

## KATHLEEN GALLIGAN

*Ephemera*, 2013  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ANDREA LEWIS

### You Jane

Tracking the  
legend of Tarzan

**T**he 1932 movie *Tarzan the Ape Man* is the first feature film I remember seeing on television. I am six. It is 1954 and Tarzan rides toward me on an elephant, filling the small screen of our black-and-white Philco. I am deep into my late-night TV ritual, sugared up on root beer and salted down on sunflower seeds, gaping at the TV, dropping shells into a melamine bowl. Tarzan leaps from the elephant to wrestle an alligator in a churned-up river. He yodels the Tarzan yell and swings vine to vine to save Jane from a lion's jaws. The tomboy in me wants to be Tarzan and the little girl wants to be Jane. I want a leopard-skin minidress and a chimp sidekick. I want to put myself in danger, but I want to be rescued too, the way Jane is always rescued. Most of all, I want *Tarzan the Ape Man* to never end.

For movie fans of a certain age, “Tarzan” will always translate to one guy—Johnny Weissmuller. And Jane will always be Maureen O’Sullivan. Together they made six movies as Tarzan and Jane, and Weissmuller made six more with various Janes. His sixteen-year reign as Tarzan is considered the golden age of the character. A champion swimmer with no acting experience, Weissmuller was an instant hit as Tarzan. “However credible or interesting *Tarzan* may be on the printed page, I doubt very much if he emerges in such splendor as he does in the person of Johnny Weissmuller” (Thornton Delehanty in his review of *Tarzan the Ape Man* in 1932).

Before Weissmuller there were eight silent Tarzan films, and before any of the films there were the books. Tarzan’s creator, Edgar Rice Burroughs, was born in Chicago in 1875 to a semiprosperous family. Burroughs languished in a series of colorful jobs—cavalry soldier, gold miner, railroad cop, cattle drover—before he tried writing and eventually became the first American writer to be a corporation. Gore Vidal calls Burroughs “a fascinating figure to contemplate, an archetypal American dreamer. . . . He consoled himself with an inner world where he was strong and handsome, adored by beautiful women and worshiped by exotic races.” Burroughs tried writing for pulp magazines, then realized his own fantasy life was richer than anything the pulps had to offer. His first publication was a sci-fi serial set on Mars. The first Tarzan novel—*Tarzan of the Apes*—appeared in 1912 in the magazine the *All-Story*. The editor, Thomas Metcalf, was impressed enough to publish it in its entirety