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From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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## Heather Saunders: The "Freaky Friday" Series

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D., *OCAD University*



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## The Birds and the Bees: Heather Saunders's *Freaky Friday* Series

By Matthew Ryan Smith

*Annabelle, when you're grown-up, people don't tell you what to do; you have to tell yourself, which is sometimes much more difficult.*<sup>i</sup>



Desire and sex and lust. The conflation of signifiers of sensuality and femininity in female clothing points to a rigorous sexualization of the body beginning in girlhood, through their dress and the way it's worn. Lace, fishnet, silk, leather, satin, chiffon and latex are shown in their various iterations in children's fashion. The same materials, fabrics and the words used to describe them host different meanings and associations in adulthood. Yet, somewhere in this liminal divide, childhood and adulthood speak to each other, and the conversation is uncomfortable, like the first time you heard about the birds and the bees.

Trickery and shame and confusion. North Bay, Ontario artist Heather Saunders's recent series *Freaky Friday* deconstructs children's dresses (size 6 or smaller) and reconstructs them into women's lingerie. Doing so

represents a point of intervention into the troubled transition between child and adult clothing (girl and woman fabrics). In this radical strategy for re-appropriation, the physical materials and fabrics originally used for female children's clothing are imbued with a lurid sexuality fit only for adulthood. The referents to childhood lurk uneasily in Saunders's lace pale pink bra and black lace underwear. For Anne Hamlyn, fabric is bound up in "the persistent undecidability of the fetishistic fantasy,"<sup>ii</sup> which complicates notions of sexual difference and, to that end, the very notion of the object of desire itself. In Saunders's work, when fabric is re-appropriated for adulthood means from childhood ends, the powerful shift in meaning denotes that the fetishistic fantasy involving satin, lace and silk may actually be a fetish for youth.



The photographs of Saunders modelling her revised children's clothing are sexy enough to be convincing but have too many reminders of daily non-glamourized life to be mistaken for boudoir imagery (like cheap apartment flooring and the common backdrop), which cleverly establishes a tension befitting of the project. These amateurized and boudoir-esque images provide a sickening jolt to the senses, which is spurred on by the idea that Saunders's highly sexualized (adult) body and gaze is subversively marked by children's clothing, robbing them of their innocence, virtue and purity. This duping, however unexpected or undesired, produces what Brian Massumi calls "a shock to thought,"<sup>iii</sup> that which provokes and stimulates a sustained intellectual inquiry, embodied here as an inquiry into the character of children's clothing and its unstable relationship to sexuality, femininity and fetishization.



In another work, albeit similar in style and execution, Saunders has cut up a size 6 dress, which includes fuchsia sparkled animal print and shirring with a fuchsia ribbon, and converted it into a salacious negligee. The ribbon that was placed below the waist in the original children's dress has been relocated to just below the bust (making it an empire waist) in Saunders's strapless adaptation. The cut, particularly the cutting of female clothing, harks back to Yoko Ono's iconic *Cut Piece* (1964) in which the artist invited participants from her audience at Carnegie Hall to mark or take



away pieces of her clothing with large silver scissors. With *Freaky Friday* Saunders has revised *Cut Piece* in her own way, this time using herself as both the audience and the subject, as a constituent of the double gaze. Although here it's unapologetically trashy, it's also a wearable sculptural object inscribed with an edifying autobiographical undertext.

Thus far childless, Saunders, an artist in her 30s, confesses that the *Freaky Friday* series is as much about children's clothing as it is about the artist's concern for placing her imaginative daughter in it. Mary Rodgers's classic children's novel *Freaky Friday*, while giving Saunders's series its name, also serves as a palpable conceptual template. In the book, a young girl named Annabelle Andrews awakens in her mother's

body (and vice versa) on a Friday morning after a serious argument the previous night. Therefore, in a roundabout way, by wearing young girls's dresses, Saunders connects herself to the daughter she may never know. Further, the series points to what trauma theorist Cathy Caruth describes as the "double wound," a trauma inflicted to both the body in a physical sense and the mind in a Freudian sense.<sup>iv</sup> Saunders's work reconciles her body's fertility with a mindful fear that bearing children exposes them to a system of representation that sexualizes and fetishizes the other skin they wear.

Although Saunders runs the risk of criticism for self-glorification, which many feminist artists have experienced, the benefit of using her own body to model is that it acts as a personal commentary as much as a socio-political commentary. *Freaky Friday* is a trial of signification, an uncomfortable interstice between innocence and sex, young and adult, fantasy and fetish. It's a sensationalized staging of smut with sinister substance. Heather Saunders has made manifest a veritable "clothing line" of little girls in pretty dresses with awkward associations, each questioning the state of the art of feminine sexuality and its bears.

\*Images: *Freaky Friday* (details), 2012-13, digital photographs, children's dresses and judys.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Rodgers, Mary. *Freaky Friday*. New York: HarperTrophy 1972.

<sup>ii</sup> Hamlyn, Anne. "Freud, Fabric, Fetish," in *Textile*, 1.1 (2003): 9-27.

<sup>iii</sup> Brian Massumi in Jill Bennett, "On the Subject of Trauma," in *Emphatic Vision: Affect, Trauma, Contemporary Art*. (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2005): 11.

<sup>iv</sup> Caruth, Cathy. "Introduction: The Wound and the Voice," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore MD & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 3.

## Biography

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D., is a writer, independent curator and educator based in Toronto, ON. His writings have been featured in several Canadian and international publications including *C Magazine*, *ArtUS*, *FUSE*, and *Magenta* as well as numerous exhibition catalogues (most recently Itamar Jobani's *People of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*). Matthew has forthcoming publications in the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* and *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*.