaba, another sacred geometrical form.) Corinthian columns bracket the portrait, gilded spires rise from the Greek pediment, and the entire tabernacle rests atop golden lions paws.

This architectural fantasy celebrates the portrait of a gentle beast, whose disembodied head floats in the picture plane. (I am reminded of Saint Veronica and the image of Christ emblazoned on her veil.) Ryden's creature has a pale face, with enormous and reflective walleyes, wreathed by a wispy black mane. The creature recalls and continues Ryden's previous series of *Anima Animals*, here within a framework that emphasizes sanctity and ritual. Ryden is an artist who is fearlessly unselfconscious about quoting Christian attributes—as well as references to any of the world's religions. His work is gently pantheistic in reminding us that all things are sacred.



The painting *Red Siren* (#156) is a portrait of another being; unlike the *tavoletta* figures, its countenance is ambivalent—not cheerful, but neither is it malevolent. Its visage, pale white with smoky, smoldering eyes and a feline mouth, looks directly at the viewer with steely sangfroid. Its body is long and slinky, with short legs and a long tail. Except for its ghostly face, it is covered in shaggy carmine-pink fur, with long locks around the head, a tendril coquettishly drooping over one eye. Perched atop a rocky outcrop, this mysterious numen presides over a body of water. The horizon is as still and silent as the creature's calm bearing. The frame suggests that the scene is at oceanside, as the frame is a gilded cornucopia of shells, coral, sea stars, seaweed, and barnacles.

When I first saw *Red Siren* (#156), I immediately thought of the Japanese mythological *kappa* and other watery *yokai* (spirits) that live near the shore and menace humans that come across their path. The title "siren" certainly implies peril. In Greek mythology, the beautiful siren is mermaid-like, with an alluring voice that harkens sailors to their death. Sirens appear in the lore of many cultures, but always with a propensity for danger. We all know that to follow a "siren's song" leads to a sorrowful end.

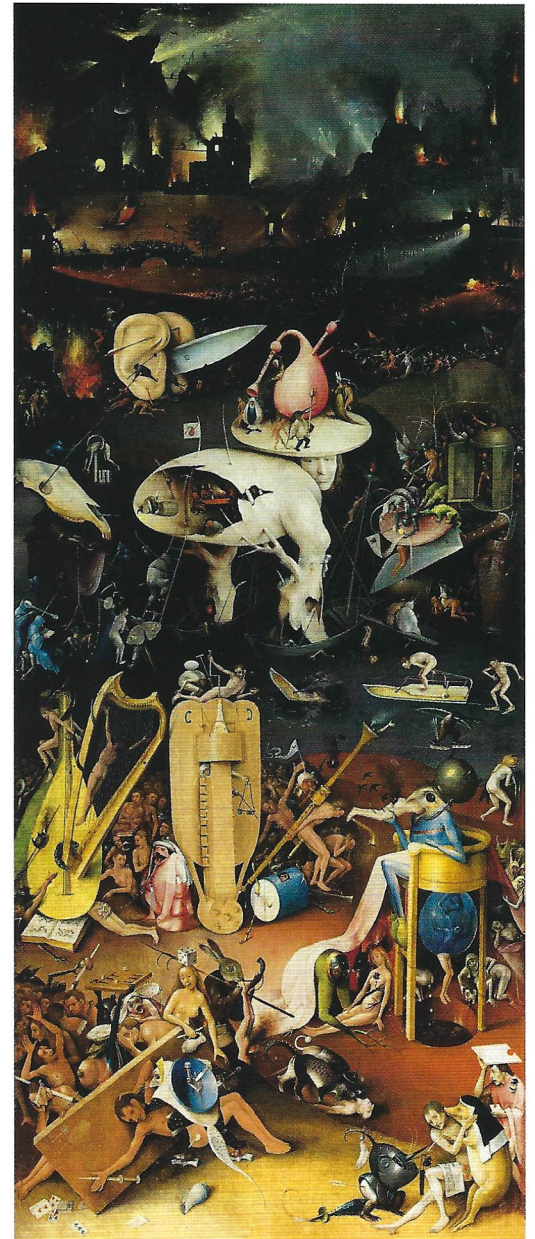
ABOVE

Meister von Flémalle, *Saint Veronica*.
Oil on panel, ca. 1428–1430

OPPOSITE

Vintage *yokai* woodblock prints
from Ryden's collection







FROM WHENCE DO RYDEN'S MARVELOUS CREATURES COME?

On a wall in Ryden's house there are two vintage reproductions of nineteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints; the subjects in both are *yokai*, examples from the hundreds of supernatural sprites known in Japanese folklore. One is a representation of the *Ushi-oni*, the ox-headed *yokai* with upward-turned horns and a spider body.^{III} The other print features *Gotaimen*, a *yokai* that has a huge head atop legs, with no arms or *toro*, next to *Iga bo*, a blue-bodied *yokai* who has distinct burrs along the lower edge of its jaw.^{IV} During the Edo period of the nineteenth century, picture scrolls (*emaki*) illustrating all manner of monsters and spirits were printed to entertain and delight Japanese viewers. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that Ryden's creatures are related?

Ryden is not particularly unique in his proclivity for creating mystical creatures, nor would he claim to be. Indeed, the history of art, Asian and Eurocentric, includes a fantastic parade of selcouth and otherworldly beings. To note a few: Medieval bestiaries, the early Renaissance demons of Hieronymus Bosch and Matthias Grünewald, and mythical sea monsters signifying "ne plus ultra" on ancient maps. Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli, along with Pokémon, celebrate the netherworld of Japanese culture while the hybridized cryptozoological specimens of contemporary artists such as Alexis Rockman and Patricia Piccinini help us imagine a version of the anthropocene that is off-kilter and strange. But Ryden is an artist whose wit is entirely devoid of menace. While Ryden often dips into irony and humor, he never loses sight of the inherent beauty of the natural and the supernatural worlds. For Ryden, these fanciful creatures seem to exist to befriend us, to literally accompany us on the arduous adventure of being human.



On a practical level, an intrinsic aspect of Ryden's studio practice involves being surrounded by and immersed in visual stimuli. His home and studio are legendary for the innumerable books, collections, toys, specimens, and Eastern and Western art that Ryden loves. He maintains thick folders of collected pictures that might inform a composition someday, categorized by subject matter. An entire alcove of his home is curated into grids of what I call "rebus dioramas" (my term, not Ryden's) in which he has playfully, but very carefully, arranged various toys and other objects into thematic tableaux. Ryden's gamesome nature occasionally inspires him to craft his own playthings, too. On the occasion of the exhibition *Animal Secrets* at Perrotin in Paris in 2022, Ryden released *Yuki the Young Yak*, a collectible plush toy with a chirpy vinyl face and luxurious black or white fur.^V Ryden's creative process is steeped in syncretism—he is uniquely curious about all cultures and eras—and he pulls from this vast universe of imagery to conceive his own mythopoeic world.

OPPOSITE, LEFT

Matthias Grünewald, inner right wing of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* depicting the Temptation of St. Anthony. Oil on panels, ca. 1512–1516

OPPOSITE, RIGHT

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (detail). Oil on oak panels, ca. 1490–1500

TOP

Pokémon, Gotta catch'em all! © 2024 Pokémon. © 1995–2024 Nintendo/Creatures Inc./GAME FREAK inc. Pokémon.

ABOVE

My Neighbor Totoro © Studio Ghibli Inc.

There is something else to know about Ryden, this in the sphere of esoterica. But—for me—it is perhaps the most illuminating attribute to explain how Ryden's mind works. Astrologically speaking, Ryden was born with his sun in the twelfth house, that amorphous place of the collective unconscious; it is the house that rules the dream world and spiritual activity. Cazimi to his sun is Mercury, the god of communication, eloquence, divination. In the metaphoric language of astrology, this sun/Mercury placement means that Ryden's Mercury (expression) is seated in the lap of the king, exalted, exaggerated, and elemental to Ryden's life's work. In Ryden's chart, the sun and Mercury combination occur conjunct to the South Node, opposite the North Node. These lunar nodes describe one's life's purpose and patterning, one's karma and the lessons one is brought to Earth to learn. This is notable, as, again, in the pictorial interpretation of the stars, the North Node represents the head of a dragon, representing an individual's karmic path, the lessons a person is brought to Earth to learn. The South Node is the serpent's tail. When these parts come together, this "dragon" creates a portal, a tap from which the collective unconscious abundantly flows. Almost literally, it is in Ryden's nature to consume and absorb the cumulative images of the world—which he then processes and distills to disseminate back to the collective.



ABOVE

Mark Ryden, *Allegory of the Four Elements*. Oil on canvas, 2006.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT

Mark Ryden, *Dymaxion Principle*. Oil on canvas, 2014.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT

Mark Ryden, *Saint Barbie*. Oil on panel, 1994.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM

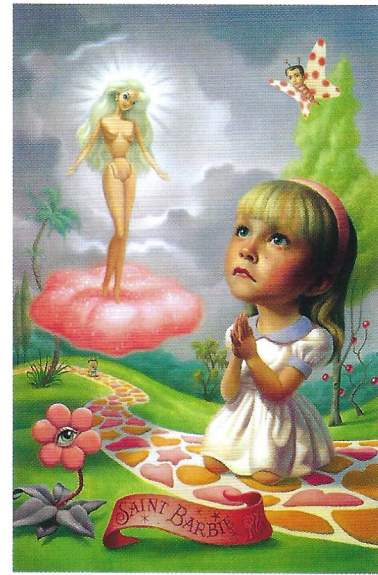
Mark Ryden, *Chroma Structure 113*. Oil on canvas, 2015.



A GATHERING IN THE FOREST

The most narrative painting in *Animal Secrets* is *The Visitation*. Here, four figures congregate around a flattened stump in a foliated clearing. On top of the stump is a furry white being, not exactly Christlike, but its arms are outstretched in cruciform. Whether the children are idolizing this creature or learning from it is unclear, but there is a genuine sense of communion. This is a composition that appears occasionally in Ryden's oeuvre, especially in the *Tree Show* painting, *Allegory of the Four Elements* (#59) (2006), in which four girls signifying air, fire, earth, and water gather around a tree stump tea party. This particular allegory—gathering around a table—has innumerable sacred and profane antecedents: the Last Supper, the Knights of the Round Table, *Alice in Wonderland*'s Mad Hatter tea party, even Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (1943). The theme conveys gravitas and a sense of metaphysical intercourse best described in imagery rather than words.

There are many other examples in Ryden's work in which the subject is humans venerating a supranatural form. Going all the way back to *Saint Barbie* (1994) where a little girl prays at an imagined vision of the Mattel doll, to *Dymaxion Principle* (#110) (2014) and *Chroma Structure 113* (2015) from Ryden's *Dodecahedron* series, Ryden suggests that there is always something outside of ourselves, beyond human culture, that we can learn from.



MERKABA MONKEYS

Animal Secrets includes a trio of drawings that offer another clue about Ryden's intentions. These works are *Merkaba Emerald*, *Merkaba Gamboge*, and *Merkaba Cerulean*; the titles identify the colors used for a merkaba form that hovers in space near each figure of a monkey. These drawings convey a sense of scientific verisimilitude reminiscent of the great naturalist illustrations of the nineteenth century; even the substrate that the *Merkabas* are drawn on resembles parchment, or the discolorations characteristic of ancient paper. One could easily imagine these drawings appearing alongside those of Charles D'Orbigny in the *Dictionnaire Universel d'Histoire Naturelle* (1837). Such stylistic considerations remind the viewer that there are other worlds to explore, other eras to experience.

Well, I call the figures "monkeys"—they resemble simians, but they are surely not portraits of actual primates. In my defense, the creature in *Merkaba Cerulean* reminds me of a snowy-white lemur, with its buggy, startled eyes and long tail. And I can't help but think of a capuchin monkey when I look at *Merkaba Gamboge*. The figure's squarish head and anthropomorphic posture recall the traditional companion to an organ-grinder. And it's worth remembering that a Magic Monkey lives in Ryden's studio; he comes out at night and helps Ryden paint.^{vi}

There are so many rich, historically significant symbolic associations with monkeys that the *Merkaba* series piques innumerable threads of interpretation. It's easy to understand why these animals have been the object of human projection. Their appearance, intelligence, social habits, and behaviors are so like "ours." There's a reason that it's three wise monkeys in the Japanese maxim to "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."^{vii} Or that we commonly refer to the "monkey mind." Humans tend to romanticize their impishness and mischief-making, fascinated by the monkey's tendency to mimic human behavior. In the long history of both Eastern and Western art, it is the monkey who most often parodies and caricatures human pursuits—even to the point of standing in for the artist or art viewer (see Jean-Antoine Watteau's *The Monkey Sculptor*, ca. 1710, or Gabriel von Max's *A Visit to the Artist's Studio*, 1867—but there are many more examples).^{viii}





That said, Ryden would claim that he has no deliberate intentions to illustrate a parable, or let alone purposely frame a monkey-like figure as a surrogate for a person. I would argue, however, that virtually all of Ryden's made-up creatures are simulacra for sentient beings in the natural world, human and non-human: those that we recognize and those that exist in alternate universes. The monkey-like nature of the subjects in these drawings underscores, for me, how few degrees of separation exist between known and unknown beings.

Equal and opposite to the figures in these drawings is the merkaba itself. The merkaba is the geometric shape, composed of two intersecting tetrahedrons, that is suspended near the creature. The tetrahedron is one of the five Platonic solids; those familiar with Ryden's oeuvre will recognize his use of another Platonic solid, the dodecahedron, in past works. He has an interest in sacred geometry and understands the potency of symbolic language. The word *merkaba* is a Hebrew word, with ancient Egyptian origins, that means chariot; the word is made up of three separate components that phonetically mean light, body, and spirit. The inclusion of the merkaba as a central theme of the drawings, and its primacy in the titles of these works emphasizes yet again the concept that virtually all of Ryden's works seek to convey: that art is a transport for the adventures of consciousness.

THE YAKALINAS

"Color = feeling."^x

—Carl Gustav Jung

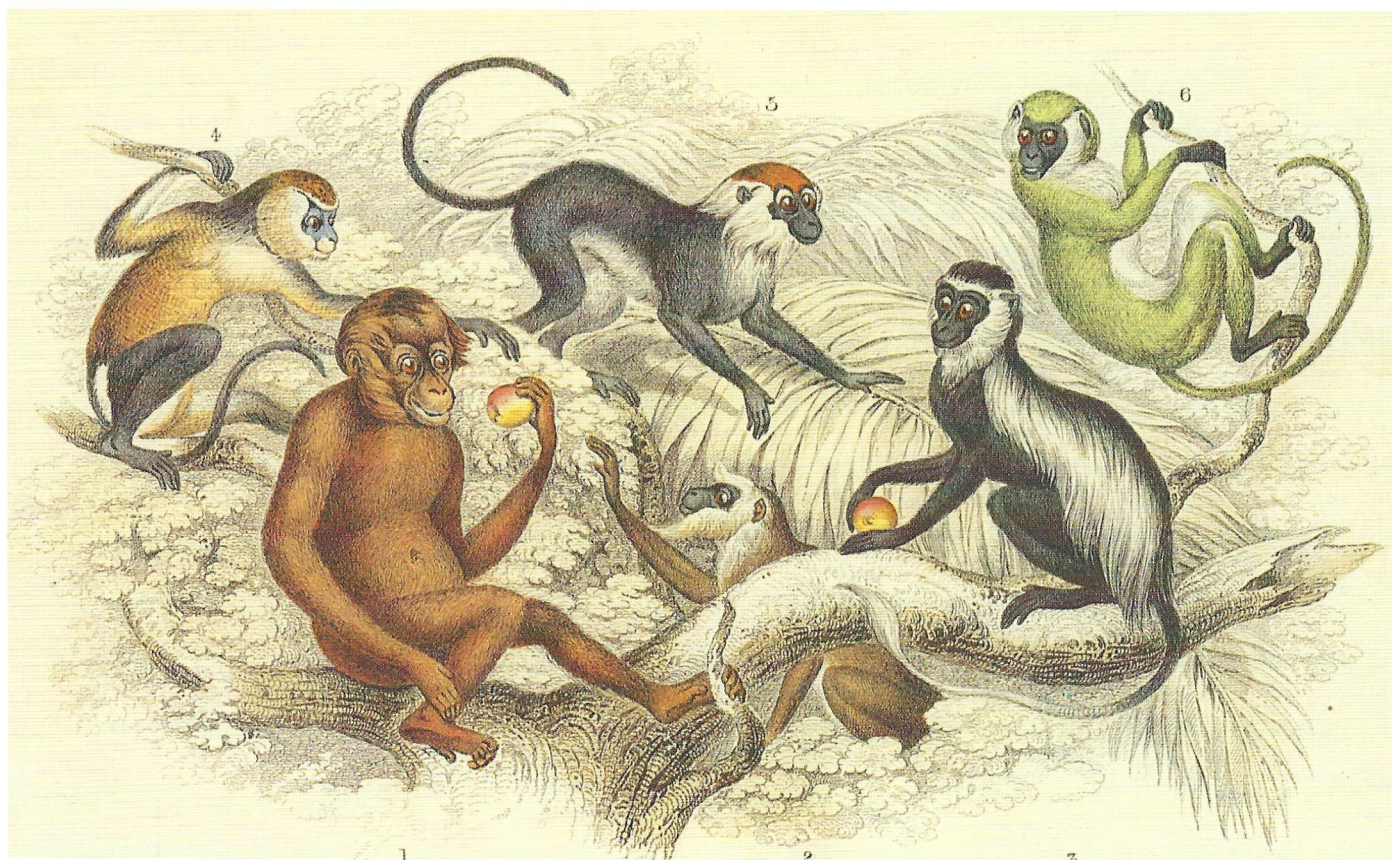
Concurrent with Ryden's *Animal Secrets* is a sculptural series he calls the *Yakalina 9* (2022). The group consists of nine *Yakalina* figures, ethereal demigoddesses, cast in bronze and polychromed in symbolic colors.^x By Ryden's own description, "*Yakalina* is a spiritual entity that originates from the divine realm through the luminiferous ether . . . *Yakalina* is sister to mermaids, fairies, and ghosts."^{xi}

Yakalina's body is very simple: a sphere head attached to a conical body; in flattened form, her silhouette is a keyhole shape. Literally, she mimics the Phoenician anthropomorph for the moon goddess Tanit or the keyhole-shaped counterpoise *menat* of the sacred Egyptian necklace worn by priestesses of the goddess Hathor. *Yakalina*'s contour is elemental; by shape alone, we know that she is a powerful being.

In terms of the lost wax casting of the nine *Yakalinas*, each figure is identical, the same shape and size, but—like humans—each is as unique as we are. Each *Yakalina* is imbued with her own special dominion, signified by her color chosen intuitively by Ryden. *Yakalina Brilliant* is gilded with resplendent gold, the color of the sun and daylight. *Yakalina Bombay* is ashen, like the moon, or smoke rising from incense, or the veil of fog on a cool beach. *Yakalina Buff* is the color of bleached bones or shells, whitened by the sun, quiet artifacts of past life. *Yakalina Blood* is a serious spirit, for she remembers old rituals and ceremonies long forgotten. *Yakalina Bronze* is the color of the forge, of tools and weapons; she sadly recalls wars and conflicts. *Yakalina Bistre* is the color of coal and smells like woods after a fire; she governs the mossy decay on the forest floor. *Yakalina Blush* is the least serious of the nine; she tends toward forgetfulness, but her color is reminiscent of the sunrise. *Yakalina Bianca* is the color of celestial light, bright white, so dazzling that it is hard to see. And *Yakalina Black* is the color of the subconscious, deep and dark, like the void between the stars.^{xii} Together, the *Yakalinas* form an ennead, a grouping considered to have special spiritual significance. In the world of Ryden's creation, no detail is irrelevant.

OPPOSITE

Mark Ryden, *163 (Reverse)*.
Oil on panel, 2021.



"To be authentic and to have sincere power, things have to come first from the heart, and then from the brain. If an artist reverses this, their art will be contrived and lifeless, soulless."

—Mark Ryden

Sometimes, when I consider Ryden's painted creatures, I am reminded of the great animalier of the early twentieth century, Franz Marc, now separated in time from Ryden by a century. Marc was an artist who knew a thing or two about the spiritual essence of non-humans. He considered animals to be more honest, more directly connected to the inner truths of nature; he, like Ryden, expressed this truth through his paintings. (Marc and his friend August Macke also wrote about the emotional and intuitive properties of color. Ryden shares deep kinship in this.) If visual art can do one thing besides delight the senses, it has the power to engender empathy—to quote Susan Sontag, "art is a form of consciousness"^{xiii} that leads to greater communication and compassion. Can Ryden's art do this? I think so. To some, Ryden's work populates an enigmatic cosmos animated by spirits and souls that are fanciful and fun—but ultimately not part of the "real world." Instead, I posit, Ryden brings into perspective the essence of very real phenomena that are to be seen with the third eye and felt by a recondite sixth sense.

—Linda Tesner

TOP

Oliver Goldsmith, *Red Orang-Outang*, *Diana Monkey*, *Guereza Monkey*, *Varied Monkey*, *Collared White-Eyelid Monkey*, and *Green Monkey*, from *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1820).

OPPOSITE

Gabriel von Max, *A Visit to the Artist's Studio*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1900.

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THE YAKALINAS

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NOTES

- I Paul Éluard, "Food for Vision: 'Beyond Painting,'" in *Surrealists on Art*, edited by Lucy R. Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 56–57.
- II Ryden started numbering his paintings during his first solo exhibition in 1998 as a means to distinguish his fine art career from his previous career in illustration. Thus, all major paintings and sculptural works are numbered consecutively and indicate where each work exists in the continuum of Ryden's oeuvre.
- III This version of the *Ushi-oni* is from *Hyakkai-Zukan* (*The Illustrated Volume of a Hundred Demons*) by Sawaki Suushi (1737).
- IV This version of the *Iga-bo* is from the *Hyaku monogatari bake-e* (*One Hundred Tales Monster Picture Scroll*) illustrated by Hoiku in 1780.
- V The urban vinyl toy *Yuki the Young Yak* was jointly designed by Mark Ryden and GOLEM (Artoyz) in an edition of 500 each of the black and white versions. The shape of *Yuki the Young Yak* reminds me of the wonderful forest spirits in Studio Ghibli's *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988).
- VI Linda Tesner, "Thoughts on Mark Ryden's Bestiary of Mystical Creatures," in *Mark Ryden: Anima Animals* (New York: Abrams, 2020), p. 22.
- VII This well-known adage originates in visual art, from a seventeenth-century bas-relief over a door of the Tōshō-gū Shinto shrine located in Nikkō, Japan. The sculpture was carved by Hidari Jingoro.
- VIII There is even a term for the genre of art in which monkeys are depicted aping human behavior. It is called "singerie," from the French for "monkey trick." See *The Public Domain Review*, "The Singerie: Monkeys Acting as Humans in Art," <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-singerie-monkeys-acting-as-humans-in-art/>.
- IX Medea Hoch, *The Art of C. G. Jung* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 33.
- X For a short video documentary on the making of the *Yakalina 9*, see Mark Ryden's Instagram posts on April 18, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccf1wMrlHax/>, and May 3, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdGYAgLFxBF/>.
- XI Mark Ryden, *Yakalina Part Two*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdGYAgLFxBF/>.
- XII Ibid.
- XIII Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964–1980* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), p. 42.