



ESSAYS

Melting the Fiction: Rachel Rose

Share



1 2 3 4 5 6

by Elvia Wilk

The supreme goal of alchemy is to turn base metals into gold. In a tradition starting as early as the eighth century, alchemists have employed an esoteric mix of pseudoscience, mythology, theology, magic, and artistry in an attempt to wrest value—wealth, beauty, enlightenment—from nature. In the ultimate alchemical procedure, the “dead” matter of a material such as copper, lead, or iron—impure and inert but full of potential—

must first be melted to be "enlivened." Only after the matter has been liquefied can it be brought through various stages of purification until it reaches its ideal state.

Alchemists see the laws of the natural world as malleable. The goal of their labor is not only to transform material substrates into value, but to restructure the whole natural order by harnessing mysterious powers for human aims. While alchemy is an exalted art, it has also long been regarded as suspicious or even dangerous: its ambition, after all, is to forge value from nothing. By attempting to short-circuit or even reverse natural temporal processes, such as solidification, calcification, and decay, the alchemist is both a genius and a cheat, employing human knowledge to rewrite the world on a molecular level—for personal benefit.

In the story of *Enclosure*, the year is 1699. An itinerant band of orphans and travelers, led by an elderly alchemist named Jaccko, rove the English countryside, using their magical abilities to take advantage of a political situation in flux. For more than a century, an accelerating system of land privatization has been creeping across England. Parcel by parcel, the English landscape has been seized from peasants by an emerging upper class of lords—some of it stolen through legal maneuvering, much of it by force. Violent revolts have done little to stop it.

Jaccko's group of interlopers have developed an ingenious scheme. They travel between villages and intercede just before a parcel of land is likely to be expropriated by the nobility—convincing the local peasants to preemptively sell their land rights in exchange for a new and unfamiliar currency: paper cash. Whether this cash will have any traction when the lords show up is unclear, but the land deeds have value to Jaccko, who is amassing a small fortune of them. The group call themselves the Famlee. *Lee*: the sheltered side of a thing, from the Middle English for *protection*.

Perhaps the peasants are willing to place their trust in pieces of paper because, in the story that is history, their rights have been protected by a paper document for centuries. In 1217, King Henry III signed the Charter of the Forest, an addition to the Magna Carta passed two years earlier. While the Magna Carta dealt with the rights of the nobility, the Charter extended land rights to commoners. It guaranteed common people free access to forests, fields, marshes, and swamps—for foraging, planting, animal grazing, and feasting—in perpetuity. "Every free man" was promised he could use "his wood in the forest as he wishes . . . on condition that it does not harm any neighbor." The Charter has held sway over England for hundreds of years, ensuring the persistence of a shared, unenclosed landscape. No private, no public. No inside, no outside. No center, no periphery.

By 1699, the peasant uprisings have died down and the power of the Charter has been almost entirely eroded. Maps are being drawn, fences are being built, swaths of land are being converted into private property with the magical stroke of a pen. *Enclose*: to encompass and surround, from the Middle English for *imprison*. In the story that is history, this systematic wealth consolidation forms the material substrate for what will eventually be called capitalism.

In the story that is *Enclosure*, the Famlee arrive in a new settlement, the last on their tour. Jaccko has promised that they only need to acquire one more land deed to exchange all the deeds they have collected for a major prize, a "crest" that will, ostensibly, finally buy them their own land

somewhere else. They're one step away from another piece of paper, another fiction to believe in.

Mousse Magazine (<http://moussemagazine.it>)

Search Follow Us

An eerie celestial orb the size of the sun shadows this village. The orb travels through the sky as if through fluid, trailing swirls, like ink, or blood. In alchemy, each of the seven base metals corresponds to one of the seven planets: gold for Sun, silver for Moon, copper for Venus. To melt and manipulate the metals is to harness the power of the cosmos and, in turn, affect it; the movements of celestial bodies influence the behavior of earthly matter, and vice versa.

The Famlee set up camp in a lush green pasture near a stream. At twilight, they gather to summon their forces. Jaccko raises a hand, proclaims "this great moment, the eve of our ascension." Wind whistles through the reeds. Birds chatter in the willows. The sky changes color, flashes burnt orange and royal blue. The black orb momentarily appears closer, engorged. A sound like stone clanging on metal reverberates over the field. Jaccko intones, "History hates the static, the strict. It rewards those who honor its flow, those who, like a liquid, allow themselves to be sublimated into it by symbol."

A young Famlee member named Recent has particularly powerful magical abilities; Jaccko has deemed her the "chosen one." It falls to Recent to convince their final "mark," a middle-aged widow, to sign away her land, a rolling farm at the edge of a dense wood—"thirty acres with healthy ash and silver birch." According to her training, Recent employs a strategy combining magical coercion, rational argument, social pandering, and spying.

While spying on the premises, Recent discovers that their mark has a secret daughter, Marla, who's hidden away and tied up in the barn because she seems to have gone mad. If Marla's possessed, though, it's not exactly by spirits but by political fervor. She's found a pamphlet floating down the stream, its blue ink leaching into water. The paper is a political treatise written by a group called the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit, a revolutionary movement still rebelling against the enclosure of land. The Brotherhood intends to bring down the "exploiters"—both the nobility and the Famlee—by any means necessary. Reading the paper has thrown Marla into mania. She intuits: when their farmland and forest are taken, when they can no longer feed themselves, when wage labor becomes the only kind of labor, she and her mother and every woman like them will have the most to lose.

Another woman who has already lost everything suddenly emerges from the forest as if from a nightmare, as if from the primordial mud. Filthy and traumatized, this stranger insists on telling Recent a story. The nobles, she says, have begun clearing the wood. Animals are being driven out in hordes by the fires, and displaced bears—those mythic, majestic, fearsome creatures—are wandering enraged into villages in search of food. This strange woman's own daughter was killed by a lost bear, but she can't bring herself to hate the beast; the bear was also a mother whose own cub was incinerated in a fire. The age of coexistence and subsistence is over, this woman's story seems to say. Suddenly there are insides and outsides. Places where certain people and animals do not belong.

Inevitably, the widow signs the deed, scrawling her name with a feather quill dipped in blue ink. Her daughter can't stop her from doing it. But afterward, alone in the cottage that is no longer exactly her home, the woman weeps. The contract, she suspects deep down, is a fiction like all other pieces of paper. A fiction to melt down the landscape and convert it into gold—someone

else's gold. Fictions are mutual delusions, and capital is a fiction she has been forcefully bent to agree to: bent through magic but also logic. The sky flashes. A clang of metal on stone. An ink blot in the sky.

Search Follow Us

The first step in any alchemical process is melting. In order to be reformulated, the natural order first has to be completely liquefied, destabilized. The story of *Enclosure* takes place in the moment after the melt: the new process of "purification"—in this case segmentation, privatization—has already begun. Marla, supposedly crazed but in fact highly attuned to impending change, seems to know this. She tries to explain to Recent: "If a spring is broken, you can bend it back to shape. But if it's too twisted and senselessly complex, there's only one way forward: you melt the spring." Time and space—and the fiction of the Charter of the Forest—have been melted down, but not in the way that Marla and the Brotherhood, or any common person, might hope.

The weird orb hovers impassively over the story of *Enclosure*, eclipsing the present order of things and signaling that an alchemical transition is underway. It warns that the structures of explainability that have held for so many years are no longer valid. Something unexplainable and weird, something that feels inevitable, is in motion. *Weird*: from the Old English *wyrd*, meaning *fate*. What is fated and what is forced?

No matter how many times it's been processed and manipulated, metal can always be re-melted, again and again. An alchemist only has to light the flame. In the story of *Enclosure*, it's ultimately up to Recent, the chosen one, to choose. She'll have to decide what to do with her virtuosic ability to melt matter, bend wills. *Recent*: from the ancient Indo-European for *to begin*. She will decide whether to begin again and what story to tell, even if it might take centuries for the world to be melted down again and reformed in a different way. Will it be the same story, or a different kind of magic?

With help from:

The Charter of the Forest (1217)

Silvia Federici, *The Caliban and the Witch* (2004)

Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2017)

James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2010)

Natalya Serkova, "World Wide Gold," *e-flux Journal* (2018)

The essay was commissioned by Luma Foundation for a new publication titled *Rachel Rose: Enclosure* which has been released coinciding with the exhibition of the same title, on view until September 22, 2019 at Luma Arles, Parc des Ateliers, Arles (France).

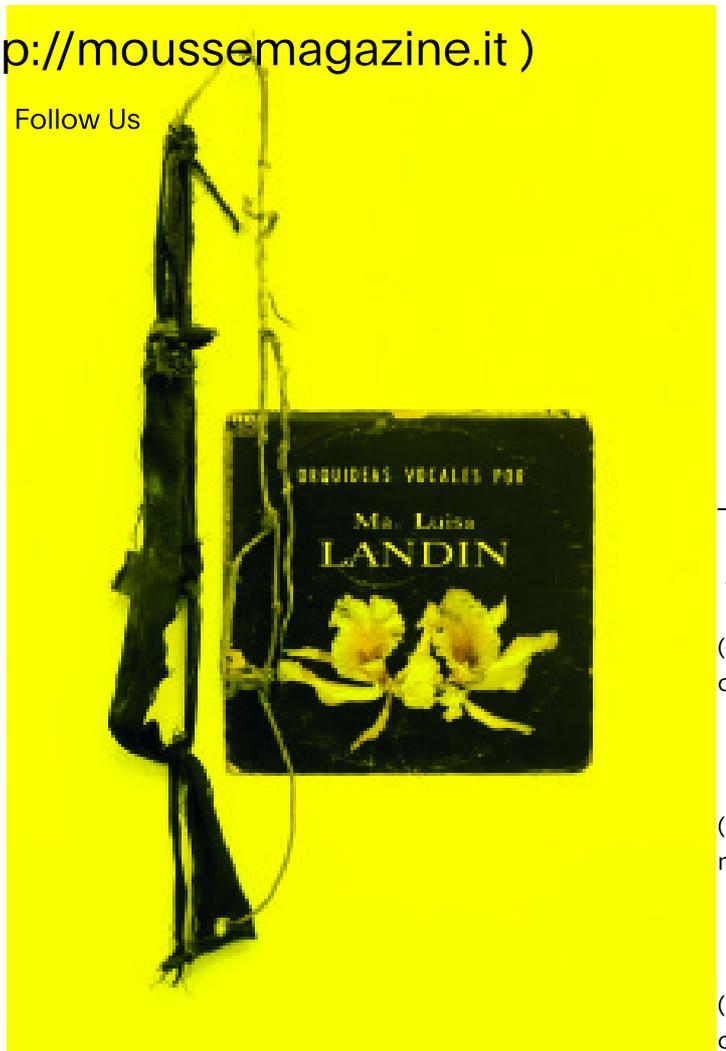
Related Articles

ESSAYS

Melting the Fiction: Rachel Rose
(Read more)

ESSAYS

Yuji Agematsu as "Primal Historian"
(Read more)



Mousse Magazine (http://moussemagazine.it)

Search

Follow Us

(http://moussemagazine.it/melting-fiction-alchemy-enclosure/)

(http://moussemagazine.it/yuji-agematsu-chris-sharp-2019/)

ESSAYS

Devotional Doubling: Kenneth Bergfeld
(Read more)

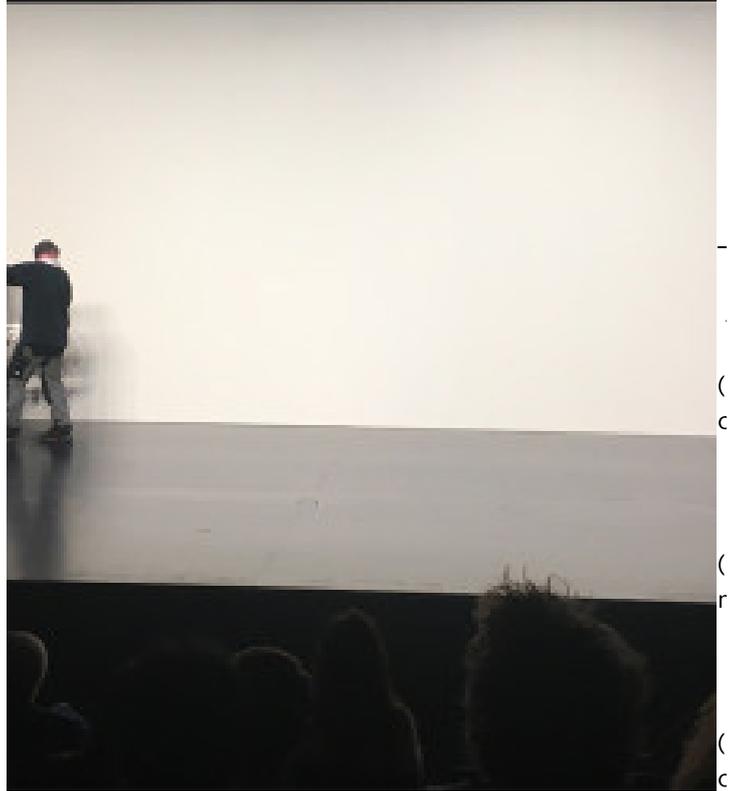
ESSAYS

The White Wall: An Essay on Performative Illusion
(Read more)



Search

Follow Us



(<http://moussemagazine.it/kenneth-bergfeld-alex-bennett-2019/>)

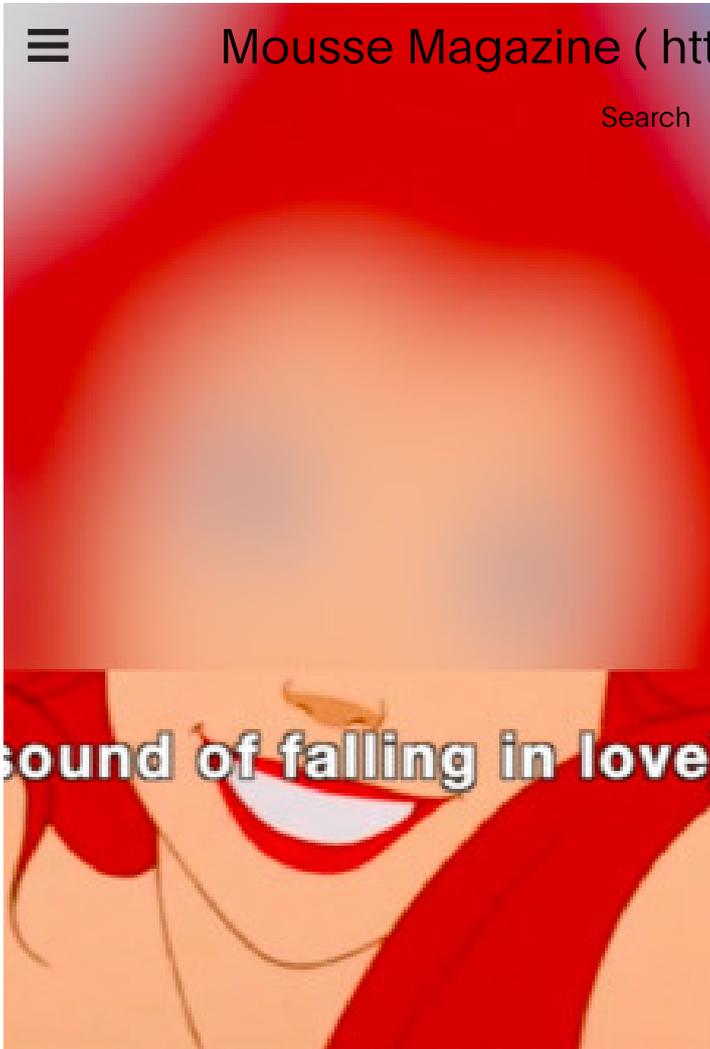
ESSAYS

Critical Creative Corrective Cacophonous Comical: Closed C...
(Read more)

(<http://moussemagazine.it/white-wall-essay-performative-illusion/>)

ESSAYS

Chinese Abstraction between the State and the Market: Wang ...
(Read more)



(<http://moussemagazine.it/critical-creative-corrective-cacophonous-comical-closed-captions-emily-watlington-2019/>)



(<http://moussemagazine.it/wang-guangle-tianyuan-deng-2019/>)

Mousse Magazine and Publishing
 Corso di Porta Romana, 63,
 20122 Milano, Italy
 T: +39 02 8356631
 F: +39 02 49531400
 E: info@moussmagazine.it
 P.IVA 05234930963