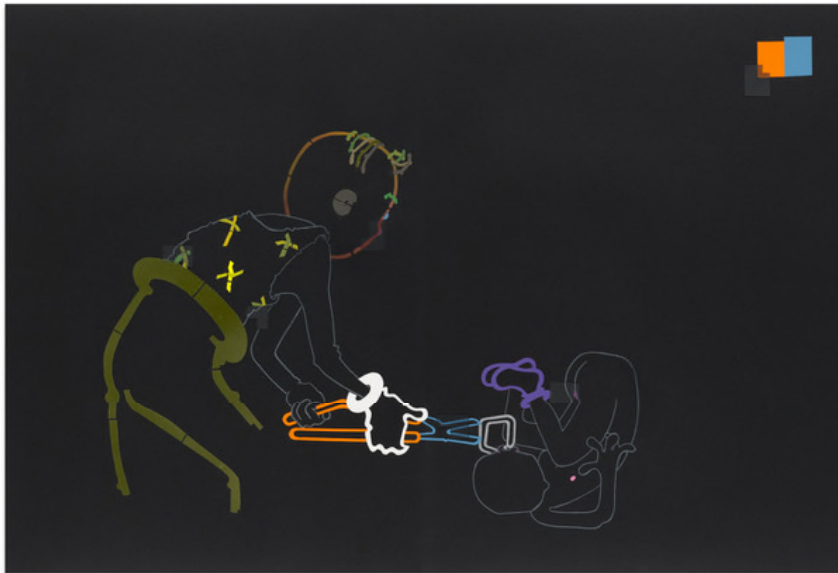




Tess Charnley

Weed Killer: Three Chapters of Medea Syndrome

Weed Killer, Oona Grimes' solo exhibition, unfolds like a film, in three distinct acts or chapters. Each chapter leads to the next, exploring the Greek myth of Medea. Medea, much like Genesis' Eve, has expanded beyond her singular story in cultural retellings, becoming both a cautionary tale of female unruliness, and a feminist antihero. In her first iteration, as a character in the myth of Jason and the Argonauts and later as the protagonist in Euripides' play *Medea* (431 BCE), she helps Jason obtain the Golden Fleece, betraying her own family in the process. Years later, when they are married with children, Jason abandons Medea to marry another woman, Glauce, the daughter of King Creon, seeking political advantage and status. Medea, rejected and consumed with rage and vengeance, kills her and Jason's two sons, ensuring he will suffer as she has suffered.



Oona Grimes *Etruscan children: Medea syndrome #34*. 2025 - 2026 Stencil drawings, collage & coloured pencil on paper, 75 x 110 cm

Medea's myth has been subject to multiple tellings, retellings and reinterpretations throughout history, in literature, film, theatre and dance. Each interpretation of Medea lingers on her motivations, whether she is driven by a grief-induced madness, revenge, or a kind of tragic agency; a way of reclaiming power. The taboo of a mother killing her children is so potent that Medea has even seeped into modern psychotherapeutic parlance, the term 'Medea syndrome' used to describe a parent's deliberate alienation of a child from the other parent as a way of seeking revenge, and the reverberating damage this can have on a child's growth and development. It is these myriad interpretations that fascinate Grimes; the possibility of viewing Medea not only as a monster but also as a mirror for human emotion, for the multiple conflicting complexities we all hold. One reading of Medea is that, in enacting the ultimate taboo, she disrupts expectations of mothers, women, and patriarchal society, railing against her own oppression.

Storytelling is the underpinning of Grimes's practice, whether through film, sculpture or tableaux collaged on sheets of black paper, referencing analogue film strips, as in the six large-scale *Etruscan Children* works on paper which form the spine of the exhibition. When viewed together, the works resemble a storyboard for a film, or the Etruscan wall paintings Grimes took inspiration from during her fellowship at The British School at Rome. Here, the first chapter of Grimes' exploration into Medea unfolds, with scenes of a mother's brutal violence depicted in comic strip style. The attacks on the children in the work are almost absurd, reminiscent of cartoon maulings. Grimes' line is so spare, so innocuous, that it belies the mother character's rage. As we connect the lines of Grimes' pared back graphic style, it takes a moment to register what we are seeing — a mother drilling into the eye of her child, smothering them with a pillow, attacking their ears with pliers. In *Etruscan Children 34*, the mother's weapon of choice is a rope wrapped around the baby's neck. She holds the rope close to her own body and it loops between the two figures, like an umbilical cord, their lifelong connection about to be severed.

While the threads of Grimes' storytelling are broad and wide ranging, weaving through varying mythologies and references, there is a tightness to the formal decisions in the works that directs our focus, in the same way a director uses a camera angle or the crescendo of a piece of music to choreograph our emotional response.

Registration marks in the top right-hand corners anchor the works, training our attention on the centre of each scene. Grimes begins each work by stencil-drawing the characters' heads with spray paint, before expanding the scenes with collage and coloured pencil. The spray painting happens with multiple cans on sheets of white paper, creating a depth of tone that contrasts the black's flatness. From these sheets, she hand-cuts the composite parts of each scene, shuffling and collaging them around on the page until the characters emerge, the dynamics between them revealing themselves to both Grimes and the viewer.

While Grimes describes herself as a 'flattist' and has a background in printmaking, the notion of non-flatness is fundamental to her practice. Analogue is everything. Harking to the Italian neorealist cinema she watches and rewatches, she is uninterested in creating perfect images. In works that deliberately adopt graphic visual language, this tension is notable. The waver of scissors on a stencil's edge, the unevenness of the spray-paint in

places, the deliberate imperfections of the work create a friction that immerses us in the image, rather than allowing our attention to gloss over its surface. There is a patchwork element too, stemming from her interest in badly repaired frescoes. It is this layering of imagery, this resistance to smoothing out the ragged edges, that holds our attention. The works are containers for myriad references, stories and mythologies that unfurl in layers with our looking. The story of Medea is here but so is the story of every mother who's harmed her child, physically or otherwise. Cinematic and photographic allusions circle, the compositions humming in the same tone as a scene seen long ago, or a Hajar photograph unspooled and reconfigured. The violence depicted is confronting and intentionally reductive, encouraging a consideration of the more subtle ways we harm or have been harmed in the tightrope of parenting. The children in these works are androgynous and largely faceless, allowing us to use them as a mirror, or project other faces upon them, her 'children' more representative of a state of being, a passage of humanity, than of individual identities. In the next chapter of the exhibition, *Etruscan ghost*, the characters' features emerge in a suite of contorted portraits on drafting paper, depicting the ghosts of the murdered children. Again,



Oona Grimes *Etruscan ghost: Medea's Children #151* 2025. Coloured pencil & collage on drafting film, 29.7 x 21cm.

Grimes's material decisions drive the interpretation, the translucency of the paper she uses embodying this ghostly presence, as though the portraits could vanish entirely in an unforgiving light. The paper's ephemerality also imbues the children with a vulnerability, articulating their loss of agency in a deft material sweep.

The faces are outlined with delicate pencil oblongs, pieced together as though sewn in running stitch, reminiscent of the stencilled fragments in Grimes's collage works. Coupled with the paper's ephemerality, the effect of the line is of a kind of conjuring, an arrangement of composite parts rather than a solid being. The children are always on the cusp of disappearing, their heads bowed, expressions mournful in their paper purgatory. Aside from an interpretation of the children as literal ghosts, we can also think of the psychological impact of 'Medea syndrome', and how a trauma can freeze a person in a kind of arrested development, robbing them of their ability to become psychologically whole.

Grimes uses Caran D'ache to introduce colour into the works, rubbing the pencil in with her fingers to illustrate features, in some works creating the effect of a freshly bloomed bruise. By conjuring the ghosts of these children harmed, she gives them a presence, a voice that had previously been silenced. In portraying the intangible, the unknowable, she invites us to question and give voice to the things we so often refuse to know — the non-comprehension and the non-articulation of emotional violence. It is not the line that makes the children solid but rather Grimes' almost cartographical treatment of negative space, using delicately lined geometric shapes to anchor the figures, foregrounding the importance of the edges — the edge of a screen, a fresco, a wall — each work tightly contained. There are more children portrayed here than in the *Etruscan Children* series and, although their features are present, they remain genderless, representative of all children across the world and time. In this non-specificity, this atemporality, the blurring and the bruising of the features takes on new meaning, perhaps nodding to the intergenerational and ancestral traumas that can echo through generations, the bruises paling only slightly and sometimes calcifying, etching in — violence mapping onto violence.

The final chapter of the exhibition, a film titled *The Following*, reverberates with references to Medea, while introducing another element of mythology too; the Moirai or Three Fates, three sister goddesses, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, who embody the cycle of life and who are personifications of destiny. In turn they spin life's yarn, measure its length, and finally sever it, inducing death. The film is set on the Cornish coast, a place rich in its own mythology, and, in it, we see Grimes alluding to elements of the Fates' roles, while simultaneously introducing other acts of divination. Grimes appears on the cliffs in archival gloves, measuring granite boulders, a life's duration, like Lachesis, before moving through the landscape with a dowsing rod, searching, questing, for something unspoken. In these tableaux, Grimes's character is wholly focused, her body wrapping closely to the rocks or moving magnetically with the rod, as though moved by unseen forces. Like many of Grimes's films, *The Following* depicts a quest and we see a mother following a daughter, both played



Oona Grimes *The Following* film still 2026. Digital film, 11 minutes 14 seconds.

by Grimes, through the landscape to an unknown destination. It is these elements of the unknown, of the unspoken — Grimes's films rarely incorporate dialogue — that hold the viewer's attention, a tension rising within our chests as though we ourselves are the followed. The film culminates in the mother burying the daughter in the sand in a trench she has dug herself, until only her eyes are visible. The tide washes everything away and there is a sense of the inevitable, that our life's duration is dictated by forces beyond our control. Here, with the mother accompanying the daughter to her death, Grimes offers a note of healing, contradictory to the brutality of Medea's violence depicted in the first chapter. In playing both characters, Grimes articulates the bond and the mirroring between mother and child and how, any harm done to them is harm done to us in equal measure. Throughout the exhibition, Grimes approaches the character of Medea with curiosity, simultaneously leaning away from judgment while giving a voice to the children who are too often silenced in the domestic margins. Through her depiction of the epitome of the unnatural, the ultimate taboo, Grimes challenges the viewer not to turn away and instead to think about the position of mothers in society, of women and children, and, rather than leaping to vilification, instead asking how this could happen, and why, and to whom.

Oona Grimes RA is a London-based artist who merges drawing, clay and film to create a world peopled by the Unseen and the Unlovely. Her work reflects a deep obsession with the learning and losing of language, fusing Commedia dell'arte with comic strip aesthetics.

During her 2018 Bridget Riley Fellowship at the British School at Rome, Grimes compounded Etruscan tomb paintings with Neorealist cinema. The resulting films, were mis-remembered re-enactments that physically integrated her into the frame.

Grimes graduated from Norwich School of Art (1986) and Slade School of Fine Art (1988). She was awarded the Bryan Robertson Award in 2022 and elected to the Royal Academy in 2023. Recently a visiting lecturer at the Royal College of Art and Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University.

Tess Charnley is a writer and curator based between Cornwall and London. Her writing has been published across leading art publications including Elephant Magazine, Burlington Contemporary, Art Monthly, this is tomorrow, Ocula and the peer-reviewed journal *Anthropocenes — Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*. She was also a contributor to *Prime: Art's Next Generation*, published by Phaidon. She is currently working on a publication on the late artist Richard Nott, which will be published by Sansom & Company in September.

Cover: Oona Grimes *Etruscan children: Medea syndrome #27*
2024. 75 x 110 cm. Stencil drawing & collage on paper.

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