

Fairy Tales,
Monsters,
and the
Genetic Imagination



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*T*his exhibition includes contemporary artworks inspired by fantastic stories in which the boundaries between human and animal are blurred. Whether in mythology, fairy tales, or science fiction, these stories and their wondrous characters are often thought of as children's entertainment. But as the artists in this exhibition demonstrate, while the novelty of invented creatures makes them delightful or frightening, they also have a serious dimension; they can cause us to reconsider our notions of what it means to be human. This takes on a new immediacy today, when scientists are able to conceive new species by mixing and matching existing genetic material. For the artists in this exhibition, the hybrid body—whether imagined or potentially real—expresses hidden desires, ancient fears, the intrigue of transformation, and the wonderful irrationality of life's paradoxes.



Fig. 1. Kate Clark. *Bully*, 2010
Cover: Patricia Piccinini. *The Long Awaited*, 2008

Fairy Tales

Many people feel spiritually, genetically, or emotionally linked to animals, finding in them mirrors of humanity. This connection is especially evident among young children and seen in the popularity of pets, cartoons, and stuffed toys. Children, of course, also love fairy tales, especially those with talking animals or people who take on the characteristics of the animals whose behavior most resembles their own—fearful people become jumpy like rabbits, sly people have fox-like eyes. But fairy tales are not just child’s play. They are sugar-coated life lessons, used to educate children about the ways of the world and to advise them of the consequences of thoughtlessness or bad behavior, which may include being eaten, molested, or carried away. They are also meant to keep children from embracing the wildness in themselves. In Amy Stein’s *Watering Hole* (2005), a bear and young girl stare at each other with what we imagine to be fascination—does each wonder what it would be like to be the other? In the photograph, the dream of such an exchange remains unfulfilled. Yet this powerful, mutual attraction—this empathy between species—sets the tone for other works in the exhibition in which human and animal are joined.

The use of animal characteristics and hybrids as metaphors for human behavior is an inheritance from ancient times, as exemplified in such moralizing classics as *Aesop’s Fables*. Although marginalized by dominant Western beliefs—in both science and religion—that humans are above animals, as early as the seventeenth century the didactic use of what has been termed “the animalizing imagination”¹ was gaining a new foothold in the area of children’s education. In 1697, Charles Perrault adapted traditional stories such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Cinderella,” and “Sleeping Beauty” to provide moral lessons to the impressionable young.² Later, the Brothers Grimm and Walt Disney promoted the idea that desirable traits—honesty, humility, thrift, cleverness—enable a story’s heroes to overcome adversity. But in addition to values that we still consider to be positive, fairy tales have often reinforced beliefs that are now discredited, such as male superiority and the natural goodness of the ruling class.



Fig. 2. Marcel Dzama. *La Verdad Está Muerta / Room Full of Liars*, 2007

This dichotomy is evident in the two tendencies in fairy-tale inspired art in this exhibition. The first involves critical re-evaluations of well-known fairy tales and nursery rhymes that convey overt messages of danger and often hidden reflections of attitudes we today might consider unjust. Marcel Dzama, Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz, Paula Rego, Tom Sachs, and Kiki Smith consider how stories from “Mother Goose” to “Little Red Riding Hood” have embedded seeds of fear in young children as a way of keeping them in line, whether through the image of a farmer’s wife with a huge knife³ or the big, bad wolf, as in Kiki Smith’s *Born* (2002, fig. 3).⁴ Divesting fairy tales of “happily-ever-after” endings, they embrace the notion held by such psychologists as Bruno Bettelheim that this type of story helps individuals cope with unexplained urges from within and dangers from without.⁵ The second tendency in fairy tale re-creation involves the invention of modern day parables that are not derived from past examples, but still function as metaphors for negotiating tricky pathways through life. Inspired narratives by Meghan Boody (fig. 4), Kate Clark (fig. 1), Trenton Doyle Hancock, and Allison Schulnik depict composite creatures as symbols of the complex self, shown as one type of creature in the process of being transformed into another.



Fig. 3. Kiki Smith. *Born*, 2002



Fig. 4. Meghan Body. *Henry's Wives: In a Garden so Greene*, 1998

Monsters

Such transformation leads to marvels, some of which can be characterized as monsters. The word “monster” is rooted in the Latin *moneo*, meaning “I warn” or “I advise.” Monsters have fulfilled complex functions throughout history. The monster as a marker of the unknown goes as far back as Greek mythology, with Cerberus, Cyclops, and Medusa and medieval Europe’s trolls, ogres, werewolves, and witches. With their horrible appearances and violent impulses, they are conceived as punishers of behavior that deviates from parental teachings, religious beliefs, or social norms. Before scientists began to understand genetics, people born with physical anomalies were often thought of as being monsters, or at least bearers of physical evidence of sinfulness. Throughout history, xenophobic cultures have often painted “the outsider” as corrupting, evil, and monstrous, as seen in offensive caricatures of gypsies, Jews, Blacks, or any other group that a fearful people might find it useful to cohere against.

The monster as an expression of both personal and societal darkness is pronounced in Francisco de Goya’s famous etching, *The sleep of reason produces monsters* (1799), which shows demons in the form of bats and owls ominously hovering over a sleeping man. This was created at the height of the Enlightenment, when irrationality and superstition were understood to be forces holding back humanity. Yinka Shonibare’s own version, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America)* (2008, fig.5), reflects the monstrosities unleashed under the aegis of the Enlightenment in Goya’s own time and after: racism, slavery, colonialism, economic exploitation, and other blights of Western history.

Other contemporary artists also use monsters to symbolize society’s darker impulses. Inka Essenhigh’s *Brush with Death* (2004) shows the war in Iraq as a snarling demon seeking to ensnare the artist’s sprite-like husband, a painter who in real life embedded himself with troops in order to authentically portray their experiences. Cindy Sherman concerns herself with historical and cultural representations that have been used to control or repress women. Her work in this exhibition evokes a witch,



Fig. 5. Yinka Shonibare, MBE. *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America)*, 2008

whose vile features offer gross parodies of sexual and other appetites. Such archetypes of the “monstrous feminine” are widely understood in feminist theory as fear-mongering mechanisms for maintaining patriarchal rule in Western culture, past and present.

But the invention of monsters is not only driven by the desire to provoke fear of the unknown that lurks outside the walls; monsters also may represent aspects of the inner life—irrational thoughts, pathologies, sexual conflicts—that are repressed by the iron hand of reason. David Altmejd’s *Sans titre. L’idée dure de l’homme lui sort par la tête* (2007, fig. 6) reminds us of the Surrealist’s desire to reveal humanity’s primal or animal essences as a way of exposing contradictions in the mind and in society, while proposing a completeness that can only be attained by recognizing the power of the irrational. Clad in a business suit, shirt, and tie, this rooster-headed figure glares out with the calculating eye of a predator measuring the distance to his prey. But the bird is less an expression of evil than a hallucination of nature’s amorality projected from within the depths of man: in the business of maintaining a pecking order, men are not so different from birds. In this gaudy creature, the boundaries between reason and instinct dissolve.

Altmejd’s composite being evokes the story of *Frankenstein*, the classic cautionary tale about the unpredictable consequence of collaging body parts. If a monster like the one composed by Dr. Frankenstein is a one-off, all we need do is destroy it. But we often see and read science fiction in which monsters have the capacity to breed, spelling possible doom for humanity. Frankenstein’s monster asks the doctor to make for him a mate. Afraid of the horrors he might unleash if the two managed to procreate, Frankenstein refuses, perhaps saving humanity. This Pandora’s-box theme taps into our greatest fears about unfettered scientific experimentation. If we can create new life-forms, can we also keep them from spreading? Such films as *Jurassic Park* and *Godzilla* portray monsters run amok as the ill-considered consequences of technology, which become threats to human survival in part because of their ability to reproduce. As in the story of *Godzilla*, Ashley Bickerton’s human-headed monster can be seen as an intelligent mutation, which perhaps arose as a consequence of such

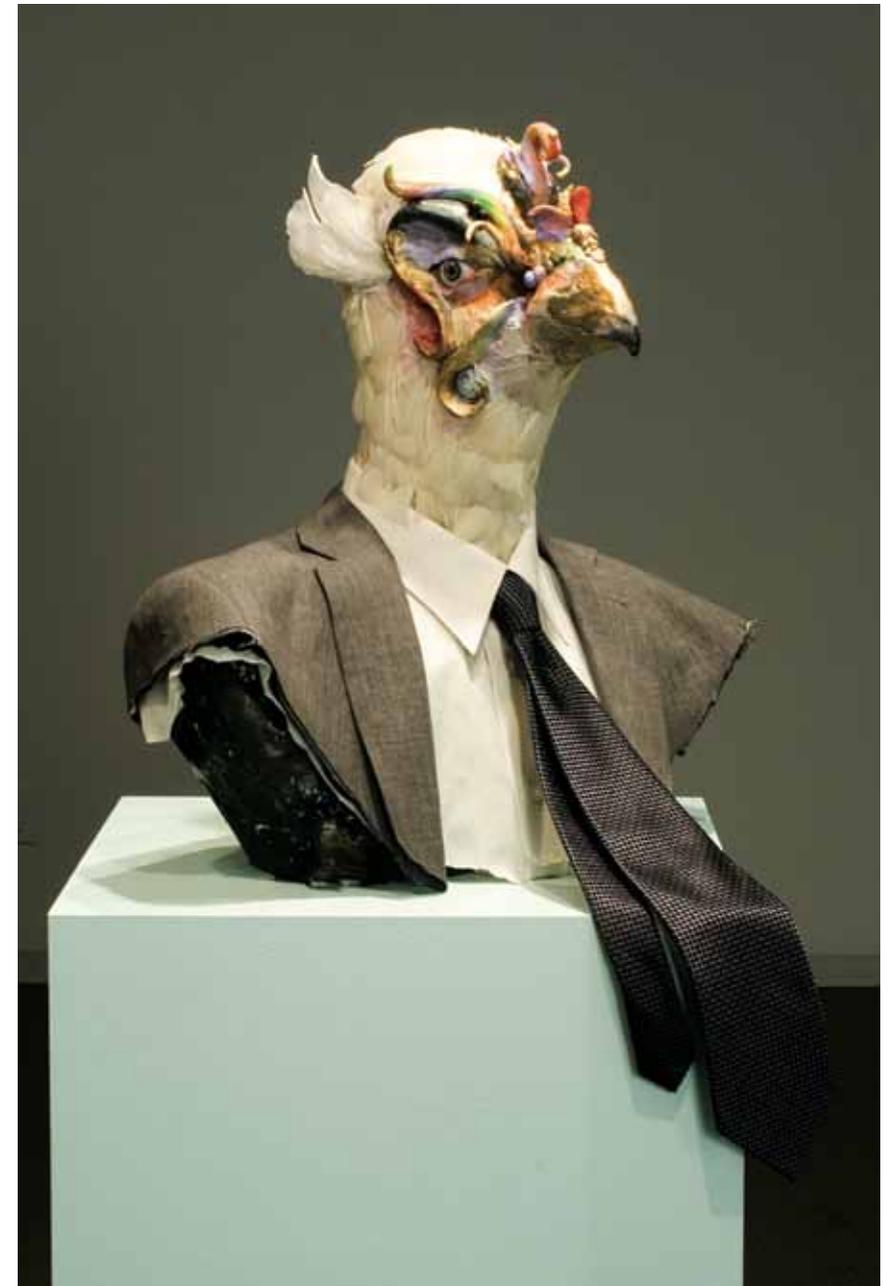


Fig. 6. David Altmejd. *Sans titre. L’idée dure de l’homme lui sort par la tête* (Untitled. *Man’s Hard Idea Comes Out of His Head*), 2007

human folly as radiation poisoning or the dumping of chemical waste. Not knowing the circumstances of this creature's origins, how can we be sure that there are not more, many more? How can we know what it wants, and how can we prevent its spread? All we do know is that it is frightening and that it is our offspring and kin, mirror and extender of our own dangerous tendencies.

The Genetic Imagination

While monster imagery has traditionally conveyed humanity's darkest aspects, today many artists reconfigure the notion of monstrosity to express empathy and identification with the outsider. They sometimes challenge the ancient linkage of ugliness with evil, as Charlie White does in *Getting Lindsay Linton* (2001, fig. 7), from a series of photographs showing a misshaped neurotic named Joshua trying to navigate his way through contemporary relationships. This photograph shows the forlorn little misfit being forced to witness a group of young men attacking a pretty young woman by pouring milk over her head, a thinly veiled allusion to the mob mentality behind gang rape. Here, we see clearly that monstrosity is a measure of behavior, not appearance.

Other artists consider the wondrous possibilities opened up by science's capacity to fashion chimeras, a word derived from a hybrid monster in Greek mythology that had the body of a goat, head of a lion, and tail of a serpent, but which today refers to biologically engineered organisms. Research into cloning, stem cells, intelligent prostheses, the transplantation of animal organs and cells into humans, and varying degrees of genetic modifications have made the bodily metamorphosis that was once only imagined into a present and future reality.

Suzanne Anker and Aziz + Cucher consider potential directions for human life in its most elemental aspect. Named for a nineteenth-century evolutionary parable called "Water Babies," Anker's photographs show



Fig. 7. Charlie White. *Getting Lindsay Linton*, 2001

fetuses in various stages of development. For her, these roughly formed specimens represent life as a cycle from birth to death that always holds the possibility of transformation into new forms. Aziz + Cucher's *Chimera* series shows abstracted figures sheathed in human skin and hair, but with no other feature that might identify them as human; no sexual characteristics, faces, arms, or legs. These mammalian amoeboids suggest the exciting potential of raw, organic matter that has been cultured in the bio-lab, which might become anything we can imagine.

Images of mutated or hybrid beings by Janaina Tschäpe and Saya Woolfalk also offer optimistic alternatives to natural biology as a force shaping what life may yet become. Tschäpe's Polaroids show wonderful new species that resemble nineteenth-century fairy pictures, which portrayed the supernatural little creatures as mergers of human and insect. Inspired by the abundant flora and fauna of the Brazilian rain forest, Woolfalk has created an entire world of new life-forms that are governed by a radically inverted set of natural laws (see fig. 8).

A more cautionary note is struck by Patricia Piccinini, who warns not of a Pandora's Box of unleashed genetic horrors, but of our own unpreparedness in dealing ethically and humanely with the results of our scientific adventurism. In works such as *The Long Awaited* (2008, cover), Piccinini places play and nurture over fear and rejection, suggesting that our own future creations might ask the same questions that haunt Frankenstein's monster: Why was I made? Who will love me? What is my destiny?

These mysteries, of course, mimic our own. We can only wonder and speculate, or perhaps ask God for answers and receive silence; in the future, how will we answer our own creations as they move from fiction into reality?

Mark W. Scala, *chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts*

Notes:

1. A term used by Gaston Bachelard in *Lautréamont* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1986), p. 27, and discussed by Alan Bleakley in *The Animalizing Imagination* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000).
2. See Charles Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697).
3. While scholarship about its origins remains inconclusive, it has been suggested that "Three Blind Mice" is a commentary on England's Mary I, "Bloody Mary," who had three noblemen executed for plotting against her.
4. Traditionally understood as a cautionary tale about predatory men and young girls.
5. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Random House, 1975; repr., New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 31.

Illustrations:

Cover: Patricia Piccinini. *The Long Awaited*, 2008. Silicone, fiberglass, human hair, leather, plywood, and fabric, 59 7/8 x 31 1/2 x 36 1/4 in. Collection of Penny Clive. Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Graham Baring: Fig. 1. Kate Clark. *Bully*, 2010. White wolf hide, clay, thread, pins, foam, rubber eyes, wood, and paint, 80 x 42 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist: Fig. 2. Marcel Dzama. *La Verdad Está Muerta / Room Full of Liars*, 2007. Diorama of compressed wood, glazed ceramic sculptures, metal, and fabric, 64 1/2 x 65 3/4 x 46 in. Edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York: Fig. 3. Kiki Smith. *Born*, 2002. Lithograph, 68 1/8 x 56 1/8 in. Museum of Modern Art © Kiki Smith / Universal Limited Art Editions, 2002. Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY: Fig. 4. Meghan Boody. *Henry's Wives: In a Garden So Greene*, 1998. Cibachrome, 53 x 56 in. Edition of 12. Private Collection, New York. Image courtesy Rick Webster Fine Art: Fig. 5. Yinka Shonibare. *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America)*, 2008. C-print mounted on aluminum, 72 x 49 1/2 in. Edition 3 of 5. Collection of James P. Gray, II: Fig. 6. David Altmejd. *Sans titre. L'idée dure de l'homme lui sort par la tête*, 2007. Foam, resin, feathers, cloth, paint, and glass eyes, 27 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 19 in. Collection of Louise Déry. © David Altmejd, Courtesy Galerie de l'UQAM, Montréal, and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photography by Denis Farley: Fig. 7. Charlie White. *Getting Lindsay Linton*, 2001. Photograph, 36 x 60 in. Collection of the Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida. © Charlie White: Fig. 8. Saya Woolfalk. *No Placean Self (female/male)* (detail of *No Place*), 2008. Mixed media, 82 x 20 x 18 in. Collection of Barbara Shuster. Courtesy of Saya Woolfalk

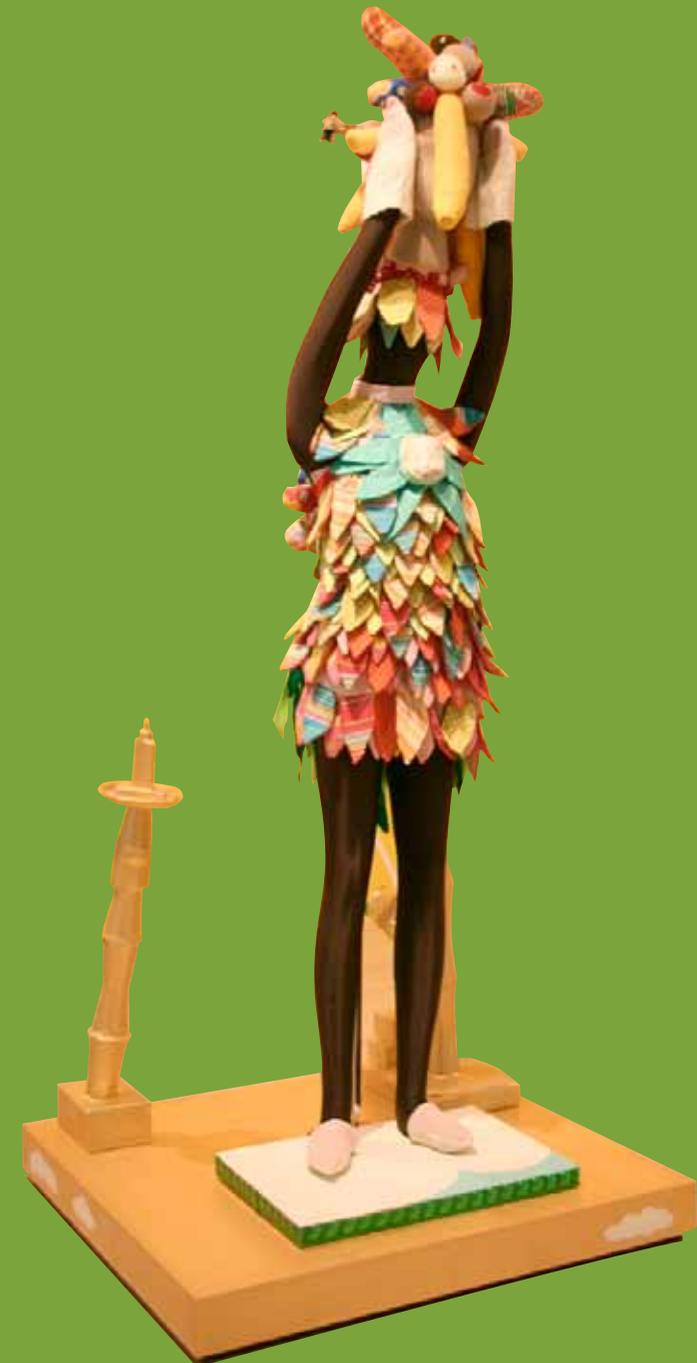


Fig. 8. Saya Woolfalk. *No Placean Self (female/male)* (detail of *No Place*), 2008

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