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Dread & Delight: The Darker Side of “Once Upon A Time”

By Pearl Fontaine August 14, 2018

Opening on August 25 at the **University of North Carolina Greensboro**’s **Weatherspoon Art Museum** is “Dread & Delight: Fairy Tales in an Anxious World.” The exhibition is a group show of works that reimagine seven fairy tale stories—*Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, *All Fur*, and *Fitcher’s Bird*—conceived by the university’s curator, **Emily Stamey**.

While “Dread & Delight” includes tales we all know and love, throughout the exhibition one might find that they are certainly not the childish fantasies we heard growing up. Featuring works by artists like **Natalie Frank**, **Xaviera Simmons**, and **Timothy Horn**, the exhibition showcases innovative, feminist, and contemporary retellings of the stories, which create relationships to the complexities of postmodern life.

Whitewall spoke with curator Stamey to learn more about the works on view, her favorite stories, and how the fairy tales we thought we knew turned into all-too-relatable parallels to today’s society.

WHITEWALL: What was the starting point for “Dread & Delight?”

EMILY STAMEY: There was this moment a number of years ago when I went to see a movie, and in the theater lobby, I was struck by the sight of two posters side by side—both promoting upcoming films based on *Snow White*. I couldn’t help but wonder, “Really? Is there actually enough interest?” But, of course, there was.
As soon as I was paying attention, I was overwhelmed by what seemed to be this fairy tale boom—on TV, in fashion, in contemporary fiction, in film… and even in art galleries. I started wondering about the history of fairy tale subjects in the visual arts—were they just a current interest, or had they always been there?

I found that there’s a wealth of fairy tale artwork dating back to the late 1960s and continuing through to the present. However, it’s received relatively limited attention from both fairy tale scholars and art historians. The exhibition and the catalogue that I wrote to go with it are my effort to bring that history to light and to explore the ways that artists have used these stories.

WW: Fairytales are often considered childish—which is not necessarily the case here. What kind of dialogue occurs from showing the darker side of these tales?

ES: I think that association with children, that sort of trivializing [of the stories], is part of why we haven’t focused attention on fairy tale subjects in contemporary art. However, the stories weren’t originally written for children—they were told to adults.

When you go back to their early versions, fairy tales are dark. They’re anchored in the harsh contexts of poverty, famine, dysfunctional families, and abuses of power. Artist

have tapped into that darkness because those are problems that we still face today. They have also, in many instances, tapped into the magical aspects of fairy tales—the incredible transformations that make them hopeful despite all that darkness.

WW: How did you arrive at the seven stories to focus on?

ES: I wanted to be able to compare and contrast the ways in which different artists had approached the same story. So part of the selection was driven by which stories artists themselves had chosen most often, while some were immediately apparent.

For instance, I could have done an entire exhibition of just *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. I also wanted to acknowledge, however, that many artists have studied and explored some of the fairy tales that we don't retell as often today. Of the seven stories featured in the show, five will be readily familiar, but two—*Fitcher's Bird* and *All Fur*—will likely be new to many visitors.

WW: How are some of the artists included using fairytales as parallel to modern day life?

ES: A great example is a piece by MK Guth titled *Ties of Protection and Safekeeping*. With the story *Rapunzel* as a starting point, she thought about why the witch locked Rapunzel away in a tower. From the witch's perspective, that seclusion was meant to protect the girl from the outside world. Guth began making a Rapunzel-esque braid from synthetic blond hair. As she did, she asked participants from across the country to think about what they would keep safe. She then invited them to write their answers on red ribbons, which she added to the ever-growing braid. The completed sculpture is 1800 feet long and holds this incredible record of what a cross-section of Americans hold dear—from "35 mm film" and "little china teacups" to "family," "civil liberties," and "a free press."

Xaviera Simmons "If We Believe In Theory #1" (2009). Chromogenic color print, 40 x 50 inches. © Xaviera Simmons. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

WW: For some artists, like Natalie Frank, a study of fairytales is part of their practice. Are there some more unexpected takes on fairytales by artists that may surprise us?

ES: Yes, the show is a mix of works by artists we often associate with fairy tale themes. Kiki Smith's many re-workings of *Little Red Riding Hood* and Ghada Amer's takes on Disney princesses are two that stand out with Natalie Frank—as well as more surprising examples. There's a great photomontage based on *Cinderella* by John Baldessari, who made a series of fairy tale works for Documenta in 1982. There's also a fantastic recent painting by Kerry James Marshall that references *Rapunzel*—in a really unsettling way that also seems to evoke *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*.

WW: Do you have a favorite fairytale illustrated in the show?

ES: I've become an increasing fan of *Rapunzel*. As a kid the versions I remember seemed to be about a sort of wimpy girl locked away in a tower, but in reading a breadth of versions for the show—especially some of the earliest tellings—I've found instances where she cleverly has the prince bring her skeins of silk to build her own escape ladder or uses her own brute strength to pull him up the side of the tower. In the exhibition, the range of artists' interpretations is also incredibly rich—including black Rapunzels, a transgendered Rapunzel, and a sympathetic witch. The story really opens itself up to different considerations of identity, psychology, and human relationships.