

## Big Girls

In 1981 I saw the exhibition, *The Wild Man: Myth and Symbolism*, at the Met Cloisters, New York. The Medieval manuscript illuminations that I poured over, many measuring only three inches high, inspired a series of twenty-four paintings and drawings that later became *Big Girls*.

Inverting the scale of these miniature creatures into seven-foot giants, *Big Girls* occupied my imagination for almost two decades. I translated their medieval symbolism into contemporary feminist ideals: hairiness represented wildness while bare skin conjured vulnerability. Sprung from a 1970s identity politic, I sought depictions of primordial beings.

The *Big Girls*' stare was confrontational. These would be in-your-face women: hairy, naked, trenchant. My themes were mythological, rendered with a hieroglyphic language of the psyche. Later, I borrowed ecclesiastical imagery from the votives I passed daily in Granada, Spain: gilded halos, feathered angel wings, Our Lady of the Water.

The drawing, *Presa* narrated the psychological effects of domestic violence. It was my response to the *learned helplessness theory*, which asserted that victims of abuse forfeited liberation after repeated, random assault. Other themes I addressed were single motherhood and a body politic that chronicled the morphing aesthetics of feminism.

*Big Girls* peppered my practice on and off over the decades, and in some ways, their stories continue to inform my compass as I navigate the political landscape. With reinvigorated urgency, a new generation of female-identified makers redefine the assertion that the personal is, in fact, political.

– Nancy Lu Rosenheim

*Big Girls* is dedicated, with love and admiration, to Mishikea Davis Brathwaite, 1979-2014

