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Sundsten's eerie physical mutations tell their own tales

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"What are they thinking?" pops into mind when viewing Francesca Sundsten's freakish photo-realism at Davidson Galleries. Like fairy tales, science fiction and mythology, they titillate with eerie physical mutations. A bikini-clad female anointed with a ram's head rises tentatively from a wetland slough, superimposed and as out of place as a movie's giant insect scaling a building.

In "Nestling" a striking blonde perches on logs, her body a hairy beast that might haunt Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are." This is surrealism tinged with Hollywood. It's life out of control. Human-animal combos seem at once perplexed and curious as to why we're perplexed. Traits of each species, like alter egos, merge, portraying anthropomorphism and its reverse. They hint at distorted genetics and moralistic tales; a prince becoming a frog or mythological figures doomed to eternal servitude.

In "Man Woman Savior" a transgender figure with six-pack abs, rippled chest, flowing tresses and wild eyes emerges reborn from baptismal waters. She/he exudes a disturbing mix of manic joy and bug-eyed look of the crazy. In "Pruning" a similar derangement shines in the eyes of a dark, solemn woman. Looming witchlike before forest-fighters battling a hellish blaze, she grasps garden clippers in a "Make my day" manner. She knows the trees are doomed, either by fire or cutting.

In less unsettling canvases, the sky rains pearls, beatific African American twins materialize like butterflies from dusky-rose larvae bodies, and a pregnant medusa plops a rhinestone tiara in her snaky, blond hair. Sundsten's fine painting and mastery of realism hides nothing in haze. Her quirky, starkly confrontational imagery doesn't disturb as much as it questions. The characters hang in confused naivete, pondering, "How did I get here?"

Sundsten's new paintings and drawings are at Davidson Galleries, 313 Occidental Ave. S., 206-624-7684, through Sept. 27. Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

-- **Judy Wagonfeld**

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