

Fairy Tale

contemporary art and enchantment

painting, sculpture, photography and video by international artists
an exhibition curated by Angela Kingston

The artists and a selection of the works that will be included

Peter Callesen (Denmark) will create an enormous castle – complete with turrets and towers – from a single, gigantic sheet of paper. It will rise from the ground leaving behind cut-outs, which will remain as proof of this extraordinary feat. It is as if the artist is proposing himself as an imaginary ‘king of the castle’ and at the same time exposing the preposterousness of this impulse.

Paul Morrison (U.K.): his paintings and prints juxtapose different ways of depicting the landscape, borrowing from cartoons, botanical illustrations, ‘old master’ prints and other sources. The various elements are rendered as stark black-on-white silhouettes and there are strange shifts in scale (a fern can be as tall as a fir tree). There is a sense of anticipation and dark foreboding.

Vanessa Jane Phaff (The Netherlands) will exhibit paintings from her Little Red Riding Hood series, rendered in exaggerated story-book style. These turn the traditional story on its head: the eponymous little girl is stubborn and resourceful and unafraid. She sometimes sleeps rough, out in the forest. What is certain is that she will never be the victim of the wolf.

Kiki Smith (U.S.A.) will be showing a remarkable series of etchings that depict a young woman being either attacked or ravished by a beast. There is a dangerous and erotic charge to these works. They resonate with the famous fairy stories in which beasts and humans cavort with each other in stories of dominance, submission and sexual awakening.

Annelies Strba (Switzerland) will exhibit her video *Frances and the Elves*, together with related photographs. These artworks depict enchanted landscapes – stark mountains, impossibly beautiful flowers, dark woods – and ‘delicate beings’ seen drifting, dancing and sleeping.

Janaina Tschape (Brazil/ U.S.A.) will exhibit *Untitled (Scream)*, a powerful video in which a beautiful woman dressed as a mermaid repeatedly lets rip a muscular and angry scream that is silenced because she is underwater. Each time, she appears to reabsorb the anger, only to scream again.

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Introduction

Our best known fairy tales have survived for centuries and travelled great distances. This is because they contain dramas that remain essential to us, and because nobody owns them: they remain 'alive' because they are constantly refurbished and remade by each person who retells them.

This exhibition has been inspired by art that retells fairy tales – and by art that is charged with the atmosphere of these stories.

'Fairy Tale' will shed light on the common ground that exists between fairy stories and the creative impulses of visual artists.

Both involve a venturing into the unknown: into the forest, into the imagination. There is, too, the magical transformation of ordinary materials (pumpkins, beans, oil paint, charcoal) into extraordinary matter. Fairy stories are tactile and sensuous in their descriptions (bags of gold, tresses of hair, glass slippers): visual artists also have what might be called an exaggerated involvement with materials and imagery.

There is a similar sense of scale too: the telling of fairy tales is domestic, familial and intimate, and works of art, too, are one of the few products of our society which can usually be made by the individual in relatively ordinary surroundings – bubbling at the hearth, so to speak.

'Fairy Tale' will reveal how contemporary artists are 'retelling' the traditional fairy tales – sometimes revelling in their darkest undercurrents, sometimes transporting us with a sense of enchantment.

The climax of an unexpurgated version of Cinderella tells of how the ugly sisters had their eyes pecked out by doves, a far cry from the prettified Ladybird and Disney versions most of us grew up with. And whereas there are naive couplings of princes and princesses in Ladybird and Disney, there is overt sexual content, much of it illicit and shocking, in the older, folk versions.

Today, significant numbers of artists are involved with ideas of *post-morality* – and these artists find themselves in the same territory as the so-called primitive versions of the fairy tales. Their art, like these ‘primitive’ versions, contains stirring kinds of unpalatable truths that are allied to Jungian ideas of the unconscious, and in particular the notion of the ‘shadow’. And their art, like fairy tales, is often bewitching and transgressive, with anti-social reverberations.

It is just as daring now, perhaps, to make art that is utterly fantastical, escapist and pleasurable. It seems out of place in our world now and we almost don’t have a language for it. At the same time as it delights us, it disorients us, and makes our present lives strange.

‘Fairy Tale’ will ask: why are artists making fairy-tale-like work now?

One explanation is that artists are reacting to today’s highly conformed and sanitised society. Think of wars being waged at a distance and described in formulaic phrases by rehearsed spokespeople; think of our anodyne mass culture; think of cellophane-wrapped meat; think of our careful euphemisms for dying and death. It is as if artists are seeking to puncture this with little pin-pricks of discomfort and pleasure that seek us out on the most intimate, unconscious levels, and use the most archaic form of address.

In the past few decades, the psychological scale of what artists do has shifted, such that we are now afforded little glimpses rather than grand vistas. Monumental modernist projects have given way to fleeting moments of rare insight. The epic has given way to the fairy tale.

The feminine increasingly finds form, too, in all aspects of contemporary society. In art, part of this flowering is achieved through fairy tales, arguably a specifically

female genre.

'Fairy Tale' will draw together a rich strand of contemporary art and shed light on artists' motivations in ways that will be accessible to a wide audience.

Fairy tales are enormously popular. Simply asking someone 'What was your favourite fairy tale when you were a child?' opens up a wealth of possibility.

An exhibition publication will include a history of fairy tales by Stella Beddoe, Keeper of Decorative Art at Brighton and Hove Museum.

In olden times when wishing still helped, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, which has seen so much, was astonished whenever it shone in her face.

'The Frog King', quoted in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 1975

'Is it you, my Prince?' she said to him. 'You have waited a long while.'

The Prince, charmed with these words, and much more with the manner in which they were spoken, knew not how to show his joy and gratitude; ... their discourse was not well connected, they did weep more than talk - little eloquence, a great deal of love. He was more at a loss than she, and we need not wonder at it: she had time to think on what to say

to him; for it is very probable ... that the good Fairy, during so long a sleep, had given her very agreeable dreams.

'The Sleeping Beauty', *The Blue Fairy Book*, ed. Andrew Lang, publ. Longmans, 1895

She was now frightened, and wished to throw off the red shoes, but they stuck fast. She tore off her stockings, but the shoes seemed to have grown to her feet, and she danced across the fields and meadows, in rain and sunshine, by day and by night, but at night it was the most dreadful.

'The Red Shoes', *Hans Andersen Fairy Tales*, publ. Thomas Nelson & Sons, undated.

As she was led to the scaffold, she placed the shirts upon her arm, and just as she had mounted it, and the fire was about to be kindled, she looked round, and saw six Swans come flying through the air. Her heart leapt for joy as she perceived her deliverers approaching, and soon the Swans, flying toward her, alighted so near that she was able to throw the shirts over them, and as soon as she had so done their feathers fell off and the brothers stood up alive and well; but the youngest wanted his left arm, instead of which he had a swan's wing.

'The Six Swans', *Stories from Hans Andersen and Grimm*, publ. J. Coker & Co., undated

So when the moon rose they got up, but they could find no crumbs of bread, for the birds of the woods and of the fields had come and picked them up...They went on all that night, and the next day from the morning until the evening, but they could not find the way out of the wood, and they were very hungry, for they had nothing to eat but the few berries they could pick up. And when they were so tired that they could no longer drag themselves along, they lay down under a tree and fell asleep.

'Hansel and Grethel', *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, publ. Wordsworth Editions, 1993

While they were out in the woods, a little girl with golden locks of hair walked up to the house. First she peered through the window, and then she peeped through the keyhole; and then, seeing there was nobody at home, Goldilocks lifted the latch and walked in.

'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', *British Folk Tales: New Versions*, Kevin Crossley-Holland, 1997

The witch scoured out the kettle with the snakes, which she tied in a knot. She then cut open her breast, and let the black blood drop into the kettle, the steam of which formed such extraordinary figures, enough to frighten any one. Each moment she threw fresh things into the kettle, and when it boiled thoroughly it was like the crying of a crocodile. At

length it was ready and looked like the clearest water.

'The Little Mermaid', Hans Andersen Fairy Tales, publ. Thomas Nelson & Sons, undated.

The devil told you that! the devil told you that!' cried the little man, and in his anger he stamped with his right foot so hard that it went into the ground above his knee; then he seized his left foot with both his hands in such a fury that he split in two, and there was an end of him.

'Rumpelstiltskin', *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, publ. Wordsworth Editions, 1993

In ancient times there existed in the country of Serendippo, in the Far East, a great and powerful king by the name of Giaffer. He had three sons who were very dear to him. And being very concerned about their education, he decided that he had to leave them endowed not only with great power, but also with all kinds of virtues of which princes are particularly in need.

'The Three Princes of Serendip', a Persian fairy tale from which the word 'serendipity' is derived, www.livingheritage.org

In her anger she clutched Rapunzel's beautiful tresses, wrapped them a few times around her left hand, seized a pair of scissors with the right, and - snip-snap! - they were cut off, and the lovely braids

lay on the ground. And she was so merciless that she took poor Rapunzel in a waste and desert where she lived in great woe and misery.

'Rapunzel', from *Grimms' Grimmet*, publ. Chronicle Books, 1997

Some background material

Fairy tale events and unconscious processes...

[In fairy tales] events occur which show that normal logic and causation are suspended, as is true for our unconscious processes, where the most ancient and most unique and startling events occur. The content of the unconscious is both most hidden and most familiar, darkest and most compelling; and it creates the fiercest anxiety as well as the greatest hope.

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, 1975

... and creativity

She describes her work, which is rooted in her own empirical experience, as a kind of exorcism, a way of externalising fears and traumas and gaining a kind of power over what she depicts through visualised knowledge.

Helaine Posner writing about Kiki Smith, in *Kiki Smith*, publ. New York, 1998

As artists we 'step out into the woods'.... The creative state... courts uncertainty. It is unable - or, rather, unwilling - to fix bearings. It is curious about what lurks in the shadows. It tip-toes up to the house in the woods, peers through the window, peeps through the keyhole, and then carefully lifts the latch.

Angela Kingston, 'Lost in the Woods', *The House in the Woods*, CCA Glasgow, 1998

Fairy tale locations and forays into the unconscious...

The strange, most ancient, most distant, and at the same time most familiar locations which a fairy tale speaks about suggests a voyage into the interior of our mind, into the realms of unawareness and the unconscious.

Bruno Bettelheim, *ibid*

In fairy tales, being lost in the forest symbolises not a need to be found, but rather that one must find or discover oneself.

Bruno Bettelheim, *ibid*

... and the experience of being 'lost' when looking at art

Caught between the reassurance of our senses and the critical awareness of our intellect, we are forced to choose ... between the instinctual need to confirm the reliability of one's senses, and the rarefied pleasure that comes from believing in something that we know cannot possibly be true.

Dan Cameron, writing about Xavier Veilhan's 'The Cave', in *Xavier Veilhan*, publ, Magasin, 2000

A quality of detachment in fairy tales...

...the hero or heroine is very different in fairytales than in myths. In fairytales they are much less human, that is, they have no inner human life of the psyche... they are like clichés, with a very characteristic trend such as cleverness, capacity for suffering, loyalty, etc., and the figures stay so to the end of the story... That is because they are not only types of human beings but archetypes, and therefore cannot be compared directly with the human ego. You cannot take the hero as one man, or the heroine as one woman.

Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Psychological Meaning of Redemption Motifs in Fairytales*, Inner City Books, 1980

... and emotional 'stillness' in contemporary art

Increasingly, much of what is depicted in contemporary art, and indeed much of the art proposed for the exhibition 'Fairy Tale', has a certain dead-pan quality. At the same time, however, an artwork in its entirety can have considerable impact. Can we begin to understand this quality of current art practice in relation to von Franz's discussion, which goes on to relate the different moments in a fairy tale to *facets* of the self, rather than the self as an entirety? AK

Darkness in fairy tales

Most children now meet fairy tales only in prettified and simplified versions which subdue their meaning and rob them of all deeper significance - versions such as those on films and TV shows, where fairy tales are turned into empty-minded entertainment.

Bruno Bettelheim, *ibid*

No matter how much people try and clean up violence in fairy tales, it remains what children like best.

Cindy Sherman, 1997

The Essential Cindy Sherman, The Wonderland Press, NY, 1999

Key references

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, publ. Penguin, 1975

Angela Carter, introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, 1991, and others writings by her

Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Psychological Meaning of Redemption Motifs in Fairytales*, publ. Inner City Books, 1980 (a Jungian discussion)

Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*, publ. Shambala, 1972

Michael Newton, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: a history of feral children*, Faber and Faber, 2002

Iona and Peter Opie (eds.), *The Classic Fairy Tales*, publ. OUP London, 1974

Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, publ. Vintage, 1995, and other writings by her

Jack Zipes, introduction to *Victorian Fairy Tales: the Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*, 1987, and other writings by him

Essays by Angela Kingston relating to Fairy Tales

'Lost in the Woods', *The House in the Woods*, Ed. Francis McKee, CCA Glasgow, 1998 (a brief history of fairy tales and a discussion of 'being lost in the woods and the creative impulse').

'Breathing Space', Artspace, Sydney, Australia, 1999 (catalogue essay on the work of Ivan Smith, with reference to the story 'Sleeping Beauty').

'A Fairy Tale about Drawing', for a newspaper, 'Art by Degree', accompanying a series of exhibitions by MA students at London art schools, at Millinery Works, 1999 (a discussion of the psychodynamics of drawing, with reference to 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears').

'First and last things', Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham, 2000 (a catalogue essay on the work of Karen Trusselle, including references to the story 'Alice in Wonderland').