

Stollenwurm is supposed to be this huge serpent, sometimes depicted as having a cat's head.

It's a bit like a basilisk.

It can kill you with its eyes. It can kill you with its breath.

There's lots and lots of accounts from the last hundred years of people encountering them and dying or being terrified and running away.

They would drink the milk directly from the cows’ udders. So they were taking what was seen as human property.

I thought wouldn't it be really interesting if we could rehabilitate this creature within a kind of environmental context.

What if these cows actually were living in a kind of synergy with them, in a kind of balanced relationship with these Stollenwurm.

When the cows were grazing maybe they couldn't feed their young, and their udders would become engorged, and the cases of mastitis would go up. So actually, wouldn't the Stollenwurm be providing something really useful by just relieving that?

I was thinking a lot about my experiences as a mother and breastfeeding, and this idea of sustenance and milk.

The idea of the milk dripping from the udders onto the grass, and that kind of biodiversity, being soaked in cow's milk, very similar to a sort of running off like the glacial melt.

This kind of material significance as well.

Rewriting some of the little narratives you can find, suggesting that Stollenwurm wasn't overly aggressive, just very timid.

Retellings of those stories.

I like playing with the idea that it was real, and part of me believes it was.

Why not believe this?

All sort of imaginative possibilities open, and seeing what the myth or the story can tell you, doesn't really matter if the myth is true or not.

What's it telling us about some relationships or broken relationships.

It reflects really clearly how humans felt, very afraid of mountains, very afraid of meeting something horrible up the mountains.

You know that power of imagination, the kind of characterization of mountains or hostile environments, potentially that kind of fraught and broken or fractured relationship that humans have with their environment, that fractured relationship leads to conflict, based on fear, exploitation, ownership, ownership of a female body parts, you know, milk.

I'm just wanting to inhabit that character a bit more.

I was also making all of the Frau Holle objects. She's the snow deity, but she's also this incredible global kind of weaving, spinning, life and death goddess. She appears all over the world. She is a very powerful female figure. So I was making her swan feet, so she appears as Mother Goose. I really love just that basic material metaphor. I've been trying to work out how the image, how an image, in the broader sense, like an illustrative work, fits with the material.

I was holding it as I was making it, and it starts to feel alive. But I was really aware of the narrative of land and landscape as something to be exploited, as something female, as a kind of historical narrative of a land to be, you know, raped and pillaged and extracted from. So I really didn't want to go there.

I was trying to reframe those works, definitely within the context of my personal bodily experiences. It's an active body within a wider environment, rather than a passive environment.

I keep circling back to this: it's going to be one sided. It is inevitably one sided. But again, it's not, it's not one sided, because it's a relationship. We read the traces of land, and we read the traces of our environment on our bodies. So it is a circle. It's like this kind of constant circling for me, of effect and reading, and effect and reading. I can see that impact on me, and I can read that relationship and that reciprocity through that. Is that where the notion of empathy comes in?

The empathy has to be kind of material or bodily. Yes, absolutely. Your work is about this kind of striving for a kind of connection, and trying to show that connection.

It's always tactile engagement. I think the physical is really important when we're talking about empathy.

To be able to imagine something you're drawing upon memory, and your understanding of empathy develops from experiences of pain or discomfort or happiness or loss or connection.

I think it's very much to do with the physical. Without that, it's very hard to embody, to reach into something, or to inhabit in that empathetic way. It is interesting, because all those words, you know, embodying, inhabiting, projecting into something.

I'm putting myself into you, and that could be interpreted as colonial. It doesn't have to be that. It can be much more about connection and closeness and intimacy, not always comfortable, but in a kind of meeting point.

A lot of my work about empathy has been really uncomfortable for people. What I was looking at with the mythologies is that they are characterizing, giving some kind of personality and an agency quite explicitly through a kind of either human or animal personification of land.

They're giving personification to landscape, to mountains to glaciers, and enabling, potentially through that enabling a different sort of empathy.

A long time ago, we talked about whether it's possible to feel the same sort of level of empathy for a mountain or a glacier that you do for a human, or you could potentially for human or for an animal.

Can you feel empathy for unicorns and fairies?

Can we feel empathy for Stollenwurm or Frau Holle?

How much do we need to get to know her or know them in order to be able to do that?

We don't fully understand the cycles of life and death.

We don't really know what happens.

The kind of fear of change is a very human thing. Fear of something changing so much that it's no longer there, something that's seemed fairly constant is so powerful. We're looking at enormous mountains and huge volumes of ice, and they've been so constant. The dramatic change and speed of change is maybe very unsettling.

I definitely think that places hold memories and energies. You know, they can be personal, but they have a kind of residual something. I was thinking about the kind of alpine environment and how steeped in nostalgia that is.

It is so incredibly beautiful and aesthetic and then it's also really troubled with all of those cultural connotations. I was thinking about the ghosts there, I hadn't really thought about it in that kind of way.

There's a lot of push to reconnect with myths at the moment, as if they hold clues for ways of living. And it's not even that I find attractive.

It is something more to do with what you were just saying about these ghosts, about something, it's still being all there. This idea of looking to indigenous cosmologies for answers to the Anthropocene and climate change is just everywhere. I think it's fascinating, but also deeply troubling on some level, because we are turning to communities that historically, we've been really abusive towards to tell us how to fix something.

I find it really interesting how we associate these ideas with the notions of the wild and purity and this kind of sense of the pre modern and what this kind of means. I was thinking about nature as redemptive, and nature can redeem us from our selves, as though we're separate from nature. It's going to somehow save us from ourselves.

And we're not listening.

If we listen nature and the landscape, and you know, those that we associate close to it, will somehow fix everything. It's so romantic. It also raises the question of individual responsibility or communal responsibility.

I've been searching for the right sort of words to use.

We think a lot about how we describe humans within the world and there's a lot written at the moment about human nature, and humans are part of nature, and even that sort of language is really, really fraught, because it still separates. Is there any language that we can use to talk about that?

I've been saying humans and their wider environment because it for me situates us within that network and within the environment that we're in, and it doesn't separate, but it's still not a good way of talking about it. Maybe there aren't the right words. Donna Haraway uses the term naturecultures, which is one word to imply the lack of distinction between humans and nature, that we're somehow together. But like almost every time you refer to nature, you referring to something that's distinct from us. You know, it and I, and that's part of how we just imagine everything outside of ourselves to be.

I've got printed up here this beautiful article written by Rebecca Solnit, and it's just one sentence. It's one long sentence, and she wrote it for an exhibition catalog for another artist. It's very beautiful.

It's about the color blue, because the artist was working with cyanotypes, and it's about the flowing blue fabric of Mary's robes with Jesus lying at the bottom, like he's floating on a kind of sea, and she talks about the fluidity of women's bodies, and it is really beautiful, and it resonates strongly with me, but it also really doesn't, because there are times when I personally feel my body is spiky and hard, and I'm not fluent, and I am none of those things, and I do not want to be categorized.

And there are many, many women who are not fluid, who are not milk producing, who are not baby producing. You know, it's not the core of our humanness.

It's a gilded cage.
It really is.

Sometimes I just don't want to be an endless kind of mother, earthy.

Drawing it back to land and landscape and the kind of environmental crisis, there's also this big push towards the kind of Goddess culture, where again women are seen as being closer to nature and having the answers. If we all go back to being baby producing Earth mothers than it will be a better, utopian way of living. I find that really, really disturbing on a really deep level.
Apparently you need to listen to your body.

Your body will tell you what to do. My body hasn't got a clue.

My body is not telling me anything my body needs.

My body has all sorts of knowledge, and my mind has all sorts of knowledge and knowing, but in terms of knowing a better way to be, it's a very weird thing, isn't it? It's just incredibly pressured.

Women have been oppressed, and will be the people who are most affected by the climate crisis, and then we're sort of instrumentalized. This kind of essentialization is always really dangerous. It can so easily turn on a coin.

One minute we are the Savior. Because we just need to listen to our wombs.

But what happens if you don't have a womb, or if you got rid of it? It's all very well and good to listen to your body and to listen to your womb. But then what happens when you reach fifty? Or your womb is a site of fear and pain and abuse.

There's so many nuances and it brings it brings us back to the fetishization of land, as well as the female. She's like nature: she's this thing that's wild and hairy and scary, but also this beautiful, incredible, pure.

The dichotomy.

Looking at Frau Holle: I've been examining images of her, how she's depicted, and she is either the stereotype like the Virgin Mary, in a white robe with candles. She's the light one, this beautiful, young, pure Maiden, or she's the Crone.

Where she's got a big nose and big lips, and she's been spinning too much, and her foots turned into a swan foot and she's terrifying, and she'll come and slit your belly and punish the children. It's so predictable when it comes to depictions of women. I've been painting her over and over again, doing lots and lots of portraits, and just trying to get under the skin of that.

It seems to be so tied to how we support the economy.

We are pure and beautiful when we reproduce the next generation of workers. But as soon as we're no longer kind useful, and we can't make more children to support the system, we are deemed to be dangerous to that system, and we're basically hags that feed off the energy.

If we decide to step out of that reproduction when we're younger, we're really terrifying, because what do you do with us? Absolutely, if you don't look a certain way and you don't reproduce, then really, you're not, worth anything, or you're terrifying and dangerous and need to be decentered.