

"Come on, Pippi! Why don't you draw on the paper?" asked the exasperated teacher.
"I used it up ages ago! My horse can't fit on a ridiculous little piece of paper!
Right now I'm working on the front legs, but by the time I get to the tail, I'll end up in the corridor!"

Valentine Gardiennet's drawings, similarly to those of Pippi Longstocking, are not confined to a single sheet of paper. Instead, they prefer to spread across the floors and walls of corridors and exhibition spaces. Both backgrounds and forms, they often overflow their frames to become wallpaper, canopies, papier-mâché sculptures, ceramics or decorative elements. We wander through Valentine Gardiennet's exhibition like Alice in Wonderland, who changes size according to the mouthfuls of mushrooms offered by the hookah-smoking caterpillar.

"Le moulin et la veilleuse (the Windmill and the Night Light)," an installation created by the artist for Les Capucins, is a liminal space oscillating between marsh and bedroom, landscape and domestic space or work and idleness. We encounter a whole host of characters who have escaped from their fairy tales and cartoons to live the lives they would have chosen for themselves. Their evolution takes place in visual worlds derived from cartoons and carnivals, which Valentine Gardiennet likes to call the interstitial worlds of the 'gutters,' those white bands that separate the comic strip panels, where she imagines that which escapes the narrative, when the settings are put into storage and the characters are freed from the plot. There's something psychedelic and jubilant about this abundance of colours and formats, but it also creates the nauseous feeling at the end of a funfair. It makes you wonder what goes on there at night when the art centre is closed: surely a cross between *Toy Story* and *Night at the Museum*.

Among the characters we meet in this great *pégoulade*—the name of the opening parade of the *félias* (fairs) in the South of France, where Valentine Gardiennet and I grew up—it is never quite clear who is familiar and who is beyond recognition. Four large panel paintings form a sequel to the adventures of Pippi Longstocking, a little girl with superhuman strength who lives with a horse and a monkey, without adult supervision, and does exactly as she pleases, against all social conventions. Created in 1943 by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, Pippi Långstrump (literally "Pippi Longstocking") has enjoyed immense popularity in Europe, with the exception of French-speaking countries. The fault lies with the translations, or rather the French adaptations, which turned her into a much more well-behaved and docile figure than in the original version, where Pippi stands up to adults and rejects school as well as the gender codes assigned from childhood.

Christine Aventin, following in the footsteps of several researchers and linguists, has revived her as a feminist and punk icon (Pippi literally invents the word spunk in one of the episodes) in her book *FéminiSpunk. Le monde est notre terrain de jeu* (*FéminiSpunk. The world is our playground*). Valentine Gardiennet's Pippi, now a teenager, has formed a punk rock band and lives in a community, surrounded by the unusual characters who inhabit the various panels: Madame Françoise, a clock that does not tell the time; Dame Oeuf, a female version of Humpty Dumpty who demands a ladder to climb; and a medieval rave party version of Hamelin's flute player.

A pastoral archetype, the windmill is a place of passage and meetings, conducive to encounters, discussions and inter-species friendships, as in *The Old Windmill*, a Disney short film from 1937 that depicts the adventures of animals living in a windmill struck by lightning. Windmills are also the giants that Don Quixote, the only one who believes his adventures are real, fights against. His idealism, freedom of thought and perseverance in a hostile world have made him a figure reinvented in the guise of a woman by several authors: firstly by Charlotte Lennox in the 18th century (*The Female Quixote* in 1752), followed by Monique Wittig and Kathy Acker in the 1980s (respectively with the play *Le voyage sans fin* in 1984 and the punk novel *Don Quichotte. Ce qui était un rêve* in 1986). Even more than Don Quixote, Valentine Gardiennet focuses on the figure of Sancho Panza: peasant, squire, friend and intermediary, as well as a shrewd judge of character under his in his simple appearance. Sancho Panza is multiplied here in the guise of several female characters who travel around on the backs of donkeys, and embodies the revenge of the secondary or supporting characters. Monique Wittig's *Le voyage sans fin* ends with Quixote stating: "Even if the whole world thinks I am crazy (...), I will say that the whole world is crazy and that I am the one who is right;" and is that not exactly the kind of certainty you need to lead a life that is different from the norm, and to make art?

By drawing on pop culture, colour and the theme of childhood, and through weaving together fiction rather than history, Valentine Gardiennet raises the question of the seriousness of art and plays with the references that need to be deployed in order to be a 'big artist' in the same way as one becomes a 'big person.' Poking fun at the condescension that adults often feel towards the world of children and teenagers, the only minority that each of us has necessarily been part of and then left behind, she uses this as a way to deconstruct the relationships of power and authority which are forged throughout life, carried along by the hardly trivial cultural objects through which we construct ourselves. However, it would not be true to say that Valentine Gardiennet has kept her 'childlike soul,' no: it is more so the spirit of adolescence that infuses her work, from which she has vowed to retain the taste for excess and the aptness of its intensity.

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Translated by Jennetta Petch

¹ Astrid Lindgren, *Fifi Brindacier*, Le livre de poche jeunesse, 2015, p. 55, cited by Christine Avenir in *FéminiSpunk. Le monde est notre terrain de jeu*, Zones, 2021.

² op. cit.

³ The script of a play originally in English, entitled *The Constant Journey*

⁴ Monique Wittig, *Le voyage sans fin*, éditions de Minuit, 1986, p.114.