

# PETRIe MISINTERPRETATION

TECHNIQUE, DESIRE, DEATH. AN INTERVIEW WITH NINA MAE FOWLER



Nina Mae Fowler at The Cob Gallery private view

Currently on show at The Cob Gallery, Nina Mae Fowler's exhibition, *While I'm Still Warm*, offers a selection of works representative of the artist's fascination with stardom and the Golden Age of the big screen. Increasingly popular with collectors and art lovers, Fowler's oeuvre exudes a sort of misbehaving creative freedom, which channels the glamour and shine of Hollywood only to have it reflected in its inversions, defects, and fallibilities.

Her works play with the idea of monumentality attached to stars, investigating ways of posthumously preserving or reformatting their glory. Every piece in the exhibition is a detail in the intricate tapestry of constructing and representing stardom, fandom, and celebrity. The chromatic scarcity permeating the collection speaks to an elaborate ruse that leads us to

question contemporary cultures of engagement with celebrity, challenging the form, content, and ever-innovating channels of glamour.

**Elena Stanciu: When did you start making art? How would you describe your practice in three words?**

Nina Mae Fowler: I think everyone starts making art when they begin to draw, stick things down, make prints with their hands and so on. I guess I was around one! I continued to enjoy everything creative until I decided to make it my focus, studying History of Art as well as engaging with the practical side of it. I am not great with words, which is another reason for making visual art, but in three words I would say: technique, desire, death.

**ES: You seem to reflect heavily on the idea of celebrity – how do you engage with your own rising popularity in the art world?**

NMF: Fortunately, there are very few artists who become “celebrities,” and those who do tend to seek it out. I think the internet is brilliant for sharing your inspirations and works-in-progress with those who want to follow you. I enjoy being able to “share” moments in my studio, which I used to take a photo of to stick in a sketchbook and hope someday, someone might want to look at them. Now, engaging with an audience through Instagram and other media, you can share your process and (hopefully) receive much needed encouragement along the way.

**ES: You have a rather radical take on stardom and celebrity – “both the grotesquery and glamour” of stardom inspire your recent exhibition with a starting point in the Golden Age of Hollywood.**

**Do you see an evolution/morphing of this cult of celebrity at Hollywood during the last decades?**

NMF: The cult of celebrity has certainly become visually more grotesque, and it seems that the uglier it gets, the more we enjoy watching it. The reason I use the Golden Age as my vehicle for this subject is because our interest in the private lives of the famous has never diminished; the more outrageous/disgraceful the behaviour of someone, in relation to their level of achievement/fame, the more our appetite to watch their demise seems to be. However, back then, the stars were protected more, they had less to contend with in terms of paparazzi and social media spreading a story or image like wildfire. The intrigue was greater because so too was the glamour and the front of decency; the scandal, and our enjoyment of it, however, was the same – it just bubbled deeper beneath the surface.

**ES: What do you make of the contemporary relationship of stars with their fandom, mostly mediated by social media such as Instagram? Does Instagram break the spell of stardom?**

NMF: The recent example of Kim Kardashian being robbed after showing off her diamonds to millions of followers is an interesting example of the relationship between these people's lives and those of her millions of fans who enjoy watching, as it seems so unreal, but the reality is that it was easy for someone desperate to know exactly when and where she was and how much they could haul, if they could get to her. They did, and she stopped using Instagram. For a bit. I think it's up to the star to choose to break the spell. It's still possible to retain an aura of mystery and safeguard your privacy. It depends on how much they want to share and how much their fame depends on it.



Installation view at The Cob Gallery  
*Notable Burials series*, 2017  
Artwork by Nina Mae Fowler

**ES: Please talk a little about your medium: I find it interesting that you make drawings and bronze sculptures – I can't help but oppose the softness of charcoal on paper to the durability of bronze. Which one are you more comfortable with and does it lend its materiality to your conceptual work?**

NMF: When I get an idea, the material in which it will be executed is always immediately clear. For example, with the on-going series *Notable Burials*, I wanted to make posthumous portraits of the names found on a funeral parlours advertorial for their most notorious clients. In this case, simply drawing them would not have been enough. I wanted to make three-dimensional portraits, which would have more of a physical presence in the room. Inspired by *Mater Dolorosa* (Virgin of Sorrows) by 17th-century artist Pedro de Mena, I am a great fan of the combined pathos and realism of Baroque sculpture.

**ES: Why do you work monochromatically? This is interesting, especially as you clash the glamour and glittery imaginary of stardom with rather sombre, cautious tones; the very nature of**

**graphite and charcoal is contrasted dramatically by current forms of visual (digital) recording of celebrity (snapshots, selfies, vines). What draws you towards these dichotomies?**

NMF: I am not drawn to colour. I find the power of black and white films greater because of their monochromatic simplicity – there is less distraction. Drawing in pencil and graphite is an obvious transition when working with film stills from this era. I do not enjoy painting or mixing colour. For me, black is the most powerful in its total absorption of light. From there you can work backwards. Black can go unnoticed or remain distant in its mystery, by contrast it can exude the ultimate power in its self-sufficiency. I always return to black.

**ES: Every Girl Crazy, included in your new show, makes me think of The Last Supper, and I wonder how would it look if we had paparazzi take shots of it. I see it as an intentional un-glamorising of the subjects. Please elaborate on your inspiration for this piece.**

NMF: I collect many images over long periods of time and gradually they start to piece together like a jigsaw until I can see a montage which interests me. This work was about images of female super-stars of the 1930s through 1950's caught in candid moments which were much rarer back then. There are many associations with food which I knew would be interlaced in this drawing, especially when associated with women. Art theorist Charlotte Martin puts it much better than I can: "These women went to gargantuan efforts over their physical appearance and to ensure their physicality matched the public persona they wanted to project. Thin bodies demarcate ambition, moral value, and sexual desirability in the minds of the public. Bingeing is a predominately female activity, perceived as a character defect, an inability to restrain oneself. However, rather than an inadequacy, bingeing is in fact a rage, a rallying cry against the painful and conflicting narratives of the female experience. They are resplendent in their entitlement to eat, and I for one would like a seat at the table."

**ES: What would your characters say to you, if they suddenly came alive out of the scenes you construct?**

NMF: I hope they would see that my work is sympathetic to them, but they could equally see me as another hungry eye. Marlon Brando said in conversation with Truman Capote: "You don't know what it's like. The people with pencils, I need a fence to keep them out." Maybe that's me.

While I'm Still Warm is at The Cob Gallery until 29th May.

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