

# Interview with Dodie Bellamy on The Letters of Mina Harker



By Siyu  
Lyu

*The Letters of Mina Harker* is an art show in the modest circular space of Berkeley Art Center, curated by CCA alumna Naz Cuguoglu. The exhibition has invited female Bay Area artists working with different mediums to explore new dimensions, personal connections and sentiments to the vampire character Mina Harker through the lens of the eponymous novel written by Dodie Bellamy, senior adjunct professor at CCA. The original book was first published in 1998; based on the San Francisco scenes in the 1980s, it depicts the sexual tensions that burst out from the author and the vampire personality that possessed her body. On the afternoon of February 11, 2023, artists Dena Al-Adeeb and Sholeh Asgary held a sound performance in the center, after which Dodie read a chapter from her novel.

**Siyu Lyu:** It was nice seeing you at Berkeley Art Center. The whole exhibition is like a tiny feeler perceiving into our sexuality. Sex is so bodily attached, at the same time, it is unconsciously entangled in our mind. This is what I was thinking after seeing the painting by Madeleine Fitzpatrick. In her work, I felt the intensity within a material body of visceral desires. Her brush strokes were furious, ticking the animality from the surface of the grotesque shape, which reminded me of Dorothea Tanning's paintings, always fleshy and too much to take in. I feel Madeleine's works and the words in your book share a similar quality of this kind of sensation and dare.

**Dodie Bellamy:** I was very happy you mentioned Dorothea Tanning. When I was an undergrad she was very important to me. She was really into those women surrealists. I feel possessive of her works. I know about them, the world doesn't. I think that you were right, they totally fit in with the aesthetic of the Berkeley Art Center show.

**SL:** So is there any artwork in the show that you're particularly interested in?

**DB:** I was mesmerized by Heesoo Kwon's video. Incredible animation—surreal, naked women floating through space. And then the canopy work by Kerri Conlon was really gorgeous. It was so much fun to read and listen to the music under it. That big red kite felt like an alien that is gonna float down and absorb you. Another one I really liked, the Madeline Fitzpatrick that you mentioned, is just wonderful. Sensuous, abject, disturbing, and compelling. Also, the sculptures by Behnaz and Baharak Khaleghi reminded me of Cronenberg, almost like furniture and body parts extending out and a kind of puppetry.

**SL:** Do you feel a gap between you and these young female artists as you are of different generations?

**DB:** I didn't feel a gap. That's what was so exciting. Obviously, my book was written in the 80s and the 90s, which was a very different world than now. It's a book that has so much sex in it, being written in a very intellectual writing world, I got attention for it. But then I also was seen as some kind of nasty weirdo at the same time. I was really happy that the book was reprinted; it suggests to me that there is a new audience and that it speaks to people today in ways that it couldn't speak to them back when I wrote it, or it didn't have its right audience. When I wrote it, there was very little serious writing that involved sex. There's always been pornographic writing and even some pop writing, but using sex for a sort of art was really radical.

**SL:** Were there any films or books that particularly influenced your work *The Letters of Mina Harker*?

**DB:** I did read a lot of theory books and histories on horror and vampire literature, but mostly I was influenced by movies in the writing of the book. I watched any vampire movie that I could get my hands on, and was particularly excited about the female vampires, like the characters in *Daughters of Darkness* and *The Hunger*. I was working on that project at least a couple of years before I actually read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. And I was shocked by how much it fit my book. The story was very much compiled through newspaper clippings and journal entries. So writing it in letter form fits the original form of the story.

**SL:** What do you think about the relationship between the show and your novel?

**DB:** To have people who had never heard of me and my work reading the book and getting something out of it was really exciting. In San Francisco, when you go to shows, you don't see that much about the female body and sex and desire. Whereas when I go to shows in Los Angeles, it's not hard to find that. The Bay Area needs more of that. So I was really excited to see younger women here making this kind of work.

**SL:** Did you intentionally choose an accent or tone when you were writing the book? And what about the tone you employed when you were reading your book during the performance?

**DB:** The tone is everything in that book. There was lots of experimenting and when I finished the book, I went through and edited it. So right until the end I was still grappling with what the tone was going to be. Because of the sex contents, it's an

embarrassing tone. It's embarrassing to read that book out loud to people. So I try to read in a more neutral fashion, pretty flat.

**SL:** Besides female sexuality, artworks in this show also focus on diaspora, a topic that is highlighted in many Bay Area art shows. As far as I know, Naz, the curator, is Turkish, and most of the artists have international backgrounds, such as Rupy C. Tut, who immigrated from India and based her works on family narratives of movement. I feel intimate to this show since it gives an inclusive perspective of femininity, vulnerability, and transformation, not only in the sense of identities, but something deeper, the inner emotion side that crosses the boundaries of countries and races. How do you feel about the connection between diasporic identity and your book?

**DB:** It was interesting to see artists interpret my book through that lens. I think anybody as an artist has had some experience of shifting worlds, or shifting class. But I think that one of the ways Naz was reading the issues about the diaspora through my book is that Mina is like this alien creature and she's never gonna fit in. And it reminds me of one of the original vampires, the movie *Nosferatu*. It's a silent film and there's lots written about how that movie is related to the Jew and anti-Semitism. So I think that issues of race and otherness are very much coded into the vampire story, and they're always coming from Transylvania, which is Eastern Europe.

**SL:** In the curator's statement, Naz quoted a sentence from your book "THE MONSTROUS AND THE FORMLESS HAVE AS MUCH RIGHT AS ANYBODY ELSE." What did you refer to by this?

**DB:** Back then women who took up a lot of space, who had strong desires, were conventionally seen as monstrous in society. You were supposed to make yourself small. But obviously, it was not the case.



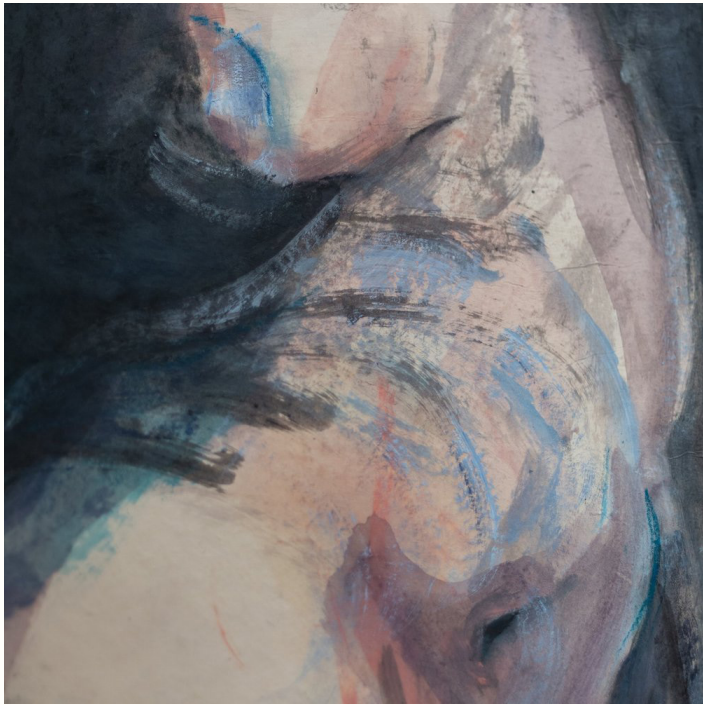
*Exhibition view, Photo by Carla Hernandez*



*Exhibition view, Photo by Carla Hernandez*



*Painting by Rupy C. Tut (detail)*



*Painting by Madeleine Fitzpatrick (detail)*



*Exhibition view, Photo by Carla Hernandez*



*Dodie Bellamy watching the sound performance in Berkeley Art Center*

Siyu Lyu is a ceramic sculptor from China, currently pursuing an MFA degree in Fine Arts department in California College of the Arts.