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Into THE FABLES WITH Heiko Müller

by Jeff D. Min

Aesop's Fables is a literary staple, found on the bookshelves of every daycare, hospital, and school across America. It gave us sayings like, "Necessity is the mother of invention" and, "Pride comes before the fall." Found throughout its pages are testimonies that our mothers and fathers used to preach to help us understand that life is not a smooth journey, but rather a long and winding road full of treacherous terrain.

It was through these stories, these fantastical exchanges between animals, nature, and man that we understand a little more about ourselves, about human nature and what drives us. How logic can at times best be understood through fantasy, as if it's something totally alien to us—something that needs to be meditated upon, cultivated, and discussed. That conversation can be found all throughout Heiko Müller's work.

Much like Aesop (or the collective of writers who call themselves Aesop), Müller embraces the cross-section of nature and humankind in ways that are mysterious and exotic, familiar yet obscure, elusive, but as straightforward as can be—when not over-analyzed. There's a distinct voice there too with innocent morsels of wisdom peppered in to help guide you along the way. If it seems a bit slight or contradictory, it's not. It's just one man staying true to himself. A lesson even Aesop could have used.

Heiko Müller was born in Hamburg, Germany—the site of one of the most dev-

astating joint assaults in WWII, called "Operation Gomorrah." The attack was a blitzkrieg coming fast and hard, burning the city into ruin by week's end. In the end more than 9,000 tons of explosives were dropped destroying 280,000 buildings, the casualties topped 40,000. It has been referred to at times as the Hiroshima of Germany, a chilling example of the type of devastation war can bring.

Present day Hamburg, you wouldn't guess that it's the same place. The streets are picturesque and have a calm sense about them. When asked about the city and whether or not it influenced his work Müller replied, "Probably, yes. Hamburg is a very beautiful city, but because of the bombings there are very few old buildings left. It is a very green city though, with masses of trees in the streets, some very nice parks, two rivers and more bridges than Venice, London, and Amsterdam combined."

Aligning the two scenes, the past and the present create a strange dichotomy. Two

OPPOSITE: "Rise", 40" x 40"

FOLLOWING (L-R):

"Bear and Falcon", oil on board, 16" x 16"

"Glade", oil on paper, 12" x 12"



polar opposites. One of destruction and carnage and the other of harmony and peace. Combine those two motifs and you have this surreal, fairytale-like imagery that puts a frame around the fragility of nature.

"I'm primarily interested in nature and animals," says Müller. "I think I have kept the fascination for animals from my childhood. I remember that since I was small I felt very comfortable when I was alone in nature. I kind of felt like it was the right place to be. Since mankind has forgotten how to live with nature in harmony I think people are usually a counterpart in my paintings."

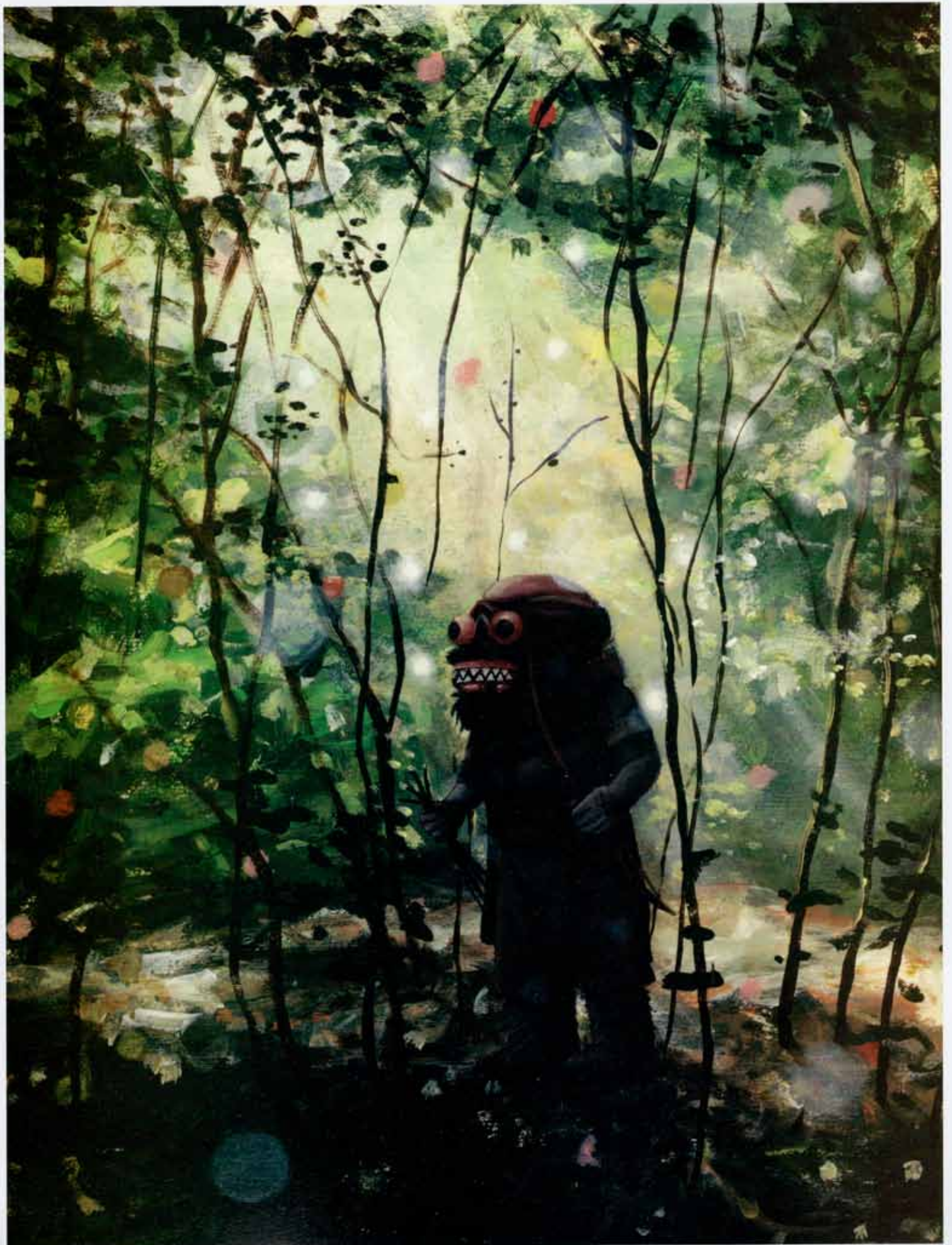
Müller embraces fantasy in very practical, sometimes humorous ways, which is what gives it that strange first impression. Take "Monkey and Cat" for example—an adorable little chimp holding a kitten, similar to that of Koko and her cat All Ball. It's a warm image, but unnatural and contrived—almost comical—so why not have the chimp have this bizarre wily look while the kitten shoots lasers out of its eyes. It's an angle that fits right in with Müller's unusual style.

"I love to read short stories and novels with a gloomy, supernatural touch," adds Müller. "But my favorite parts of those stories—those sentences that I never forget—are

those which make me cry and also those I really can laugh about. So it seems that humor is extremely important for me."

The other side, the gloomier side that Müller mentions is an important bookend to his method as it expresses a distinct air of uncertainty and anxiety. "Devil" is a piece that again is very straightforward, but different in that it's incredibly cryptic and sinister. Here's this ghoulish figure, half-man half-pig perhaps, directly in your face, consuming the scene, nature, in a very obtrusive way. Embers fly in the air all haphazardly, and the only part of the landscape you can see are the dark trees. This alien-looking figure, with a dark mischievous look smeared across its face, is chaos.

That balance between malevolence and good-natured humor, the surreal and real, finds equilibrium via technique. Müller breaks up his work into three distinct mediums: drawings, brush drawings and paintings—each offering its own advantages. It allows Müller to make these huge aesthetic strides without losing his footing. His brush drawings for example have a righteous kinetic energy, motion, and tension all wrapped into one. "The brush drawings are very well adapted to develop visual ideas," explains Müller. "It allows me to work more intuitively and to change detail in







the picture very quickly. I can add or subtract elements without destroying big parts of the picture."

Whether it's brush drawings or paintings or mixed media, there is one thing that remains constant in Müller's work: love (as strange as that may sound). Love of art, love of nature, and love of family. The images he uses are an aggregate of the things that have in one way or another touched his heart. He'll then spin those emotions into a story that remind us just how precious all of that can be and how preserving emotion, through image or music or what have you can raise some compelling questions.

"As far as the animals that I paint, I think my childish interest for fairytales plays a big role," says Müller. "Like in fairytales, my animals are simply representing a human feature. It is a good way to simplify a character. At the same time I try to present the animals as something precious, as something that is worth protecting. Also my human beings usually have a fabulous aspect. They represent simplified characters, either as a counterpoint to the animals or as a part of nature."

In *Aesop's Fables* there's a story called "The Eagle, the Jackdaw, and the Shepherd." The jackdaw one day sees an eagle swoop down and snatch up a little lamb with its sharp talons. Envious by the majestic nature of the eagle, the jackdaw tries to emulate it. It jumps on the back of a ram and with all its might tries to lift it. In the process it gets entangled in the ram's wool and becomes helpless. The shepherd, who just so happened to be passing by, sees what's going on and grabs the jackdaw, clips its wings and brings it home to his kids. When they ask what it is he replies, "It's a jackdaw and nothing but a jackdaw. But it wants to be taken for an eagle."

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BUT IT
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OPPOSITE: "Zwei-Hansen"
ABOVE: "Balz", oil on board, 16" x 16"





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The moral of the story is that if you attempt what is beyond you, you'll not only waste an incredible amount of time, but you'll be met with misfortune and ridicule (and, in one way or another, be clipped). Everyone has a role in that story, even man who, although destructive, still pushes the narrative forward. Similarly, in Müller's work they all have a say. Each character, whether it be a man, an animal, or a beast. All of them play a role in taking the viewer into a completely different world.

That place is the thin line that separates fantasy and reality, where they meet face to face and without prejudice. The most entertaining part is that with enough time and faith that fantasy can become a reality, how a fox talking to a hen can actually tell us a thing or two about how we should conduct our affairs. By maintaining his eager, childlike sensibility, fueled by a fondness for nature, Müller shows us that commitment—especially to the things you love most—are fundamental cornerstones for progress.

"With so much bad news that we hear continuously, it is hard to stay optimistic," says Müller. "But to remain optimistic is very important to me. Not only because a pessimistic attitude is bad for being creative—from my point of view—but also because I want to exemplify an optimistic attitude for my children. I also believe strongly that we humans are beginning to change our fundamental attitude towards the environment. We are still at the beginning, but it can be seen already."

Müller's vision is expanding. On September 6, he'll be celebrating the opening of his first solo show at Feinkunst Krüger in Hamburg. "With almost fifty pieces it is the biggest exhibition I ever did," he said over email. "So I'm quite excited." †

OPPOSITE: "Lost in Switzerland", oil on canvas, 47" x 47"
ABOVE: "The Inner Light", oil on canvas, 32" x 32"