

The Bachelorette, 2021, by Claire Partington



THE FOOTMAN, 2021, BY CLAIRE PARTINGTON



Left: Reflection in the Looking-Glass River, 2021, by Raqib Shaw

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ARTS
AWAY WITH THE FAIRYTALES

Folk stories have always inspired artists. Victoria Woodcock meets a new generation channelling their gorgeous and sometimes gruesome power

Filled with ethereal fairies and magical animals, evil stepmothers and beastly creatures – not to mention the odd wicked woman living in a gingerbread house – fantastical and frightening fairytales continue to enchant. Children like stories about cannibalism, as Margaret Atwood once noted. Constantly retold and reimagined, they’ve morphed from centuries-old spoken folk tales to the written works of the Brothers Grimm; from Disney to Angela Carter to a new Kengo Kuma-designed museum in Denmark, based around the stories of Hans Christian Andersen.

Artists, too, have long felt the lure of fairytales. While the Victorians went in for dreamlike, slightly erotic portrayals of stories such as *Sleeping Beauty*, more recent reinterpretations come with a feminist twist – such as Little Red Riding Hood

seen through the eyes of Kiki Smith. This spring, fairytales are woven into a series of exhibitions: solo shows by contemporary artists who are building their own intricate and evocative narratives.

“I’ve made work based on Korean fairytales as well as European ones, and they are all similar. There’s nearly always a beautiful young maiden who transforms into an old hag,” says London-based ceramic artist Claire Partington. “It’s nice to have a bit of escapism. They’re also easy to relate to; it’s really a common language across cultures.”

Partington’s current show (on until 19 March) at Winston Wächter gallery in Seattle chimes with the release of a new monograph of her work, *Historical Fiction* (published by Amsterdam gallery KochxBos), which shows how her sculptural practice began as literal translations of fairytales and grew into modern mythologies. Her classical porcelain figurines (from £10,000 to £16,000) feature folkloric elements but also popular-culture references; a golden-haired, golden-winged fairy becomes *The Bachelorette* (2021), sprawled on the floor next to beer bottles, wearing a body-con minidress and flip-flops.

In her latest body of work, a pair of figures reference the Grimm tale *Brother and Sister* (which was adapted from a Russian folk story); they combine blue-and-white Delft-like patterns with elaborate Georgian dress, as well as interchangeable animal and human heads. “It’s a story about transformation and metamorphosis, like,

“Don’t drink the water, you’ll turn into a salmon.” Or, “Don’t touch that, you’ll turn into a fox,” says Partington. “The children have bear heads, but cutesy Care Bear ones.”

More rustic – but equally rich in symbolism – is the ceramic work of Kathy Ruttenberg, which will be shown across Lyles & King’s three New York spaces from 19 March. Whimsical ceramic sculptures, both miniature and monumental, reflect her own woodland setting: a leafy and remote corner of Ulster County in upstate New York, which she shares with a menagerie of animals. “Every day is like a Grimm’s fairytale around here; it’s not fantasy, it’s reality,” she laughs. “The pigs are here in the studio with me at the moment.” As well as four Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs – named Trixie, Sir Francis Bacon, Oola and Boris – there are goats, peacocks, Angora rabbits, cats, dogs and

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Right: Klara Kristalova’s exhibition *Camouflage* at Perrotin Paris in 2017. Ceramics from €10,000 to €40,000



Above: *Horse with a Heart*, 2019, by Klara Kristalova. Above right: *Humanity Needs a Miracle*, ceramic, LED lighting and video display, 2020, by Kathy Ruttenberg, POA, from Lyles & King. Right: *Untitled*, 2020, by Gert and Uwe Tobias, €32,000, from Rodolphe Janssen

horses. “It’s all a big installation,” she says of her setup. “I think it’s both escapism and life manipulation. I’m creating my own film right here. I’m the director.”

Ruttenberg’s visual narratives nearly always centre on a figure: a woman sprouting branches for hair, roosted upon by a flock of birds; a man with the head of a stag nesting up to a tree trunk that has legs – and high heels on. “[Ruttenberg] collapses the hierarchy between humans, animals and the natural world entirely,” says Lyles & King director Isaac Lyles.

In the new show, titled *Sunshine at Midnight*, fairytale motifs take on a modern urgency. In the metre-high *Humanity Needs a Miracle* (2020), a girl stares up at an angelic figure atop a leafless tree, while a fawn and an owl stand sentry; in a smaller piece called *The Sky Fell* (2020), she gazes down at the sun upon charred ground. “Sometimes I just want to wrap myself in a tree,” says Ruttenberg. “Some days I feel like my way of life is insane, but other days it just flows. I feel very connected to the earth. And it’s beautiful.”

Artist Klara Kristalova’s home in rural Norrtälje, Sweden, also strikes a fairytale tone. “Living here, I meet more deer than people,” says the Czech-born artist. “It’s not always fun – it can be super-boring, in fact – but it’s good for my art. I am inside the work all the time.” Her garden has become a makeshift gallery for her rather sinister stoneware sculptures – figures with horse heads or busts with long tangled black hair, their faces speckled with moths. “My work is mainly about life situations and psychology,” she adds, “but I use fairytales on the side. I like their playfulness. In my work, that and humour are very important. I have a very black sense of humour. I’m very inspired by Goya. But also the reviews for scary movies.” She refers to her work as a frozen film still: a scene

where something is about to happen. Something strange and unexpected. Perhaps something horrific. “But you have to imagine it yourself.”

For Kristalova’s next show – at Norrtälje Konsthall in May; moving to Perrotin in New York in September – her interest in transformation has shifted from adolescence to later life. “The role of the older women is very strange and vague,” she says, adding that she’s currently working on a weathervane to be installed in the French port town of Le Havre, which will centre on a sea witch – “a big scary figure” – surrounded by sea creatures.

BUT IT’S NOT ONLY SCULPTURE that is having a mythical moment. The woodcut prints and paintings by Cologne-based twin brothers Gert and Uwe Tobias are “influenced by their Romanian heritage and the area’s local myths, costumes, handicrafts and vernacular motifs,” says gallerist Rodolphe Janssen. They depict flying creatures, figures or floral motifs, floating in a gauzy yet jewel-toned world that is imbued with the atmosphere of fairytales rather than specific stories. “Like fairytales, some of our work exists in a place and time that is indefinite, a parallel world,” says Gert, as they prepare for a solo show of large-format woodcuts at Contemporary Fine Arts Berlin from 4 March. “The irrational, the fantastic, are other things in common.”

Just as colourful and mysterious are the paintings of Indian artist Raqib Shaw, whose work will be shown at the Dries Van Noten project space in LA from 16 February to 26 March. Bringing together stories and symbolism from east and west, Shaw’s opulent, otherworldly landscapes (POA, from Pace Gallery) often hark back to his childhood in Kashmir. Recalling the work of Hieronymus Bosch, the busy scenes are populated with anthropomorphic beings and painstakingly wrought in enamel and metallic paints.

“As a child, I found great comfort in fairy stories,” says Shaw. “I started living in a fantasy world that I created in my head and could transform the most mundane surroundings to a magical land the moment I closed my eyes.” A beloved copy of the *Giant Book of Fairy Tales*, published by Hamlyn, often appears in his paintings, including one in progress for a solo presentation opening on 20 April at Ca’ Pesaro Museum in Venice. “I have always used fairy stories as metaphors to illustrate and record my own experiences,” he explains.

THE SKY FELL, CERAMIC, 2020, BY KATHY RUTTENBERG

