

Ann Hirsch
American Medium
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Ann Hirsch, *Xanxia*, 2016, colored pencil and graphite on paper, artist's frame

The scene has been set domestic, but not comfortable. Small and intricate crayon drawings wilt over the chair rail molding and hang themselves from the fake-flickering sconces, their uneven bodies caught at rest or in acts of self-mutilation. “Genie + Annie,” an arrow-pierced heart declares above one, alongside a list of tips for “healthy marriage.” Last year, Hirsch married Gene McHugh, the critic and curator, and this show abbreviates the honeymoon for a frank reckoning with the prospects of two human bodies going together through the world. Framed pencil portraits depict would-be husband-wife mash-ups— Gene’s hairline, Ann’s nose, a bulging bloody eye and garish grin of unknown provenance. Changes to the body are visualized as mutations both advantageous and horrible. On a flat screen at the head of a dining table, Hirsch is seen slowly parting her hot pink nightgown to reveal her stomach, which appears at first engorged by a spiral bulge filter and then as a vagina, parted by polished fingers. Finally, a fully-clothed toddler is superimposed, as if wandering out of the womb. The artist’s face silently contorts in the imagined pains and pleasures of birth.

The press release for *A Formidable Daughter* reads as the reception-end transcript of a call from the artist’s mother. As they discuss the installation, words of praise and questions of interest are evidently met with rebukes and evasions. (“Ok, it doesn’t have to represent anything. But doesn’t all art... ok, I’ll stop.”) Like any artist, like any child, Hirsch plays perfect contrarian in the face of well-intentioned inquisition. In this installation, she foregrounds the sort of familial anguish that seems doomed for infinite repetition, that special antipathy we reserve for those who love us best, the conviction that one has been wronged by having been brought to be as they are. Hirsch seems to celebrate and chastise herself for these feelings in equal measure, as a parent might curse their daughter, scrubbing her latest masterpiece from the wall even while admiring the linework.

— Maxwell Paparella