

SIX ARTISTS AND THE FAIRY TALE

Angela Kingston

Much of the art being shown in Britain today is in essence documentary. Think of all the videos, made without actors, scripts or sets, that re-render 'real life'. Think of all the life-as-it-is photography. This publication and the exhibition it accompanies catch hold of another, rarer, tendency in art – one that reaches a higher level of fantasy.

Fairy Tale looks at art by major international artists that retells traditional fairy stories or is charged with the atmosphere of these tales. As we will see, the six artists in the exhibition also borrow and adapt any number of the curious formal characteristics that are peculiar to fairy tales. And at the same time they tap into the powerful psychological workings of these age-old stories.

Paul Morrison's paintings and prints often juxtapose different ways of depicting the landscape, combining imagery from cartoons, botanical illustrations, 'old master' prints and children's books. Within his landscapes there are strange shifts of scale: at one moment we loom over a tree as if we are giants, and the next find ourselves dwarfed by a flower. The logic of perspective is sent awry: we might seek out a small tree in the distance only to find that it's already right next to us on the picture plane. These anomalies of scale cause our eyes to be suddenly drawn from one part of a painting to another. We are subject to forces

unfamiliar to us: there is magic at work.

Paul Morrison renders everything in stark black and white. There are no shadows. It follows that the world he depicts is one of fictional extremes, in which absolute good and evil exist.¹ Everything takes on a new significance: in the painting *Ascidium*, the single flower is seductive but sinister; the background is a forbidding sky, or a threatening torrent of water, or even witch-like hair (and perhaps all three at once).²

Paul Morrison's artworks are outside of time, beyond the laws of nature, and their imagery is archetypal in the way that fairy tales are. We venture into them as characters in our own stories. And according to the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, landscapes such as these have a special significance:

The strange, most ancient, most distant, and at the same time most familiar locations which a fairy tale speaks about suggest a voyage into the interior of our mind, into the realms of unawareness and the unconscious.³

In *Domatium*, a drawing of a Germanic castle has been stretched and its towers now loom absurdly. Imagery surrounding the castle has been manipulated still further, such that it now forms mysterious striations of black and white. The fictional nature of the source material has been made doubly strange, and the title *Domatium* (like *Ascidium*, a botanical term) could be a religious incantation, a spell, or an ancient code-word.

Vanessa Jane Phaff's paintings, like Paul Morrison's, derive much of their appearance from children's book illustrations, with their highly schematic forms and colours. Her art sometimes involves actually reworking a particular tale, her favourite being 'Little Red Riding Hood'. A major work, comprising thirty-six silkscreens on canvas,

is concerned with the stretch of time between Little Red Riding Hood leaving her mother's house and arriving at her grandmother's, in which she is famously distracted by the wolf.

Vanessa Jane Phaff sets Little Red Riding Hood free. The little girl offers the wolf her hand to sniff; she dallies among the trees; she sleeps out rough in the woods. And the girl and the wolf *take turns* at being the aggressor. At one point they even join forces and confront the viewer. Days pass and we see Little Red Riding Hood tucked up in bed – whether innocently or not we do not know – with her would-be assailant. We can't tell what will happen, but we sense that the usual, familiar ending is no longer possible.⁴

It's clear that Vanessa Jane Phaff identifies with the drama of a little girl leaving her familiar surroundings, and she equips her with courage and imagination. And she goes further than this: she understands the fairy tale in terms of an internal, psychological struggle.⁵ As the artist explains:

The wolf, Red Riding Hood and I are all the Big Bad Wolf, and all Red Riding Hood.... I was aiming to achieve a balance of opposites: irrationality and rationality, impotence and power, good and evil, the feminine and the masculine, without attributing those extremes specifically to women or men (i.e. Red Riding Hood or the wolf).⁶

The simplified characters and matter-of-fact delivery of the traditional fairy tales mean that they get right under our skin.⁷ Vanessa Jane Phaff's spare and straightforward style likewise beckons us in, to experience for ourselves her teasing play of opposites.

Notice also the mirror hanging on the wall in Vanessa Jane Phaff's version of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. Signalling Red Riding Hood's growing self-awareness as she ventures from her mother's house, the

mirror also reminds us of other fairy stories. There's the 'mirror-mirror-on-the-wall' of 'Snow White', and the room of mirrors in 'Beauty and the Beast', for example, which likewise express transition and identity. This adoption by the artist of a key image from other fairy stories is entirely in keeping with how fairy tales have evolved. For they have always borrowed from, and sometimes even morphed into, each other – freely re-using objects (such as mirrors), and also certain incidents and even names.⁸

As a consequence of this, some themes are shared by several stories. In the animal-groom tales – 'Beauty and the Beast', 'Snow White and Rose Red', 'The Frog Prince' – young women encounter repellent animal creatures that they deliver from curses, thereby turning them back into handsome princes. Three etchings by Kiki Smith, *Splendid*, *Rapture*, and *In a Field*, involve a breathtaking refashioning of stories such as these. A tiger lunges towards a woman and seizes her by the throat; a lion clenches a woman from behind, teeth in her back, paws on her head and haunch; a wolf is taking hold of a woman, his eyes intently on hers. These are scenes not of rape but of ravishment. The women yield to the creatures even before there's any question of them being transformed. They prefer, it seems, their beastly state. Woman, here, is released from chasteness and probity, her desires wanton and savage.⁹

It is very satisfying that this work takes the form of a triptych. For fairy tales are tales of threes: in 'Beauty and the Beast' a father has three sons and three daughters; the father, indebted to the Beast, must return to him within three months or die; instead, Beauty becomes the Beast's captive for three months, and so on. This is because fairy tales have drawn freely from both the content and the structure of ancient myths and religious stories from all over the world, with their threes, sevens and thirteens. *Trinity*, also by Kiki Smith, is clearly something of a

tribute to this. A young, virginal Mary figure, straight from the pages of the Bible, kneels at the side of a lake, looking intently at an apple that has fallen to the ground. We might think of Eve from the Old Testament, or the Greek goddess Aphrodite, or indeed Snow White, and the apples in their stories.¹⁰ The melding of stories and worlds continues, with the young woman's conscience represented, in the sky on her left, by a witchy figure who gestures like a traditional Indian dancer and, above her on her right, by a fairy in a western party dress.

A series of etchings by Kiki Smith, called 'Blue Prints', alludes to myriad stories and possibilities. *Wolf Girl* is a startling portrait of the progeny, it would seem, of an alliance between the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood. Through allusions to twentieth century tales – there is a portrait of Dorothy, heroine of *The Wizard of Oz* – *Blue Prints* also reminds us that the pot of stories will never stop being filled.

Janaina Tschäpe creates her own visual narratives, often with characters played by her female cousins in Brazil and set in the forests, mountains and beaches near where the family lives. She works highly intuitively, drawing freely on the imaginations of her collaborators too. As she says, 'The fairy tale is in everything I do'.¹¹ Also in play are stories of the sea goddess Yemanjá, the mermaid mother of all fish, who is part of Candomblé, the West African religion that came to Brazil on the slave ships.¹²

'The Sea and the Mountain', a series of large photographs¹³ by Janaina Tschäpe, is set at the edge of things, where sea meets land – in this case, land in the fullest and most verdant mountainous form that it can take. The scene is set for a transition or slipping between states, a transmutation of sorts. A young girl is alone at this edge of things, undergoing a curious transformation in which it would

seem that elements of her inner being – thoughts, imaginings, entrails – are erupting out of her, forming appendages that morph her into some kind of half-aquatic creature. She takes her place, therefore, among a whole species of fairy tale beings that express between-states, such as mermaids, dwarfs, and man beasts.

By contrast, the making of her video installation *Untitled (Scream)* took Janaina Tschäpe to Florida, and to an underwater theatre in which 'The Little Mermaid' is enacted daily by women in costume. The artist's video features one of the Florida 'mermaids' letting out a great howl of frustration, air bubbles streaming from her mouth. This venting of raw emotion is seen in slow motion, and then in reverse, in a continuous loop. The mermaid's rage is therefore without end: worse, it is not only continually reabsorbed back into the creature, but also rendered silent. Here, Janaina Tschäpe reintroduces something of the horror and abjection of the original tale, prior to its prettification by Disney and others. (In the original Hans Christian Andersen story, the little mermaid has her tongue cut out, walks with constant, searing pain after her fish-tail is transformed into legs, and fails to win the love of her prince.)

Fairy tales, in both old and new versions, often involve the magical transformation of the most ordinary materials. Take, for example, the pumpkin in 'Cinderella' that becomes a carriage. In making *Castle* at Walsall, Peter Callesen has transformed a single, very large sheet of paper into a fairytale castle with turrets, towers and crenellations. The prosaic whiteness of the paper is converted, through this sleight of hand, into the suggestion of a grand marble edifice surrounded by virgin snow.

But look again, and the shadows on the ground all around the castle are revealed as the cut-outs that remain from Peter Callesen's painstaking assembly of this great structure from paper. The enormity and

strangeness of the artist's undertaking here call to mind the heroes of fairy tales and their tasks: the prince who must struggle through thorns to reach Sleeping Beauty; the young hopeful who can obtain the hand of the maiden only if he can make her laugh, or only if he can draw down the moon.

However, as one commentator has said of Peter Callesen's paper craftsmanship: '...if the gesture is heroic, the outcome is equally fragile'.¹⁴ Self-made king-of-the-castle, the artist has created a world that is, quite literally, hollow. There is, it seems, a self-deprecating mockery of the male position within this artistic endeavour of Callesen's. It is at the same time affectionate, however: in Callesen's creative act we recognise the longing that is embodied in the fairy tale prince, a figure who represents 'the unnoticed little boy who goes out into the world and makes a great success of life'.¹⁵

Annelies Štrba would have us believe, quite straightforwardly, in fairies: or at least creatures that the digitised image, moving or still, makes possible. She has taken footage of her daughters and a farm girl in a forest and grassy clearing and heightened the colours, altered the tempo and blurred the image – to reveal whirling, dancing, ecstatic female figures, fleeting and ethereal. They have billowing dresses and shawls and long, long hair. One of the creatures is in Alice-in-Wonderland blue, another in Snow White's costume of red and white. Sometimes a figure will blur into the trees to suggest a tree-sprite; at other times, one creature will flicker and be transformed into another. Whenever they are still, they are seen sleeping the death-like sleep of the fairy tale.

Photographs accompanying this film depict a landscape that has heightened, magical properties too. The flowers and trees are rendered in extreme, fantastical colours, each a miracle of pixelation. The film and still images were made in homage to a body of work created in

1917 by Elsie Wright (aged 15) and Frances Griffiths (aged 11),¹⁶ who exploited the potential of plate photography to depict fairies in their own gardens, just as Annelies Štrba now harnesses digital technology's new fantastical possibilities.

There is a daring psychological freedom to Annelies Štrba's artwork. It is transgressively feminine, meandering, unhooked from narrative, both 'once upon a time' and 'happy ever after'. The fantasy is both infantile and womanly, and all pleasure continuous and undifferentiated.

In a variety of ways, and as a result of a whole range of creative impulses, the artists in *Fairy Tale* do two important things: they restore a certain kind of fantasy to contemporary art, and they reawaken the rawest sensibilities of fairy tales – the dark undercurrents, the sexual appeal – that have lain dormant for too long:

And when he saw her looking so lovely in her sleep, he could not turn away his eyes; and presently he stooped and kissed her, and she awakened, and opened her eyes, and looked very kindly on him. And she arose, and they went forth together, and the king and the queen and whole court waked up, and gazed on each other with great eyes of wonderment.¹⁷

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1. See Mary Midgley, *Wickedness*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 (Routledge Classics, 2001), for a compelling contemporary discussion of evil.
2. See Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: terror and fantasy in Baroque Germany*, Yale University Press, 2004, for a gripping account of witches as a projection of fearful fantasy.
3. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Thames & Hudson, 1976 (Penguin, 1991), p. 63.
4. Vanessa Jane Phaff's reworking chimes with older, forgotten versions of the story, however. See Stella Beddoe's essay, pp. 12–14.
5. This is the great theme of the Jungian psychoanalyst Marie-Louise von Franz's books on fairy tales. See, for example, *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*, 1972 (revised edition: Shambhala, 1993).
6. *Double Cube: Vanessa Jane Phaff*, Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem and Artimo-Gijs Stork, 2005, p. 39, 41.
7. Von Franz, p. 18 and Bettelheim, p. 37.
8. See for example Angela Carter's introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Virago Press, 1991.
9. Angela Carter's heady reworkings of *Beauty and the Beast* are equally unmissable: see 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' (1979) and 'The Tiger's Bride' (1979) in *The Bloody Chamber*, Vintage, 1995.
10. See Bettelheim, p. 212.
11. The quotation is from a conversation with the artist in her studio in May 2006. It is interesting to note in passing at this point that the traditional fairy tales are typically set within the family.
12. See www.geocities.com/annafranklin2/blueandwhite.html and www.religiousmovements.libvirginia.edu/nrms/macui.html
13. 'The Sea and the Mountain' is also realised in video form, in a work of the same title.
14. Camilla Jalving, 'Nostalgia, Reverie & Intoxicating Dreams: romantic longing in the art of Peter Callesen', in *Peter Callesen: selected works*, emily Tsingou gallery, 2006, p. 43.
15. Bettelheim, p. 111.
16. Alison Packer, 'Real Fairies', in *Fairies*, Brighton Museum, 1980, pp. 33–41.
17. 'The Sleeping Beauty', in *Grimms Fairy Tales*, trans. Lucy Crane, Wordsworth Editions, undated, pp. 206–07.