View of "Marlene McCarty," 2020. Background from left: *"14" (2),* 2014; *"14" (4),* 2014. Foreground: *Into the Weeds,* 2019.

Marlene McCarty

KUNSTHAUS BASELLAND

There is a craft to the installation of exhibitions. When unpacking large paper works that have been transported rolled, gallery staff lay them out on flat, clean surfaces for some days, to let the fibers of the paper relax, before preparing them for hanging. When the art installers performed this familiar ritual at the Kunsthaus Baselland, a murmur of surprise went up. Reproductions do not communicate the force of Marlene McCarty's drawings. In the JPEGS that are now the dominant medium for viewing art, her drawings in graphite and ballpoint pen look like accomplished, almost vernacular illustrations, black and blue and earnest as denim. Confronted face-to-face, they carry the same charge as ambitious abstract painting.

To give an example: In the enormous drawings that open the show, *"14" (2)* and *"14" (4)*, both 2014, the hair of a sleeping woman cascades over the sheet. In reproduction, the images carry the charm of nostalgia, a sensual realism. The viewer who is tempted to step closer to the nearly eight-foot-long originals to look at the work's details will inevitably get caught up in the maze of her tresses. The lines seem to convey the physics of hair, its weight and natural fall, but there's also something disturbing, even impossible about the composition that reveals itself only slowly. It is as if the rules of growth that allow the cellular differentiation of flesh, skin, and hair follicles have run off course. Standing too close, you suddenly feel like an intruder. You can step back, but this does not make the picture any less strange. Is she really sleeping? Certainly it is not a mistake to see a woman rendered so large that she becomes a landscape, but there is also a latent image here, like the underexposed black within a photograph, that contains something you don't want to see.

McCarty's method can recall botanical illustrators' careful techniques and archaeologists' studies of disturbed earth—or police sketches of crime scenes. Her line carries both precision and confidence. At the same time, she understands drawing as a Conceptual practice. Drawing is a means to reflect on history, on the history of violence toward and by women, and toward and by humans in general, and it is also a medium that contains conventions that must themselves be reflected on and occasionally violated. Her most famous images—the "Murder Girls" series, 1995–2014, with its depictions of matricidal American daughters such as Marlene Olive—work through the ambiguities of the technique in a way that only intensifies the force of the narratives they retell.

Drawings of these dimensions, with the thousands of hours that they take to produce, encompass both critical distance and ecstatic immersion. For example, the attention to detail that she lavishes on a datura flower—a plant well known to botanists and poisoners alike—involves a duration of creation that is linked to methods of scientific observation, but is also an invitation to contemplate the vicissitudes of history that arrange individual events into collective fates. Forms morph: Flesh becomes hair, hair forms papules that blossom into tumors or goiters. These drawings are major works, not because of their breathtaking size, but because of the abyss that they suspend you over. McCarty pushes the craft of drawing to the

point that it becomes conceptual art, at the same time using it to reflect on history. In this exhibition, she also plays on the tradition of pairing painting with sculpture, juxtaposing the supposedly secondary art of illustration with an indoor garden in *Into the Weeds*, 2019. The work is filled with those beautiful flowers that she favors in her drawings, plants that can be used as medicines, ornaments, or abortifacients—another means of defying reproduction.

— *Adam Jasper*