Fiona Smyth, *Self-Portrait* (2008)

ANTHONY ENNS

SEX, FEMINISM, AND COMICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH FIONA SMYTH

INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED CANADIAN ARTIST FIONA SMYTH was born in Montreal in 1964. Raised as a Roman Catholic, she attended a private girls' school from the age of twelve to fourteen. Her family then moved to Toronto, where she enrolled in a high school art program at Central Technical Collegiate. She went on to study painting and printmaking at the Ontario College of Art. After graduating in 1986 she immediately began working as a professional artist, and her work has since been exhibited widely in Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Venezuela, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. She has also received numerous grants from the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Although she was primarily trained as a painter, her early exhibitions often included a self-published minicomic or zine. She also contributed pieces to other independent comic books and zines, such as *Babble, Trash Compactor, Fabulous Babes, The Social Drinker, Heavy Girl Press, Maow Maow, Paper Rodeo, Regal Beast, Milk and Wodka*, and *Everything Elevator*. In the early 1990s she began to create her own solo comic books, including *Nocturnal Emissions* (1991-1992), published by Vortex Comics (one of the leading Canadian independent comic book publishers), and *Perkyssimo* (1994), published by Starhead Comix (an American independent comic book publisher). She also contributed work to some of the earliest all-female underground comics anthologies, including *Diva Grafix and Stories* (1993-1994), *Twisted Sisters, Volume 2* (1994), and *Girl Talk* (1995-1996). By the end of the century Smyth had thus firmly established a name for herself as one of the leading underground cartoonists in both Canada and the U.S.

Smyth became particularly famous in Toronto for her psychedelic murals and her monthly comic strip "Cheez," which ran in the free music news-

paper *Exclaim*! for ten years (1992-2002). The instalments of this comic strip seemed to resist narrative coherence by having no recurring characters or storylines; instead, they featured surreal landscapes and mysterious symbols or motifs that were often highly ambiguous, obscure, and bewildering. (One reviewer described them as "a series of highly coded diary entries.") A collection of these comics, titled *Cheez 100*, was published by Pedlar Press in 2001, and the series has since been published online through Artpost, with new drawings uploaded weekly (there are now over 500 instalments). Smyth also drew the surreal, non-linear monthly comic strip "Fazooza" for *Vice* magazine for nearly eight years (1995-2002).

Smyth has cited Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's *Raw* (1980-1991) and Robert Crumb, Peter Bagge, and Aline Kominsky-Crumb's *Weirdo* (1981-1993) as major influences on her work. She has also expressed admiration for more obscure underground comic books, such as Mark Connery's *Rudy* (1992-) and Doug Allen and Gary Leib's *Idiotland* (1993-1994), as well as the artists associated with the Canadian "psychedoolic" movement—a term coined by Marc Bell to describe artists whose works incorporate psychedelic imagery and notebook doodles. While her artistic style bears a striking resemblance to that of earlier underground cartoonists, like Kim Deitch and Charles Burns, her feminist themes have also invited comparisons between her work and that of the cartoonists associated with the "Wimmen's Comix" movement, such as Phoebe Gloeckner and Lynda Barry. Unlike these artists, however, Smyth has always incorporated the style and content of her comics into her art shows—a practice shared by several other contemporary artists, like Keith Haring, Gary Panter, and Raymond Pettibon, whose work similarly straddles the divide between comics and art.

In 2006 Smyth accepted a position at OCAD University, where she now teaches courses on illustration and cartooning, and in 2011 she released her first full-length graphic novel, *The Never Weres*, which was published by Annick Press. Although it is primarily intended for younger readers, this novel presents a bleak vision of a future in which the human race is on the verge of extinction due to an infertility virus. In addition to their impending extinction, the few remaining humans are forced to live in a world that is constantly dark and raining due to climate change, and they must struggle to survive due to the exorbitantly high cost of food production. The story focuses on three teenagers—members of the last generation of naturally-born humans—who uncover a mystery connected to the world's first successful

clone. While the practice of cloning is extremely controversial among members of the older generation, the characters gradually become convinced that it represents the only possible solution to the declining population problem. *The Never Weres* thus contributed to the burgeoning genre of post-apocalyptic YA novels—a genre that includes such popular titles as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *The Maze Runner* (2009), and *Divergent* (2011)—and it was particularly praised for its dense and detailed visual style. Some critics even compared Smyth's vision of a futuristic Toronto to director Ridley Scott's equally dark vision of a futuristic Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* (1982).

In 2013 Smyth also collaborated with Canadian sex educator Cory Silverberg on the Kickstarter-funded picture book *What Makes a Baby*, which was later republished by Seven Stories Press. The book was designed to teach children about conception, gestation, and birth in a way that works regardless of whether or not the child was conceived using reproductive technologies, surrogacy, or intercourse. This book was followed in 2015 by *Sex Is a Funny Word*, which was one of the first children's books to deal with issues like sexual orientation and gender identity (there are no genders identified in the text).

Smyth's latest book, *Somnambulance*, has just been released by Koyama Press. Annie Koyama came up with the idea for this book after seeing Smyth at Canzine, a festival for zines and underground culture held in Toronto. As she said in an interview with Laura Kenins for *Quill & Quire*, "I realized that none of the young zine-makers had a clue as to who she was and how important she was, and that cemented for me that she needed to have something of her own out." *Somnambulance* seeks to reaffirm the central importance of Smyth's work by providing a retrospective look at her amazingly prolific career, including her comic strips, zines, and solo comic books, which are presented in roughly chronological order, beginning with several half-page comic strips from her student days in the mid-1980s. It also features several new or previously unpublished stories, including several longer pieces that were produced as recently as last year. Many of these comics were also created for publishing collaborations with other artists, including Dame Darcy, Ellen Forney, Maurice Vellekoop, and Dave Lapp. The book thus not only provides a valuable introduction to her work and a fascinating look at how her style has evolved over time, but it also conveys a clear sense of how admired and influential her work has been within the underground comics scene.

The following interview was conducted over e-mail in June 2018.

Anthony Enns: Although you received formal instruction in painting at the Ontario College of Art, it seems that you were also drawing comic strips for the student newspaper *Fishwrap* as early as 1983. When did you first become interested in comics?

Fiona Smyth: I grew up reading *Asterix* (1959-) in my family's house and *Giles* (1945-), *Peanuts* (1950-2000), and *Mad* magazine (1952-) at my cousins' house. There was also a summer trip with my cousins in the early 1970s where we read EC horror comics. In college I read a lot of Frank Miller's work, including *Daredevil* (1979-1983), *Ronin* (1983-1984), and *The Elektra Saga* (1984), as well as some of Chris Claremont's *The Uncanny X-Men* (1975-1991). My OCA schoolmate Maurice Vellekoop introduced me to *Raw* magazine, and Mark Askwith, the TV producer who was working at the Silver Snail comic book shop at the time, introduced me to *Love And Rockets* (1982-) and the work of Dan Clowes.

Enns: Clowes is particularly famous for the comic "Art School Confidential" (1991)—a satire of art schools that was loosely based on his own personal experiences at the Pratt Institute in the early 1980s. Were you familiar with this work, and did it resonate with your own experiences?

Smyth: Certainly it did, and I've shared it for years with my students. It's a hilarious send-up of art school culture, and the scathing portrayals of students and teachers are pretty spot-on. The comic also included the warning that only a few art students go on to have successful careers, which is still true today. In a similar vein, we presently have Walter Scott's brilliant graphic novel *Wendy* (2014) lambasting the art world.

Enns: It sounds like you were most familiar with American comics. When did you first become interested in Canadian comics?

Smyth: Buying a copy of Chester Brown's self-published minicomic *Yummy Fur* (1983-1994) was hugely influential. Chester opened my mind to underground comics and self-publishing. His style of art and storytelling was so different from anything I had read at that point. I soon began to check out

other local zines, like Pete Dako's *Casual Casual Comics* (1983-1985)—the *Raw/Weirdo* of Canada. Dako also organized one of the first exhibitions of small-press comics, which travelled across Canada, Europe, and Japan.

Enns: Scott said that he stopped drawing comics in art school and only returned years later, after he became disillusioned with the art world. Did you also have difficulty reconciling your interest in comics with your ambitions as an artist?

Smyth: I would sell minicomics at my art shows, but painting and drawing were more my focus during my last year of college and the years following.

Enns: When did that begin to change?

Smyth: Comics became more of a focus with the publication of *Nocturnal Emissions* in the early 1990s and the ensuing requests to create work for other publications. I discovered that my comics had better ways of travelling the world than my paintings.

Enns: Your early comics seem to have a kind of woodcut style, and they rarely include speech balloons. Were you initially inspired by expressionist woodcuts or woodcut novels?

Smyth: I was mostly working with brush and ink for my comics, and I was painting very filled-in picture planes that happen to look like woodprints. I didn't learn about the wordless graphic narratives of folks like Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel until at least a decade later. My biggest inspiration in the mid-1980s was Keith Haring. I really admired his style, efficiency, and speed, and I was particularly impressed by the way he expressed the personal as political. I was also inspired by the work of Gary Panter, Sue Coe, Georganne Deen, the local Toronto artist collectives Chromaliving and Baramundos, and John Scott, who was one of my teachers at OCA and later won a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2000. I recall John showing our class one of his drawings and saying, "Look at Death offering comfort and protection to these doomed bunnies." How funny and horrible! There was also a huge show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, *The European Iceberg* (1985), which introduced me to Italian and German neo-expressionists

like Jörg Immendorff and Mimmo Paladino. For most of these artists I was drawn to their densely-filled picture plane styles and more importantly the narrative content of their work.

Enns: In another interview you mentioned that you initially felt like an outlier within the underground comics scene, as you were producing "artsy" minicomics instead of longer autobiographical narratives. Why were you interested more in surreal images and absurdist situations than in real people and everyday life?

Smyth: Creating autobiographical comics calls for total truth-telling and transparency, and at the time I wasn't feeling enough in my skin to reveal myself in that way. I was also a punk rocker who wanted to go against the prevailing focus in comics. And linear narrative is hard! Working in a non-linear way was closer to how my drawings and paintings worked. But now, in retrospect and with the wisdom of age, I'd say that my work has always been autobiographical and similar to other forms of non-linear storytelling. I've always related to Frida Kahlo's rejection of her work being labelled surreal and her affirmation that it was about her life. I think a lot of outlier artists would identify similarly.

Enns: One of the recurring features in your early work is your use of Catholic iconography. Why were you drawn to these symbols and themes? What were you trying to say about your Catholic upbringing or about Catholicism in general?

Smyth: I was definitely trying to exorcise my Catholic indoctrination once I was old enough to understand its repressiveness and misogyny. I wondered why my mother, my sisters, and I dutifully attended mass every Sunday when the patriarch of our house did not. I would get bored silly and stare at the altar art, the stained glass windows (comics!), and the Stations of the Cross (more comics!) to stave off sleep. As a young artist, post-college, I took the ecstatic martyrdom that I saw in Catholic imagery and further sexualized it by portraying Kewpie-doll Christs, for instance. At some point I got tired of only reiterating familiar imagery and felt like the work was too western-bound. I was starting to be inspired by Buddhist and Hindu imagery instead.

Enns: Your comic "Late" (1993) also describes how the story of the Immaculate Conception was both confusing and terrifying to you as a young girl. What did this story represent to you, and why did you feel that it promoted an unhealthy self-image for girls?

Smyth: The biblical tale of the Annunciation represented spiritual rape to me as an adult. I didn't fully understand it in those terms as a child, but I certainly understood it as a transgressive act against a female body—one very much like my own. This was a transgression by the God I was supposed to revere. I saw no choice, no autonomy, and no freedom enacted in this story. I would continue to see this confirmed in the church, in school, in society, and even in my own family.

Enns: You also conclude this story by arguing that the title of the pamphlet *It's Wonderful Being a Girl* (1963) was simply "wrong." This pamphlet about the "miracle" of menstruatuon may not be familiar to readers today, but I believe that it was published by Johnson & Johnson (the makers of "sanitary napkins" and "feminine belts") and that it was distributed to Quebec schoolgirls in order to encourage them to "get ready to marry and have children" as soon as their period arrived. Were they still distributing this pamphlet when you were in school, and why did you feel that the title was misleading?

Smyth: Yes, I remember seeing that pamphlet in the 1970s. It was very archaic, even though the art direction looked contemporary at the time. My childhood was full of contradictory messages of feminine compliance and the burgeoning women's movement. When I got my period I was attending a private Catholic girls' school where no one spoke of periods and students in grades 7, 8, and 9 weren't even allowed to carry purses. The perpetuated female self-image was all about outer appearances, menstrual secrecy, and being of service to others. Thankfully my family moved to Toronto, and I was enrolled in an arts high school where girls proudly spoke about being on the rag!

Enns: When did you first become interested in Buddhism and Hinduism? Were you primarily interested in the visual styles associated with these religions or did you also feel that they were more egalitarian?

Smyth: I grew up with Japanese, Chinese, and Inuit art in my home. This was Montreal post-Expo 67, and there was an embrace of other than just Western culture. Once my family moved to Toronto I also spent time in Kensington Market with my friends, and we were influenced by all of the cultures represented there. Hindu posters permeated my psyche with their bright colours and ambiguously gendered gods and goddesses, and elephants also began to figure greatly in my work because of their size and their symbolism as memory keepers and matriarchs. Elephants also have long noses, which connects to "The Nose Knows" or "Swonk"—recurring mantras in my work, which serve as a reminder that unspoken truths will always reveal themselves.

Enns: Your early work was also very explicit in its treatment of sexuality. Why were you initially drawn to this subject matter?

Smyth: I was definitely making a feminist statement, but I was also living through the work as an alter ego. As a young, shy, fat girl, I felt that I could live sexually and loudly through my artwork.

Enns: Could you say more about how the sexual content of your early work was intended as a feminist statement? In your comic "Whore/House" (1987), for example, you juxtapose images of strippers and housewives. What was the purpose of these juxtapositions?

Smyth: The purpose was to critique the stereotypical roles forced on women by society, such as virgin/whore or mother/slut, which reflect a kind of naive 1950s view. I wanted to portray how women aren't singular characteristics; rather, we are good/bad and ugly/beautiful all at the same time. In other words, I was embracing all of these roles simultaneously in a super-energized graphic way. This zine was also part of an art show with the same title, which featured paintings and drawings of women who were sexually in control, empowered, and full of agency. I also painted the walls of the gallery around my paintings and drawings à la Keith Haring, Chromaliving, and Baramundos, and I even taped photocopied drawings of sperm on the ceiling, as if a crowd of men had circle jerked the entire space.

Enns: "Slack" (1995) and "Foxy" (1996) also feature strippers in provoca-

tive poses juxtaposed with women doing mundane, everyday activities, like reading or watching television. Did you have a similar goal in mind?

Smyth: "Slack" is about female bodies in non-sexual poses and spaces, although ironically they are still being looked at and assessed. "Foxy" is juxtaposing the bodies of sex workers versus fantasies versus romance versus love. There's a winking enticement or flirtation included as well.

Enns: This theme also seems relevant to one of your most famous characters—Gert the Mannequin—who is "fascinated by sex" even though (or perhaps because) "she could feel no pleasure." Gert initially works as a stripper and prostitute, as she can assume the most ideal forms of femininity, and she later claims that she represents "every woman" because of her ability to "change every day." Gert's situation seems to exemplify the idea of femininity as a mask or disguise that women are forced to wear in order to please men, yet there are also parallels between Gert and Pinocchio, as she dreams of one day becoming a "real" woman. How did you negotiate these seemingly contradictory meanings?

Smyth: I think Gert represents the need to be one's true self beyond familial, cultural, capitalist, and societal pressures. She represents exploration without judgment. Gert is unknowing of herself because of outer projections and the implication that she was created by someone else—namely, in a factory. Gert reveals the exterior and interior juxtapositions of the self, which illustrates my own struggles to understand myself. She's a good universal symbol—a product of consumerism striving for individuality and idiosyncrasy.

Enns: "Plus" (1998) similarly illustrates how women are often forced to adhere to a particular body type in Western culture. You note, for example, that "diets commence at 13 with promises of empowerment through weight loss," and the hollowness of these promises is emphasized by the accompanying image of a young girl's body being squeezed in a giant (and presumably male) fist. Is Gert's ability to alter her body also related to the social pressure that you describe here?

Smyth: My teen self in "Plus" dreamed, as many young girls do, to have the

abilities of Gert to change her body at whim. To tell stories of a female body, a fat body, or a menstruating body is sadly still radical today.

Enns: You recently drew a sequel to this piece, in which you describe how "punk released [you] from society's not so subliminal campaign against female bodies, although it exerted its own beauty standards." Could you say more about the positive and negative influences of the punk movement on you and your work? How did you gradually learn to be "in the world on [your] own terms," and how was punk culture part of this process?

Smyth: Punk taught me to reject the status quo, question authority, and not give a fuck, and it influenced my work by inspiring me to create bold and brash statements in a highly graphic and aggressive style. It also freed me from the religious, parental, and societal rules governing female bodies, even though it still had its own fashion, hair, and body rules. The Queercore and RiotGrrrl movements later emboldened my work around bodies, identity, and feminism.

Enns: Was the sexual content of your work controversial? For example, several Canadian cartoonists and comic book shops were charged with obscenity at this time due to the production and distribution of small-press comics, and feminist groups were often promoting comics censorship. Was your work ever discussed in this context?

Smyth: I'm sure it was. I once submitted a painting of a sexy, curvy woman beside a giant erect penis for an art show on censorship, and I was rejected because some members of the jury felt that my work would offend feminists, even though some female artists came to my defence. And when I became a working illustrator, art directors would often say to me, "We love your work, but no flaming vaginas or erect penises please!" The irony is that I now draw genitals for kids' books, but at that time it was considered to be in bad taste or even anti-feminist to depict my own sexual desire. I think the key thing is that I was a young woman creating images of female empowerment, agency, and humour. My male peers were not judged in the same way for their sexual images or the sexual harassment and assault that some of them perpetrated within the arts community. It was considered normal for them to act inappropriately—sometimes even criminally.

Enns: I recall that Trina Robbins' all-female comic book *Wet Satin* (1976) was initially rejected by the printer for being pornographic, yet the same printer also produced *Bizarre Sex* (1972-1982), which was so explicit that it had to be covered in plain white paper. Do you think female sexual fantasies are sometimes seen as more obscene than male sexual fantasies?

Smyth: The stereotype used to be that women weren't as sexual as men, didn't have the same sex drive, and didn't respond to visual imagery in the same way. Of course it's dangerous for the object of desire to have thoughts and feelings and to wield power—that's a terrifying concept. It's great that today the conversation about desire doesn't just include binary-gendered assumptions and prejudices.

Enns: Do you try to avoid making distinctions between female and male sexual desire in your own work?

Smyth: I think for the most part that if I'm drawing sex in my personal work, then it's almost always my sexual fantasies or nightmares that are being depicted—even if the main character isn't "female." One of the few exceptions is "Fluffy the Dog" (1998), which was written by Patty Powers and describes a sexual encounter with a canine.

Enns: That story has a lovely ending, in which Patty and Fluffy are staring at each other in bed and Patty writes, "We were both horny and confused, and we were probably thinking the same thing: 'wrong species.'" Why did this story appeal to you? Did you relate in some way to the themes of sexual confusion and frustration combined with the overall message of tolerance and compassion?

Smyth: Patty contacted me about drawing this comic for the zine *Ben Is Dead*. Visually it fit into my world of sexual freaks and the expression of sexual desire in all its gnarly forms.

Enns: Another recurring theme in your work is the language and landscape of dreams. Many of your comics recount your own dreams, such as "Interrupted" (1992), "I Dreamt I Was Burt Reynolds" (1992), and "Pavor Nocturnus" (2006), although the nature of these dreams seems to vary wide-

ly—from the surreal to the hilarious to the absolutely terrifying. Why do you find dreams so interesting, and why have they become such a constant presence in your work?

Smyth: I've always experienced vivid dreams, although now I don't remember them as well as I used to. In the past I used to describe making my art as channelling from the ether, but after many years of therapy I now understand that I'm actually plumbing my own depths—my own selves.

Enns: Does your work help you to analyze the meaning of your dreams?

Smyth: Creatively, I don't want to dissect or decipher my dreams or dream states. I think there is value in being free to explore and create without extreme self-reflection and self-censorship—to follow an idea and see where it takes you. I can take the time to analyze the work later.

Enns: The title of your latest book—*Somnambulance*—also refers to the experience of sleepwalking. Is this a reference to the dream content of your work or your stylistic approach, as your work often appears to have been produced while in a trance state (like doodling or automatic drawing)?

Smyth: I think the title refers to states of dissociation. A recurring symbol in my work is the sleeping woman floating above a bed or sometimes a symbol for a bed of nails, such as pine trees, daggers, or crystal-like shards. The sleeping woman represents resilience to internal and external attacks, and she often appears sleeping, dead, or ghostlike, which is about being present and absent at the same time.

In regards to the book, the title refers not only to this recurring motif but also to the dreaminess of the passage of time and how memory can work or not work. The book shows work spanning over 30 years, which is a lot of life lived and dreamed. It was Annie Koyama who really named the book. I was originally thinking of "Somnambulist," but she turned this personal noun into a more general condition. I'm forever grateful to her for giving the book life.

Enns: The symbol of the sleeping woman also appears in your comic "The Somnambulae" (2005), which tells the story of a cute bear-like creature who

appears to be killed by a falling asteroid only to have her spirit merge with another spirit to become a kind of goddess. In many ways this piece feels like a shift in style due to the abstract nature of the world it depicts, the absence of character names and dialogue, and the extreme ambiguity of the narrative. How do you interpret the meaning of this piece?

Smyth: This zine followed the creation of my art show *The Chimera's Daughters*, for which I had an Ontario Arts Council grant to support research in Japan. To me, the word "somnambulae" refers to the elements and actors within a sleepwalking world, and the zine is about resilience through trauma, duality of spirit, and birthing/dying transformations. All of these themes visually and conceptually go back to the images of Christ and martyrs that I grew up with, which I transferred to my female bodies and connected to my own female experience. I see stigmata as a sign of PTSD, for instance.

Enns: So the main character experiences a trauma, which is represented as an external attack, and her somnambulant state signals her resilience, which leads to a personal transformation?

Smyth: Yes, something like that. The somnambulae's world is beautiful and terrible at the same time, as nothing is stable or dependable except change itself. The comic is also visually dreamy, especially with the lack of text, which is a great device in comics because it provides a sense of narrative openness and allows the reader to project more easily into the story.

Enns: What were you researching in Japan, and how was this comic related to your research?

Smyth: My research project involved creating new ink drawings inspired by and in reaction to Japanese manga. A large percentage of the genres in Japanese comics feature transgressive images of violence and sex inflicted on the bodies of women and girls. I related to this imagery as themes I've explored since I began my career. I wanted to explore manga but exert my feminist take and create my own world of monsters and victims.

Enns: Was this project related to your interest in non-Western religions?

Smyth: Visiting Buddhist and Shinto shrines was very inspiring. I learned how Japanese visual culture, design, and comics are part of everyday life—unlike North American visual culture, which is not considered an essential part of life.

Enns: In another interview you also mentioned that *The Chimera's Daughters* marked a turning point in your work, as "the female body . . . began to turn inwards to the viscera and even molecular level, to turn inside out." What brought about this change, and how was it reflected in your show?

Smyth: This change was inspired by the experience of dealing with chronic illness and death in my family and my partner's family. It also came about through reckoning with my own mental health, which showed me that pain and suffering can co-exist at the same time with happiness and peace. The word "LUKKIE" also began to appear in my work to symbolize the arbitrariness of fate and the unfairness of ascribing it to peoples' lives. Further changes are shown visually through internal landscapes and running narratives of post-apocalyptic worlds peopled by female heroes, victims, and monsters.

Enns: Some of the monstrous women in *The Chimera's Daughters* were taken from popular culture or ancient mythology, such as Sadako, a character from the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (1998), and the Chimera, a monster from Greek mythology who was considered to have been female. What makes these women monstrous? Do they reflect male fears of the female body or your own fears as a child concerning your lack of bodily control?

Smyth: Horror definitely plays a big part in the aesthetic. Pattern, repetition, and anthropomorphism are featured, for example, with what appears to be arteries or sagging flesh. The characters of Sadako, Lamia, the Chimera, and the Matriarch are also monstrous in their unbounded power. They represent opposites of feminine archetypes, as they are anti-heroines, reverse saints, or non-martyrs. The birth imagery is also related to my own fear of the Annunciation and pregnancy, which began when I was growing up and continued until I had a hysterectomy on Women's Day in 2017.

I think that the world depicted in *The Chimera's Daughters* is also significant because of the absence of male characters. It doesn't consider the

male gaze, and it isn't made specifically with a male viewer in mind. As an emerging artist I was concerned with outrageousness, shock, and bucking the patriarchal status quo, but over the last 20 years my work has become more personal, as it deals more with experience, bodily memory, anxiety, and trauma. Again, I'm mostly interested in creating something that is not contrary to male experience but rather independent and outside of the male art history narrative. I'm currently working on a new graphic novel, titled *Spinnbarkeit*, which further explores this world of female and non-binary characters.

Enns: "Spinnbarkeit" was also the title of a mural that you created for the art show *What It Feels Like for a Girl* (2003). I believe this word refers to the elastic qualities of cervical mucus, and in her discussion of your work in the accompanying catalogue Sally McKay notes that "elasticity is a survival strategy, a mechanism for deflecting and absorbing the bombardments of suffering, illness, and confusion that come packaged with bodily existence." Could you say more about what this term means to you and how it is related to this piece?

Smyth: "Spinnbarkeit" is a word that perfectly encapsulates my feminist view of resilience, survival, and creativity. It refers to the mucus present when the uterus is most fertile, which is gross and beautiful at the same time, and it is all about elasticity. I've depicted this idea using the sleeping woman above a bed of nails, the resigned walking woman, and wombs or maws that are sometimes full of teeth like the *vagina dentata* of folklore. Bodily liquids like blood, milk, and ejaculate can also be seen.

Enns: I wonder how this concern with monstrous women is related to your first graphic novel, *The Never Weres*, which deals with the themes of viral contagion, defective reproduction, and global annihilation. How are the characters in this novel also coping with a kind of embodied trauma?

Smyth: *The Never Weres* also explores trauma through the story of a teenager, who happens to be a clone and the answer to saving the world. Her story not only speaks of traumatic memory within one's own tissue but also not so subtly suggests that this same tissue is literally the key to salvation. I think I wrote the book with this subconscious message in mind.

Enns: Your comic "The Maul" (2015) also deals with the themes of contagion, monstrosity, and extinction by depicting an infestation of teenage zombies in a shopping centre. This story seems to provide an explicit critique of capitalism, as bodies become interchangeable with products and the act of consumption literally becomes a form of cannibalization, yet you have described it as a critique of the commodification of teenage bodies. Could you say more about how teenagers are being exploited and how this piece critiques their exploitation?

Smyth: I was primarily thinking about how teen bodies are used in advertising and especially in the fashion world to represent the ideal of bodily perfection and the happy life, which serves to promote capitalism. Capitalism vampirizes their youth, sexuality, and promising futures and conceals their real-life concerns with racism, homophobia, misogyny, and economic disparity.

Enns: Are you suggesting that the zombification of these teenagers reflects the ways in which their bodies are being exploited under capitalism or that it signals their resistance to this exploitation by allowing them to consume those who would otherwise consume them?

Smyth: I think it does both. On the one hand, the teenagers are self-destructive and insatiable (just like non-zombie teenagers), and their actions will end the world. On the other hand, it is a world that exploits them and that was constructed without their consent. Will a better world rise out of the ashes? Maybe, but the future is uncertain.

Enns: You also recently contributed two pieces to Françoise Mouly and Nadja Spiegelman's protest comic book *Resist!*, which was published in response to the 2016 American presidential election. How did you become involved in this project?

Smyth: I read the call for submissions on Facebook and saw it as a chance to get involved in a tangible way. I wanted to convey a message of solidarity, and one of my published drawings, "Keep on Dreading," is my female version of Crumb's "Keep on Truckin'" (1968), which has been in my paintings and drawings for years—a symbol of both resignation and resilience.

Enns: Over the course of your long career you have worked in a wide range of media, including paintings and comics as well as installations, murals, and films. How do you decide which ideas are appropriate for which medium, and do you feel that the medium alters or constrains the work in some way? Is it a difference in scale or narrative complexity?

Smyth: The medium usually sets the constraints. Comics are the most laborious and involved medium. Film follows because there are usually other people involved, who help to carry the labour. Storywise, though, I think there is little difference between these media except the expression of time, as a single image can carry as much weight as a 300-page graphic novel. Think about Kahlo's painting *The Two Fridas* (1939). She shares so much of herself and her story in that one image.

Enns: It's interesting that you describe comics, films, and paintings as roughly equivalent in terms of their aims and effects. Do you feel that they also complement each other? When you create a minicomic to accompany an art show, for example, does it have the same essential meaning as the paintings or do they both enhance each other in some way?

Smyth: I definitely use different media to enhance each other. Films can exist outside of the gallery context on smart phones or as projections on buildings, and comics are tangible and affordable art objects that readers can engage with more directly, as they create an intimacy that a painting cannot. Comics can also provide a more linear narrative than a painting or an installation, which helps to add more meaning to the work. In the "Whore/House" zine, for example, I could explore and develop characters and have them speak, which helped to flesh out the larger themes of the show.

Enns: What are you currently working on?

Smyth: I'm currently working on a new kids book with sex educator Cory Silverberg. This is the third in a series of books on sex education, and it focuses specifically on puberty. It also features more comics than the previous two, which attests to the fact of their accessibility and educational viability. It feels like I've come full circle in exploring the themes of identity, sex, consent, and empowerment through this work.