

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Artists Reinterpret Classic Fairy Tales, from *Rapunzel* to *Snow White*

In *Dread & Delight: Fairy Tales in an Anxious World*, 21 artists draw on age-old fantasy stories to explore contemporary social issues.

Amy Funderburk October 22, 2018



MK Guth, “Ties of Protection and Safekeeping” (detail) (2008) Synthetic hair, flannel ribbon, and ink, 1,800 ft., configuration variable. Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, © MK Guth, photo by YoungDoo M. Carey, 2018.

Once upon a time, the original versions of fairy tales, as recorded by the likes of the Grimm brothers, were indeed, well, grim. In an early adaptation of *Cinderella*, the evil stepsisters, in a misguided attempt to fit into that famous glass slipper, cut off parts of their own feet. In more recent, Disney-fied revisions of classic fairy tales, however, such

elements of horror have been censored — and in the process, strong heroines have also been diminished.

The 21 artists featured in *Dread & Delight: Fairy Tales in an Anxious World*, on view at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina, restore complexity to fairy tale narratives. Centuries-old stories take on new relevance in these multimedia works: artists explore contemporary social issues by deconstructing and reassembling imagery from tales like *Rapunzel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. They go beyond dispelling the myth of a helpless princess waiting to be rescued from her tower; racism, sexism, poverty, and LGBTQ inequality are among the cast of shadowy villains depicted here. While happy endings are certainly present, the exhibit reinstates the balance of dread and delight inherent to these classical stories — a duality at the core of why folklore and fairy tales are so enduring.

Setting a dramatic tone for the exhibition is a *Rapunzel*-inspired installation by multidisciplinary artist MK Guth, called “Ties of Protection and Safekeeping,” originally created for the 2008 Whitney Biennial. To make this collaborative piece, Guth asked people to write answers to the question “What is worth protecting?” in black ink on strips of red flannel. Guth then wove these ribbons into a synthetic blonde braid almost 1,800 feet long, which is hung in swags from hooks on the ceiling.

The height of this powerful installation alludes to a tower. Red ribbons rain down from golden tresses like prayers from a Wishing Tree. The fabric is ripped and the edges left raw. Guth chose red, a primal color of blood, anger, and power, rather than maiden white. The participants’ words are handwritten, not cleanly printed like a storybook. Free-hanging phrases such as “honey bees,” “dreams,” and “microbial diversity” can be easily read; interrupted sentences such as “My wife, her fragile...” and “A black girl’s dream/.../nightmare” tease us with the mystery of how each phrase is completed, hidden as they pool onto the floor.

Just as Guth prompted her participants with a question, artist Xaviera Simmons created a dialogue with her subjects while creating her series of three large chromogenic color prints, inspired by *Little Red Riding Hood*. In each photograph, a different child poses in a field of grass before an arc of trees. Each wears the same red cloak and carries a wicker basket. While shooting the photographs, Simmons asked the children to show her “where the wolf was.”

Their responses draw us in as witnesses to their playtime. While the boy pictured in “If We Believe in Theory #2” has his head thrown back dramatically in soft-focused fear, the girl in “If We Believe in Theory #3” points to her imagined wolf with a sense of willpower and a look of determination, well-suited to overcome her challenger.

Like fairy tale illustrator Arthur Rackham did in 1909, Simmons makes each child appear diminutive in the context of their surroundings. However, this is no gnarled Forbidden Forest. Simmons chose to picture the children in manicured grass; the trees could be the backdrop of a suburban housing development. There is no obvious threat here, no literal “wolf” — it is either all psychological, or, darker still, implies more sinister societal dangers lurking.

In “Mother-Load” — an impressively executed, pumpkin-orange carriage sculpted from materials including aluminum foil, hot glue, and crystallized rock sugar — artist Timothy Horn alludes to issues of poverty, both in his use of unsophisticated materials and his inspiration beyond Cinderella. The piece draws from the real-life rags-to-riches tale of Alma Spreckels (1881-1968), a poor laundress who married into a sugar fortune. Despite her great wealth, which was used to found San Francisco’s Legion of Honor museum in 1924, Spreckels was still ostracized by high society. At six feet tall, Spreckels, known as “Big Alma,” would not have fit comfortably inside Horn’s child-sized coach, echoing her exclusion.

“Les Flâneuses,” a mixed-media work by Ghada Amer, juxtaposes the unyielding innocence of Disney’s *Snow White* with sexually charged

imagery. The eye goes immediately to an embroidered cartoon portrait of the familiar Disney character and her animal friends. Visible around her, though, are the outlines of provocative models, sourced from pornography. Like Herrera, Amer rewards the studious viewer as faintly painted faces rise out of the background, like an Old Master's ghostly *pentimenti*.

Works inspired by *Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and the Beast* are notably absent from the exhibition. Visitors are introduced instead to two largely unknown tales — *All Fur* and *Fitcher's Bird*. These stories not only provide enigmatic creative fodder, but also serve as grisly examples of the earliest versions of fairy tales.

Photographer Anna Gaskell explores “All Fur,” a more malevolent take on the classic *Cinderella* story. Her haunting yet elegant chromogenic color prints are touched by an unknown horror that is revealed only by reading the displayed text: there are overtones of incest in this censored fairy tale. In the shadowy, tense interior of Gaskell's “Untitled, #35 (hide),” a seated young woman is clad in a sleeveless white shift, looking through her dark hair. Her outstretched legs are bound by tights to create a yonic triangle.

In the exhibition catalog, curator Emily Stamey defines fairy tales as “wonder tales that originated in oral folk traditions,” and notes that “many of the artists whose work is featured in *Dread & Delight* may not have been familiar with these early iterations, yet their work often resonates deeply with their more troublesome content and tone.” These artists give a voice to the subconscious that insists on reinstating the role such wonder tales originally served.

*Dread & Delight: Fairy Tales in an Anxious World is on view through December 9, 2018, in the Bob and Lissa Shelley McDowell Gallery at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (corner of Spring Garden and Tate Streets, Greensboro, NC). The exhibit then travels to the Falconer Gallery at Grinnell College, Iowa, from February 2 through April 27, 2019, and to the*

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*Akron Art Museum, Ohio, from June 29 through September 22, 2019.  
Organized by the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Dread & Delight is  
curated by Dr. Emily Stamey, their Curator of Exhibitions.*