Artist Isabel Samaras has become know for her iconic pop-culture artwork featuring not only countless movie monsters, but also many other TV greats including characters from BEWITCHED and THE MUNSTERS. Born in New York City, she moved to the suburbs of Washington, D.C. when she was young, but New York is a city with a strong gravitational pull, and shortly after graduating high school, she returned home.

“In Virginia,” Samaras says, “I’d felt like I had to differentiate myself from everyone else; I felt really different on the inside, people treated me like an oddball, so at a certain point it just seemed natural to stop hiding it on the outside too. But once I got back to New York, I could relax and let my shaved hair grow out.” She attended the Parsons School of Design, intending to become an illustrator, but took the money she made from her first big job—providing 70 illustrations for a Japanese seafood cookbook—and took off for Italy. Once there, she experienced an “artistic epiphany” and returned home a painter.

Years later, while visiting family in Greece, she had another epiphany and realized, “I didn’t need to be in New York anymore—what I was, what I made, it didn’t come from the city; it came from inside me and I could do it anywhere.” For Samaras, it was time for something new, something different. “The newest ‘territory,’ the farthest ‘frontier,’ was California. So that’s where I am! And when it’s not endlessly raining, as it is right now, it’s completely fantastic.”

FANGORIA: Covering fine art and painting is a little outside of my area of expertise. I hope I don’t ask you anything too silly.

ISABEL SAMARAS: Are you kidding? It’s such a huge kick to be featured on Fangoria.com. I spent most of my high-school years with the magazine tucked under my arm—further cementing my oddball status—and at the time I fully expected to grow up and enter a stimulating, gory career in film effects. I’ve wanted to work with monsters all my life! And while I’m not sure I ever actually grew up, and I didn’t end up working in film, I have ended up dealing with monsters, just not the way I expected. I always loved the world I read about in FANGORIA; it made me feel less alone to know that other people shared my interests to that degree—to the

blood, sweat and tears level.

FANG: OK, then, first question, and it's a bit generic and deceptive: How would you describe your art?

SAMARAS: Go look at my website, it's easier. I'm kidding. I like to say I'm blending Old Master imagery and technique with pop-culture characters, kind of like a musical mash-up—telling stories with the paintings the same way they did. But because many of the tales they were telling would be lost on us today, I've been using my generation's known characters to retell them. Now I've gone even further back than the biblical and mythological sources mined so heavily by those artists, and have started revisiting old fairy tales. If I were really getting into it—you know, seriously running off at the mouth—I'd probably throw around words like "narrative" and "humorous" and sometimes "erotic." There's been a running theme of unrequited love and "fixing" various storylines—my brain lives in an alternate universe where things turn out a little differently and love conquers all. I'm a romantic at heart, and that heart is pinned to my sleeve where pretty much everyone can see it.

FANG: Speaking of your fondness for pop culture, what is it about the Universal monsters, GILLIGAN'S ISLAND and the like that inspired you?

SAMARAS: Both this sense of "the unwritten" and "the wronged." With so many of those old TV shows, it always felt like we were only ever seeing half the story—what the hell happened after the credits rolled? Surely someone got lonely, or got a crush—all those feelings I was having when I was watching them as a kid. Why weren't they expressing any real emotion? They acted more like children than children did! So that was just weird, and I grew up "what if?"-ing a lot. The monsters always struck me as simply victims of terribly bad luck—so many of them were

just wrong place/wrong time scenarios, and they seemed to be looking for love and companionship too, some kind of acceptance. I mean, really—what are we all looking for? Why would they be seeking anything different? OK, sure, some of the undead, zombies and whatnot, they're mostly just out for brains.

FANG: You have since moved into a different direction, into the woods and the primeval world of fairy tales. Was there a moment when the shift crystalized for you and you began changing your work?

SAMARAS: I was working on a series of paintings of Frankenstein's Monster and his Bride, and something about that struck me very much like a fairy tale—at least the way I was imagining it—they actually take a shine to each other and live happily ever after. I ended up thinking about Red Riding Hood about the same time and just let that carry me—followed the muse into the wintry woods. I became very curious about the girls who didn't have their future and fate handed to them on a silver platter, who didn't sacrifice their personalities for a tiara. One might read between the lines here that I have a real problem with the culture of Disney princesses—and one would be right! What happened to the girls who stayed lost, who had to find their own fates, make their own ways, survive by their wits and forge their own futures?

So after I was done with Red Riding Hood, I started to think about Goldilocks, and while I had intended to stay focused on her and Baby Bear, the strangest thing happened: I went into the woods and didn't come out. I ended up turning my back on the human world and ended up peering through the trees of my imagination to see who else might live in their hip-hop wonderland.

FANG: Can you take our readers through the creative process of one of your paintings?

SAMARAS: I'm constantly jotting down notes and pinning things to my wall—the notes say

things like “pimp cup” or “never had a chance.” Right now some of the things on my wall are: a small skull I yanked off a dead bird, a drawing of a dancing bear, autographed photos from Julie Newmar and John Astin, a still from BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN, a carved wooden owl, a drawing of Wonder Woman, a little black paper haunted house, some swatches of different paint mixes I thought were interesting and didn’t want to forget, old etchings of forests, a big rubber Frankenstein’s monster and an Aurora model of the Bride. And books everywhere, books books books—I cannot have enough books.

Oh, wait, I got totally distracted. Well, that’s part of my process too. All that stuff kind of swirls around in my head until something pushes forward, one idea muscles the others aside and takes center stage. Once I have that idea, it’s all about reference—do I need to go photograph something? Do I need a model? Rent a costume? Find a location? Is it in one of my books? All the elements get cobbled together, sketch sketch sketch sketch, and when it’s just right, then I can transfer it to my surface. I started out painting on old tin lunchboxes and TV trays, so I sort of spoiled myself with these perfect, smooth surfaces. When I realized I wanted to paint bigger, I tried canvas and hated it—wow, did I hate it. It felt like a lunar surface, all giant rocks and craters. So I paint on gessoed wooden panels. I like the image to be as “set” as possible, and I don’t want to make a lot of changes once I start painting—though it does happen; unfortunately, I often can’t tell if something is “wrong” until I see it big and in full color.

Sometimes at this point, I’ll block in lights and darks, just to see how everything is working, but sometimes I’m so excited—or the show deadline is so tight—that I just go for a color underpainting, and then layer layer layer up the paint until it’s time for eyelashes and glistening highlights. This is all done in oils, which are lovely and gushy and have that wonderful “I’m killing you while you’re lovin’ on me” smell.

Every painting is a battlefield. Every single time, I reach a point that is like a black pit of despair—“What the hell was I thinking? This looks horrible!” The good thing about those moments is that you resign yourself to “Well, I can’t make it any worse,” and right when you give up and push through is usually when it all turns around and really starts to sing.

Every painting is like a fight, like a love affair. Up and down and up. But it always ends on up—it’s not finished until it’s dialed all the way up again, and I can’t walk away until the fight is over and I’ve won. Deciding when to stop is often a problem for me—if I didn’t have deadlines and need to varnish things, I’d probably keep painting indefinitely, just noodle away forever: “One…more…tree…”

FANG: Much of your work has an erotic edge to it, of a type that so many artists shy away from. Has there been any backlash over you incorporating pop-culture images in sexual situations?

SAMARAS: Happily, there has been virtually no backlash. Sometimes, the children of the actors or the actors themselves will even e-mail me and tell me they like it or think it's funny. A friend took some pictures of my work to show John Astin, who played Gomez Addams, and he cracked up and said it was great! I think anybody with one eye and half a brain can see that this stuff comes from a place of huge affection; these characters were my childhood friends, and I love them all. Some of the situations I imagine them in might be embarrassing, but they're never mean-spirited or spiteful.

As for why more people don't do erotic art—you know, a lot of them do, they just don't put it out there. There are whole books of people's "closeted" artwork, from the Old Masters to contemporary comic artists; the book CLEAN CARTOONISTS' DIRTY DRAWINGS comes to mind. I guess I just had a bigger desire to share, which probably came from wondering if I was the only person who ever thought about this stuff.

FANG: How about the series of works featuring the Universal monsters in roles usually associated with religious figures?

SAMARAS: I really, truly do see them as martyrs. The original meaning of "martyr" was "witness," and I believe these monsters are witnesses to the true horror, which is us, humanity. Our lack of compassion and understanding. We persecute what we fear—you see that every day. Frankenstein's Monster didn't ask to be cobbled together and reanimated, and once he was, he just wanted to be understood and loved for what he was. He was not inherently evil and he was martyred, literally put to death, for the crime of being different. The Wolf Man didn't ask to be bitten; the Creature from the Black Lagoon was just doing his own thing in harmony with his surroundings until humans came along. There's a lot of heartbreaking tragedy in these stories.

OK, you might be wondering, "But what about Dracula?" Well, you'll notice I didn't paint him as a saint. He's a little more complicated. I always felt more sympathy for him than for Harker or Van Helsing, and though he's not quite as much of an "innocent" as some of the other classic monsters, I still feel he was the equivalent of a very skilled hunter out there in Transylvania—a wolf in his forest, culling the flock now and then. Clearly he wasn't out of control, spreading the "disease" of vampirism far and wide, or all of Eastern Europe would have been infected. He had

lived for centuries in balance with nature, but he was lonely. When you're at the top of your game like that, it's hard to find your equal, your soulmate.

I might be pushing it a little bit with Dracula, but I have a lot of sympathy for him too, and clearly I'm not the first person to romanticize his plight or root for him to shove that stake into Van Helsing where the sun don't shine.

FANG: Why the shift to fairy tales as your primary subject?

SAMARAS: I wanted to reach back to even more primal stories, to the first stories, the ones that are rooted deeply inside us. It gave me a chance to tell a different kind of tale; I desired to be more open-ended in a way, and not use recognizable models anymore so that the viewer could be more a participant in the story. When you see Batman, you know so much about him—you already have his whole background and personality "on file" in your mind—so you bring all that to the painting when you look at it. But fairy tales are pretty vague about who these people really were, what they looked like, and taking characters that were children and "growing them up" in my mind allowed me a lot more freedom in the narrative, as well as a more open playing field for anyone looking at the painting—you make up the other half of the story yourself. I see it as a collaboration, one that takes place in your mind.

FANG: I love the inclusion of the hip-hop culture into the Woods paintings. Baby Bear's bling, hoop earrings, afro combs, etc. It adds to the surrealism of the work. What effect, if any, were you trying to elicit by adding these features?

SAMARAS: When I was first painting Baby Bear, I was worried—as I often am—"Will anyone get this?" So I thought I'd give him a big dookie chain with a gold-plate "Baby" on it. At the time, I was spinning a bunch of old records, Big Daddy Kane—"Wrath of Kane" is one of my all-time

favorite songs)—Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Afrikka Bambaataa, Run-DMC, MC Lyte, Public Enemy, Salt-n-Pepa, EPMD, Erik B. and Rakim…it goes on and on. Great music, I mean epically phenomenal stuff. Jamel Shabazz has some amazing photography books out that chronicle those days as far as street style, and the attitude and joy in those pictures was really inspiring. I ended up tacking the Run-DMC cover to my wall as a kind of touchstone. Baby looked so good with his gold rope, I added a gold tooth with a diamond chip and a bling ring, and everything else just came cascading out of my head after that; I literally couldn't paint fast enough. I loved the idea that these creatures had dragged back these fragments of human culture into the forest and adapted them to their world. It's not that the mockingbirds have little mini-boomboxes; it's that they're sitting on top of a giant human-sized one having a rap war.

FANG: You have many roles: artist, mother, wife, daughter, among others. How do you incorporate all of them into one person?

SAMARAS: With a sledgehammer and a roll of duct tape! The roles actually all blend fairly seamlessly—thank you, duct tape!; the real issue is only ever time and balance. It's nearly impossible for me to do all those things well simultaneously. When I'm cranking on a show deadline, everything else kind of goes to hell. When I'm suddenly free after a big deadline, I want to embrace everything I shoved aside for work, making it harder to focus on painting. It's tricky and challenging, not the least because I am a) very distractible and b) an ace procrastinator. Not the best combination.

FANG: Is there such a thing as a typical Isabel Samaras fan?

SAMARAS: Seemingly not! The people who show up at book signings and shows span all ages, ethnicities and proclivities. I'm really happy about that.

FANG: Where can one see your work?

SAMARAS: Oh, it's so easy now! Chronicle Books has put out a truly lovely book of my work, ON TENDER HOOKS: THE ART OF ISABEL SAMARAS. And yes, I know the word is actually "tenterhooks"—it's word play, people! I find a running thread of tenderness in a lot of my work, in the affection I have for the characters and their feelings for each other. The book turned out to be just gorgeous, brimming with full-color reproductions of pretty much everything I've

painted over the last 20 years. It was really important to me that it not be a “gallery in a book,” that it be more personal, more the “Here, peel the skull open and peek inside!” feeling.

So there are pictures of my studio, some of my goofy reference photos—me draped and posing as the Bride, etc.—and even a cool “lift the flap” page where you can see the original sketch, the underpainting and the finished piece. That was based on old medical illustrations where you could lift the “skin” page and see the muscles, lift that flap and see the organs, etc. I wanted people to be able to see the “guts” of one of my paintings.

As a companion, there’s a postcard book with 30 images, printed on really nice heavy card stock, but the kicker is the packaging—the thing is like a tiny little treasure chest the way it opens up and there’s real red fabric binding inside. I sleep with one under my pillow. OK, not really. But you could, it’s that special—and I am in no way biased!

FANG: Do you ever do commissioned work?

SAMARAS: Yes, and again, I love the collaborative aspect of it, of finding out what someone is absolutely crazy for and working with them. I have a real soft spot for obsessives, being one myself, and I love geeking out with people about their fixations and collections. I have turned a few things down—for the record, I really don’t want to paint clowns.

FANG: Will there be more in the fairy tale series now that you’ve captured Goldilocks? Are there other stories to which you’re drawn?

SAMARAS: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I’m scribbling notes and making little sketches now for a show next spring at Corey Helford Gallery that will explore another girl who never came out of the woods. I am nearly breathless with excitement about it; it feels like my gooey brains are on fire.

FANG: Who are your artistic influences?

SAMARAS: Oh Lord, that's a long list. There are the usual suspects—all the great Italian Renaissance painters like Botticelli, Messina, Raphael, Bronzino, the guys showing up off North like Durer, Cranach and definitely Hans Holbein. Then the baroque and rococo stuff cuts loose and wow, you've got Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi—a woman, finally!—all the way right up to Ingres, who I just can't get enough of. Old black-and-white horror movies, comics and urban street culture—anything I can take in with my big brown eyes. Music is also a huge influence; the music I'm listening to has a real impact on my work, and I have fairly eclectic tastes, so it can be old Vic Mizzy soundtracks Monday, Curtis Mayfield on Tuesday, Hawaiian slack key guitar on Wednesday, The Ghastly Ones on Thursday, Seu Jorge on Friday, Iggy Pop on Saturday and M.I.A. on Sunday. Also, I've got to give it up for dark chocolate and bright sunshine. Those two things keep me going.

FANG: Would you ever consider appearing at a FANGORIA convention?

SAMARAS: Are you kidding? I would be ever so flattered if somebody asked me to do that. Horror fans are my people!

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