

From Mads no. 1 (self-published, 2019)



From Agent 9, collected in The Agency (Fantagraphics, 2018)



From Agent 73, collected in The Agency (Fantagraphics, 2018)



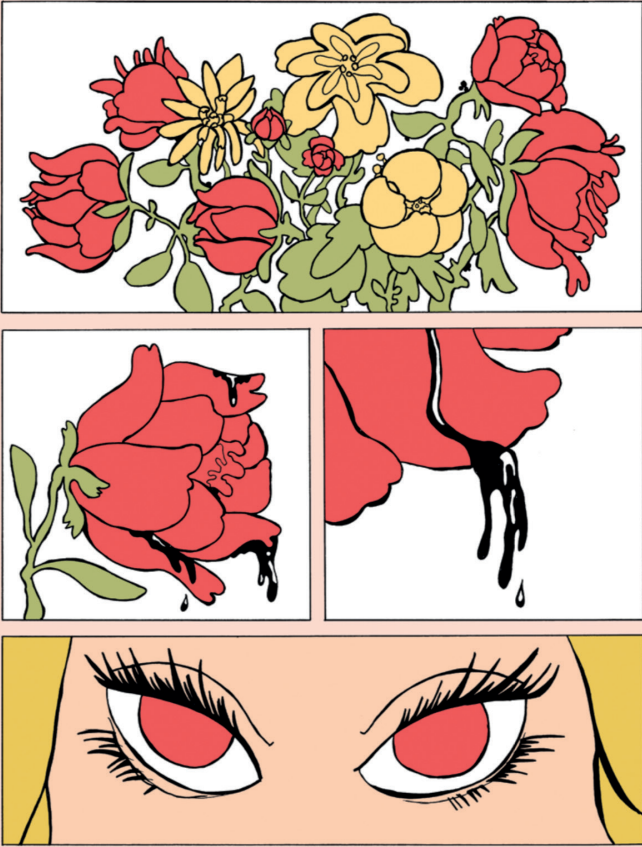
From My Pretty Vampire (Fantagraphics, 2017)



'The Hierophant', Bad Girl (2018)

SKELLYWORLD

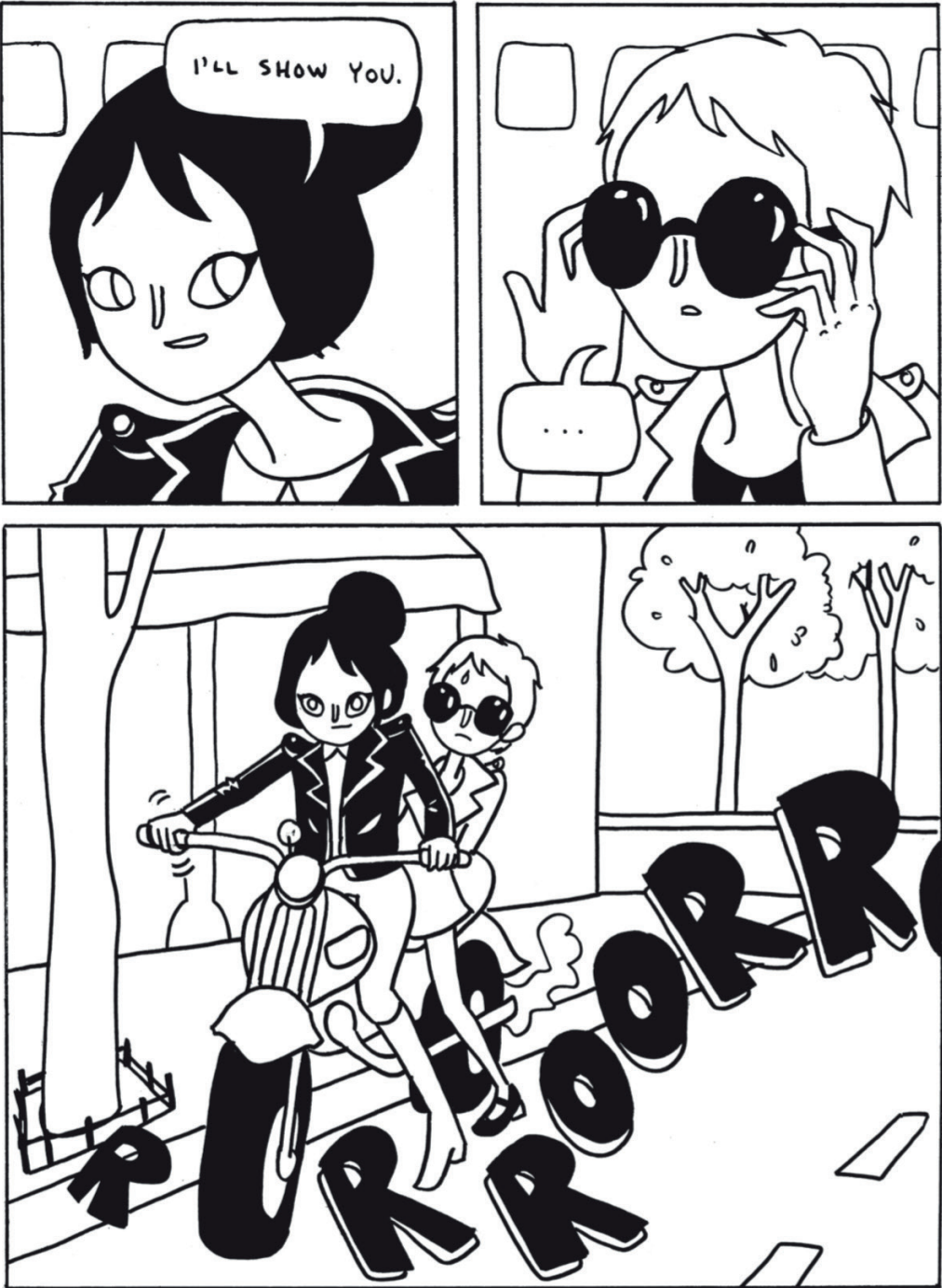
Katie Skelly



From My Pretty Vampire (Fantagraphics, 2017)



From My Pretty Vampire (Fantagraphics, 2017)



From Operation Magazine (AdHouse Books, 2014)

SKELLYWORLD

Katie Skelly

“*Skelly’s work is an absolute ownership of fantasy – she makes what she wants to see, striking from the medium’s fundamental power.*” – **Nate Powell**

The Naughton Gallery invites audiences to dive into *Skellyworld*, journeying through the comics of Brooklyn-based cartoonist Katie Skelly (b. 1985, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA). Skelly is one of the most exciting names in contemporary comics, with this exhibition giving greater insight into her work and artistic process. Featuring original drawings from all of her major published works – including *Nurse Nurse* (2012), *Operation Margarine* (2014), *My Pretty Vampire* (2017), *The Agency* (2018), and *Maids* (2020) – *Skellyworld* also features paintings, sketchbooks, merchandise, video projects, and *Bad Girl Tarot*, a 78-card tarot deck fully designed and illustrated by the artist.

Inspired by gekiga, giallo, bande dessinée, science fiction comics, and B movies from the ‘60s and ‘70s, Skelly’s work examines exploitation genres for transgressive elements. Through her female protagonists, Skelly normalises all manner of female sensuality, encouraging confidence, sense of self, or the power to erase one’s self and become an agent, an alias, or a woman on the run.

WELCOME TO SKELLYWORLD
Rachel R. Miller

You are now entering *Skellyworld*. A world where the leather-clad bad girls have not-so-secret hearts of gold, where nurses travel the galaxy combating foul science experiments and fighting intergalactic pirates dressed in panda suits, where a vampiress fills her diary with dreams of her own liberation and hits the road in an iconic black cape and red trucker hat (after draining its unsuspecting owner of his lifeblood, of course). Here, the pleasures of bygone eras of pop culture meld into subversive new visions, each panel dipped in pastels that will sear Katie Skelly’s world into the back of your brain. Even in black and white, the world you are about to enter is as endlessly imaginative as it is sexy, profoundly weird and playful. Skelly can dream up the most striking invasions into our reality in the space of a single panel. Showcasing over a decade of Skelly’s career in comics, illustration, and medium-bending multimedia art ventures, *Skellyworld* is an invitation to immerse yourself in the world of one of the most provocative voices at work in graphic art today.

Katie Skelly shifted the landscape of alternative and indie comics when she began delivering dispatches from the year 3030, pursuing a coterie of nurses deployed on missions to Venus and Mars in her self-published minicomic *Nurse Nurse* (2011). Betrayed by her fellow nurses on Mars, Gemma sets off on her own hyperspace journey in which she will confront hallucinogenic lab-created butterflies, demanding and demeaning exes styling themselves as space pirates and quack scientists, and a colonization conspiracy involving a treacly TV show called *Nurse Nurse!*. Gemma will find herself – literally, one of her exes has cloned her – but the bigger discovery Skelly makes here is space as a new frontier for speculative feminist storytelling in comics. Questions about self-worth, friendship, how identity can become inextricably entangled in work, and the ethics of interplanetary colonization lurk just beneath the campy surface of Skelly’s space romp. After *Nurse Nurse* was collected and

published in full as one of the last titles for the late Dylan Williams’ Sparkplug Books, a wave of feminist-oriented comics took off after Skelly to the final frontier, including Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro’s hugely successful *Bitch Plant* (Image Comics, 2014-17), Carolyn Nowak’s short about astronaut school dropouts, “Girl Town” (2015), and Jessica Campbell’s recent off-kilter satire *XTC69* (Koyama Press, 2018). If you remain unconvinced that Skelly’s work can see into the future, though, all you need do is let the cards of her *Bad Girl Tarot Deck* (2018) decide your fate.

One of Skelly’s unique storytelling gifts lies in how she deftly unmasks the casual violence of even the most blasé villains, who are hollowed out by avarice in their endless pursuit to control the young women around them. Pirate and self-styled doctor Lucien sends bounty hunters after nurse Gemma, another ex, Dr. Zardoz, tries to clone her, and in her follow-up to *Nurse Nurse*, *Operation Margarine* (2014), a host of dirtbags, bar flies, and dowagers pursue Skelly’s girls on the run. With *Operation Margarine* (2014), Skelly is back to planet Earth and hot on the motorbike-made tracks of good girl gone bad Margarine Litres and her newfound bestie Bon-Bon. Like Nurse Gemma, Margarine places her trust in the not-so-trustworthy when she endeavors to escape the mental institution to which her dowager mother has committed her. Fate is on her side, however, as she crosses paths with the chain-smoking Bon-Bon, who decks the predatory drunkard who broke Margarine out of Bellefrew (and broke the story of her institutionalization to the tabloids) so they can hit the road on the run together.

Skelly’s fever dream of fast friendship and faster motorcycles finds her style cohering into the sinuous linework and trippy, inky patterns that will come to define her later work. Whereas Nurse Gemma was often adrift and alone in an unforgiving universe, *Operation Margarine* also establishes another defining trope of Skelly’s work: the celebration of the fast, frightening (to their adversaries) friendships between women. On the road, it hardly matters who plays

the good girl and who plays the bad girl. The story leaps from the present simple pleasures that the girls share – an open road, greasy diner food, cigarettes – to backstories in which both Margarine and Bon-Bon are unceremoniously dumped by those who claim to love them. But rather than dwell on the bad breaks of the past, both women glimpse the possibility for reinvention in their fateful union. As Bon-Bon puts it from behind a plate of burger and fries in Galaxy Diner after Margarine asks her where she’s from: “Marge, I have an idea. Let’s skip this part. Let’s just be... new people.”

By turns all-consuming, fateful, and regenerative, the female friendships Skelly visualizes in her comics are a working analog to her own relationship to bygone eras of mass culture junk. An ambulatory, autodidactic archivist of popular culture, Skelly opens up new vistas of visual pleasure as she voraciously digs through transnational cultural debris from the B-Movie babes of *Barbarella* (1968) and *Return to the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) to the surrealist erotica of Italian cartoonists Guido Crepax and Milo Manara to the miasmic, melodramatic frames of animated revenge fantasy *Belladonna of Sadness* (1973). In 2015, Skelly began the aptly named podcast *Trash Twins* with fellow cartoonist Sarah Horrocks. Each episode finds the two women meticulously deconstructing their love for the forgotten and the strange, the campy and bizarre pop culture ephemera of all sorts, modeling a new sort of pop culture criticism that sinks well beneath the flashy surfaces of low culture productions.

In episodes on Female Vampirism (which puts the films of Jess Rollin and Jean Franco in touch with the theory and scholarship of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed), *The Anna Nicole Smith Show*, and “problematic” 1980s anime, Skelly and Horrocks show themselves to be incisive guides through the murky affects of ardent adoration, hysteria, and even aversion that these artifacts can so often invoke in their audiences. In her mid-1990s bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of*

Adolescent Girls, pop psychologist Mary Pipher worried over the souls of girls who were aimlessly consuming a “junk mass culture”. Young women, by this account and the many others that followed it, are not able to make the kinds of decisions about their media diets that might transform them into good, empowered feminists. Brought up under that bad sign, Skelly and Horrocks nevertheless show us that one can eat at the altar of pop culture trash and eat well.

Starvation and self-denial are, in fact, the concerns at the center of *My Pretty Vampire* (2017), Skelly’s debut with alternative comics publishing force Fantagraphics Books. Vampiress Clover is kept locked away in an ornate mansion, fed a diet of ox blood and lies by her controlling brother, Marcel. Though her life may seem a charmed one – skinny dips in a marble pool after nightfall, plush bedding and stuffed animals, and a maid who will trade secrets for cigarettes – Clover dreams of her own liberation, getting out from under the prying eyes of her brother and actually indulging her basest urges for once. Swaths of primary colors and pastels that lay flat on the page find Skelly’s spare panels as neat punctuation: a pulsating beat that swiftly moves the eye through this blood-soaked tale of hunger and longing. As the stylish bodies of her prey pile up around her, Clover is pursued by surreal visions that hold some unsettling truths about her identity and familial bonds.

Even as incredibly stylish bodies pile up in Clover’s wake, it becomes clear that Skelly’s vampiress isn’t on a murderous rampage, but merely learning her pleasures – for sex, drugs, and, yes, blood. As the comic enters its third act, Clover wanders into the ruins of a party and is plied with drugs as a nameless girl asks to try her dress on. “I feel the twitch rising in me...worse than ever,” Clover admits as the girl begins to make out with her. “I’m starting to feel myself disappear...” Skelly’s panels trip out, pockmarked with pop-art bursts of pink, magenta and white as they cut from steamy kiss to a surreal x-ray of

Clover’s skeleton beneath her blonde coif. The fangs come out. Clover bites her new paramour, taking a chunk out of her chin before finding, at last, her neck.

Skelly shows off the deep archive that influences her comics throughout *My Pretty Vampire*. Her flat color lays are swiped from forgotten 1960s-era Franco-Belgian comics like Guy Peellaert’s *Pravda La Survireuse* and *Adventures of Jodelle*. The sinuous, steady lines that animate her wide-eyed heroine might be just at home in an offering from Clamp, the legendary all-women manga collective founded in the late 1980s. Her character designs often resemble the fashion plates of femme fatales past and present of Italian fashion houses like Gucci, Versace, and Prada.

My Pretty Vampire is an enduring, erotic fable about how female hunger is so often figured as monstrous, feminine desire something that should be locked away or buried deep underground. Living so long in her starvation, it’s no wonder that Clover consumes everything around her with little regard for the consequences of her actions. Along with Skelly’s other graphic novels, *My Pretty Vampire* works to satisfy a deep longing: for the gaps to be filled in around the women represented in the low brow pop culture Skelly herself so fervently treasures. Clover’s hunger, then, is allowed to be infinitely complex, her liberation deliciously ambivalent. That Clover wins the night showcases Skelly’s sympathy for the devil in us all, the one with an endless appetite that might just be sated for a little while by dropping into this lush, hungry world.

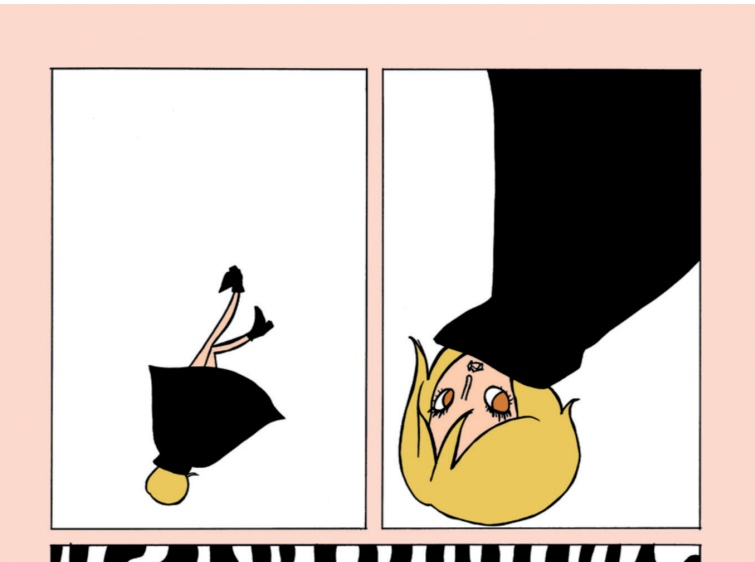
With a seemingly endless range, Skelly’s more recent projects have continued to show off an ardent will towards experimentation and reinvention. At the end of the 2018, she successfully crowd-funded the production of her complete tarot deck, lovingly named *Bad Girl Tarot*, and, as a special bonus for backers, reimaged each of the twelve zodiac signs. Skelly’s illustrations of the major and minor arcana cards offer up a playful meditation on female power, sexuality, and identity. Inspired by the classic Rider-Waite tarot deck, which

has been in production since 1910, Skelly’s cards are all windows into a world where bad girls – biker babes, priestesses, devils, and weirdos – can chart your present, future, and past.

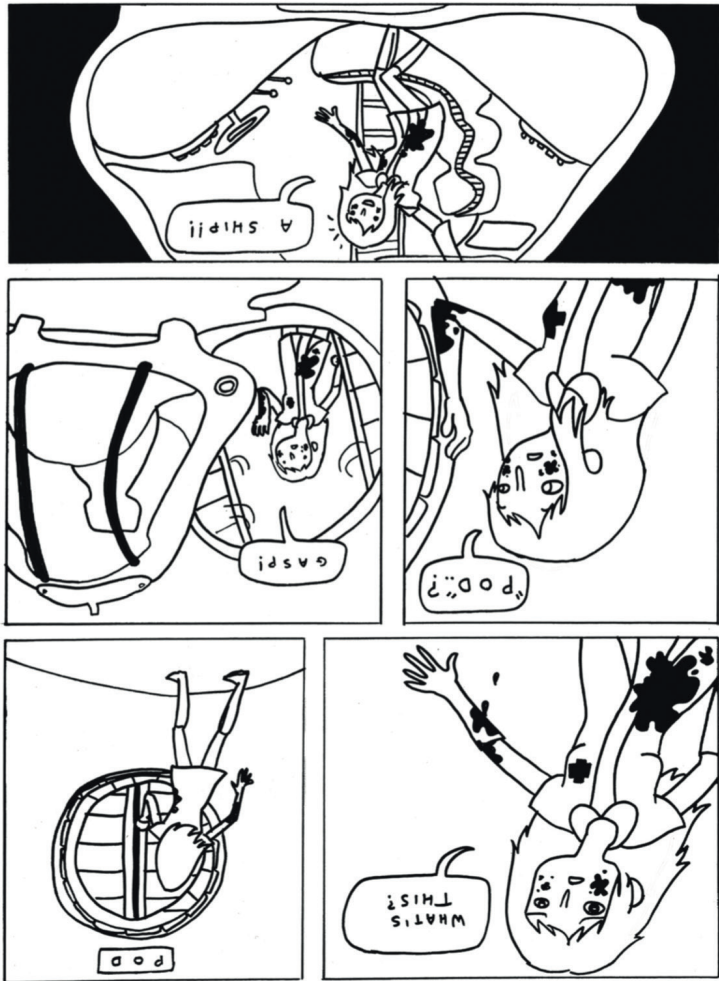
Between the publications of her graphic novels, Skelly also churned out a series of erotic comics for the sex positive online collective *Slutist* that documented a cadre of agents from hyperspace to the Go-Go cages of Earth all in the pursuit of pleasure. Collected as *The Agency* in 2018, Skelly’s erotica, not unlike her long-form narrative work, privileges visualizing female pleasure, desire, and power in stories where narrative is not just a pretense for a good time. Rather, sex, suspense, and intrigue all mix and comeing in *The Agency’s* panels, leaving the reader wanting oh so much more. So, too, does Skelly’s collaboration with writer Alex de Campi in the first issue of Image’s *Twisted Romance* series – a split issue which she shares with Trash Twin Horrocks – hint at the kind of genre bending Skelly is capable of in the hardboiled, genderbending story of private eye Misha Meserov. “Whatever you think I am...I’m not,” Misha confesses. “But whatever you want me to be? I can become it.”

Skelly’s latest venture, *Maids*, continues to excavate her obsessions with symbiotic friendships, control that runs generations deep, and personal liberation. The story of two sisters, Lea and Christine, who have been hired out of a convent as help in a mausoleum-like mansion, *Maids* finds Skelly guiding her readers through an autumnal world of muted beiges, greens, and deep reds that won’t give up the secret lives of its sisters so easily. If you pray the rosary of a page deftly divided into nine wordless panels – glimpses of Lea’s transformation from maid to nun to girl soaked in blood; a swipe of lipstick; a fire at the polished feet of our heroines – you might begin to piece together the machinations that lie beneath the surface of Lea and Christine’s reunion. With covers that have been beautifully rendered in watercolor, *Maids* finds Skelly at the height of her visual and storytelling powers and promises to be one of her most twisted visions yet.

SKELLYWORLD



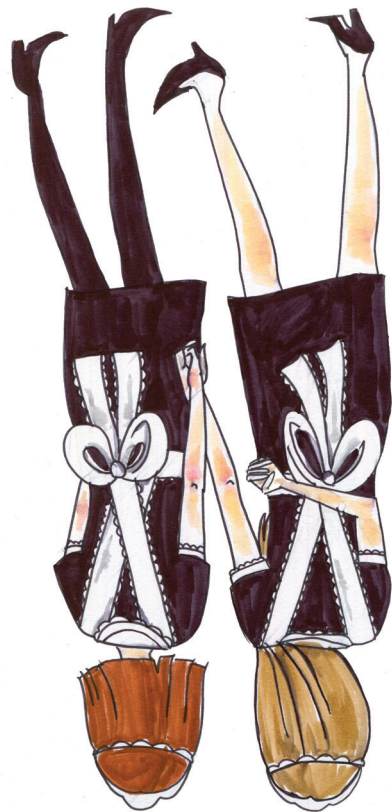
Katie Skelly



From Nurse Nurse (Sparkplug Books, 2012)

Rachel R. Miller is a feminist media scholar, Presidential Fellow, and PhD Candidate working at the Ohio State University. Her work has been published in or is forthcoming in The Oxford Handbook of Comics Studies, Comics Archives: Memory and Styles, Public Books, and Bitch Planet. Her latest project, The Girls' Room: Bedroom Culture, Girl Collectors, and the Ephemeral Archive, considers how girls renegotiated their relationship to media from the space of their bedroom at the end of the millennium. She is currently at work co-curating an exhibition on women's innovations in comics, which will open in Fall 2019 at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum. To find out more about her scholarship, please visit racherrmiller.com. This essay was specially commissioned by the Naughton Gallery.

Whether she is carefully observing the escapades of an intergalactic nurse or cadres of secret agents, unmasking our darkest desires in lush blues, greens, and yellows, or digging through the pop culture trash for our benefit, Skelly is an endlessly empathetic, masterful artist and storyteller. We hope you enjoy your stay in *Skellyworld* – where the bad girls, the weird girls, the mystics all survive the night and might even tell you your future.



Maids painting (2019)