Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design

By Bettie Judish

Falling Tales covers a discrete episode in the world of design that has seen function superseded by concept, and which is broadly associated with the influence of Design Academy Eindhoven under its former director Li Edelkoort. It is to no great surprise that Guzel Williams, in his valedictory show for the V&A, presents the familiar contractness, rigor and flattening with depth of the Eindhoven tendency, well-exposed in Continental exhibitions and fairs over the last decade, in a fresh and captivating light. Superstitions, the recent edition of the Hawai'i Triennial, featured a similar cast of designers, but Telling Tales is a leaner, more muscular selection of design artifacts, united under a clearer vision.

Divided among three highly stylized thematic sections, the works seem much the stronger for having to fight for attention against the operatic scenography. William's groups the 50 works on show around these storytelling traditions. The Folktale finds us in the primitive forests of northern Europe, furnished with omens, slightly infamously works by Jorgen Bay, Toivo Eigert and Marissen Baas. The printed novel brings the next section into a baronial drawing room in which Jorine Verhoeven's marcelled Margaret Cinderella Table (2005) stands metamorphic against Seheran Birajder's eschatological Frankenstein. The amorous, introspective stories of the age of psychoanalysis recall a trip through the nocturnal wings of a reptile house, the scaly monsters replaced by the slightly less alarming sight of Wieland Scamozzi's statue in the shape of a pug's skull and Kelly McCalman's stuffy fox garnished with cast gold nuggets.

Narratives are what we use to make sense of the world – the human brain is constantly in search of patterns, both on aesthetic and rational levels. Pattern, as Studio Job have pointed out in the past, is also one of the things that separates artists from designers as something is repeated, it becomes formal. Few of the designers here (the most notable exceptions being Birajder and Mathijs van Bommel) have embraced design as a narrative level. As fugitives from mass production they are also fugitives from the controlled meaning that comes with domestic functionality.

Limited editions are not always thin for reasons of conceptual seductiveness; some objects are simply bloody difficult to make. In letting the pieces speak for themselves, Williams does slip rather lightly over the technical hurdles of this storybook. Tomás Gustafsson Lithography's Honeycomb Vase (2007) involved the designer collaborating with five bees, and few of the other works – whether Julia Lohmann's The Lasting Void (2007), cast from a girl's body cavity, or the detailed marquetry of Studio Job's Perished Bench (2006) – are much less insidious in their construction. For those still unconvinced by the "upstart" notion of design art, rarely few would resist the appeal of a good utanion myth.

See more reviews, including illustrations, plus the entire December issue of ArtReview magazine, free on your screen, here.

Follow – E-mail me when people reply

http://www.artin.com