

From: Christine Rebet, *Game Over*, New York: A Huge Book, 2003.

Jens Hoffmann

### **Guided dreams on the Drawings of Christine Rebet**

« *If dreams are a translation of waking life, equally waking life is a translation of dreams.* »

André Breton

German psychologist Erich From once wrote that dreams are similar to a foreign language. We are often unable to understand any of their signs, but as with another language, we can learn to understand and interpret their meanings. In previous centuries, dreams were associated with the world of the supernatural and with religious convictions.

Dreams were described as visits from the gods and demons, or in the case of the ancient Greek philosophers, dreams were understood to be inspirations coming from a divine force to foretell the future. Since reflections by Sigmund Freud— on the matter in his famous book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, written more than a hundred years ago, we know that dreams have little to do with the supernatural or with enlightenment of a divine origin. They have a direct relation to the experiences and desires of daily life. However, dreams do not continue the so-called waking life, but rather seem to be a mechanism that removes us from our daily anxieties to give us relief from them. Today most scientists believe that dreaming is no more than a neural house cleaning, an editing of information in the storage area of the brain. Many books and essays have been written about dreams, their causes and triggers, and their connection with the conscious and subconscious levels of the senses. But what precisely is it that dreams are telling us? All that is necessary in order to understand a dream is to learn a special psychological technique to interpret it. Once we are able to comprehend its symbols and allusions, we can in fact see that every dream has a “psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state”, as Freud specified. And yet we are not in control of our dreams, they are a subconscious affair coming from the depths of our minds. Generally we speak of having a dream, and never of making a dream, even though everything that comes to mind during the state of dreaming has no source other than ourselves, our experiences and desires. We are the ones that put the images together. Despite this, we feel exposed without protection when dreams bring to light lost and remote memories of an unsettling and repressed nature, many that at first glance would seem to have no significant meaning.

The drawings of French artist Christine Rebet, made between 1999 and 2003, are similarly as cryptic as dreams, appearing to be a language of their own, full of symbols, metaphors and subconscious references. We realize at once that we need a specific method in order to read these drawings, such as those depicting scenes ambiguously entitled *Soul Hunter*, or *Split Mind*, amongst many others. The drawings are distinctly connected to memories from the artist’s childhood and to particular dreams that she had as a young girl, the time when she first started sketching. As Rebet said: “We witness an adult mind going back to the mind of a child. Re-living his fears and his confusions.” It is a child with archetypal fears of losing his parents, of finding himself in an extremely embarrassing situation, or of discovering the paralyzing thought of death. Dreams can, with an amazing force of reproduction, recall distant and fully forgotten experiences from our earliest years, but Rebet’s drawings go further. The dread of physical and emotional tension emerges from every one of her drawings. It is evident that their powerful expressive impact draws on other sources beyond Rebet’s own purely autobiographical anxieties. They are connected to fairy tales, comic books, ghost stories,

horror movies, popular culture at large, and most of all, by the contradictory impulses of life itself. The drawings contain a playful and emphatic beauty when reporting on the dangers and complex depths of the human condition. They are unrefined and appear occasionally unfinished, as if to mirror the fragmented nature of our existence.

Rebet grew up in Lyon, a city she describes as a surreal and fearsome place, a place intensely marked by memories of her conflicts with the bourgeois surroundings of her childhood. She initially studied painting at the Academy in Venice and moved on to work with theatre in the mid-1990s when she studied stage design in London at St Martin's School of Art and Design. This is where her drawing activity encountered theatre. Rebet's images bring together a cast of fantasy creatures that she sends on to her own mental stage. Here, they perform pieces that tell a story, through states of mind that are themselves reduced to temporary gestures, exposing views of the artist's inner life. In her drawings, we encounter the little demons and goblins that so often chase us in our dreams. Devilish looking children, and surreal characters signifying our most feared anxieties; haunted depictions of alienation, trauma and despair. The characters appear with highly disfigured bodies and heads, their arms, legs or faces out of proportion or not existent at all, making them look like deformed and grotesque creatures from our most nightmarish dreams. Here, particularly, the series *Split Mind*, with their distorted adolescent boys and girls, reminds us of tales of horror and dismay. Yet many of the sketches also possess a humorous and cartoonish aspect that emerges through the titles and their relation to continuously fearsome and uncanny images, such as *2 Rabbits in Trouble*, or *How to Upset a DJ*. The uncanny atmosphere of Rebet's drawings is what makes them hugely fascinating. One knows in an instant that one has encountered a different universe with its own set of rules, located in a dusty zone somewhere between the familiar and the unfamiliar. It is an alternative fantasy- world, a self-contained system that depicts momentary visions, like short flashes from haunted memories. We experience fragmented and broken narratives, short and unfinished stories, as if glancing into an abyss of ragged reminiscences.

In Rebet's drawings, with the truthful openness of dreams, we encounter a taste for the eerie and the mysterious, for uncovered virtue and our own emotional depths. We see an idealistic vision of life on a level not pretend and unreal but internal and authentic. Life, like dreams, is torn by our minds' most secret motions, forming us by the simplest and barest means.