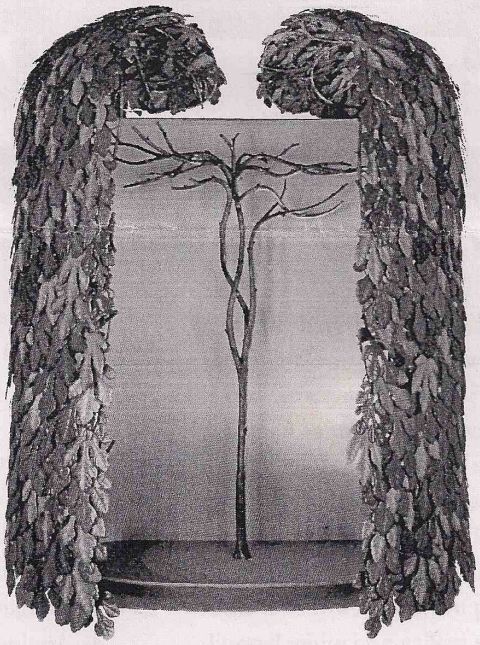
Reviews

Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design

V&A, 14th July—18th October 2009

As a professional storyteller in my other life, I knew I had to visit the V&A's summer show, Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design. The exhibition is a showcase of furniture which has storytelling at its core. Of course, all objects have a story to tell, and curators have long been drawing stories out from objects and offering them to the public. The young designers featured in Telling Tales are consciously setting out to challenge our perceptions through use of imagery familiar to us both in western European culture and throughout the world: 'fairy tales, conventions of status display or anxieties about morality'. But the narratives in the show do not fit with the fairy tales of our childhood: they are ironic, knowing and sceptical, and they challenge the viewer to rethink not only furniture and its place in our lives, but also the narratives we spin to construct our cultures.



The Fig Leaf wardrobe, 2008, designed by Tord Boontje © Meta

The objects displayed tread a fine line between art, design and functionality. Although most of the objects are notionally functional – they are chairs, wardrobes, cushions – the importance of that functionality is superseded by the concept of the design. The exhibition is also a celebration of Design Art, and sets out to explore how Design Art – concept led, self-initiated, often unique – fits into either the art or the craft world. Many of the designers are Dutch, which provokes the question of why such extreme craft is coming out of the Netherlands. The British pieces seem conservative in comparison, still fitting in with the humorous and well crafted tropes of British 20th century design.

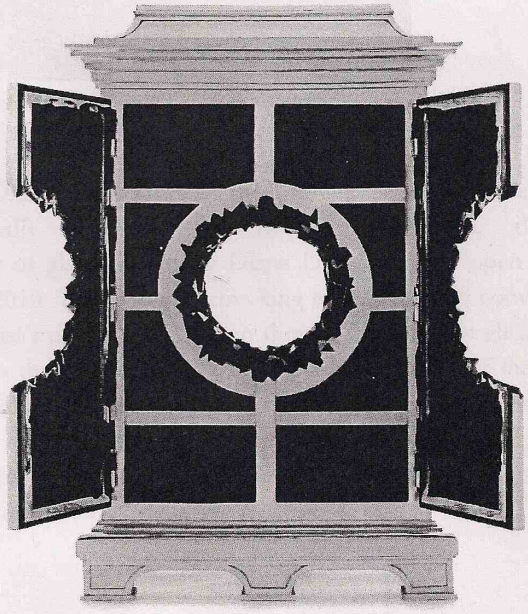
Telling Tales is more than just an exhibition: it is a sensory overload experience. It sets out to overwhelm the senses right from the very beginning, and to induce a sense of awe and wonder in the visitor. Music, lighting and spatial effects are used to envelop and unbalance. You enter the gallery through a series of cut out screens and to birdsong, representing the Forest Glade, the first section of the exhibition, with a small video installation of natural forms and candlelight to lure you in. But the stage set almost overwhelms not only the visitor, but also the exhibits.

The exhibits range from the powerful – Tord Boontje's Fig Leaf wardrobe, an ironic take on our need to clothe our nakedness – to the almost creepy – Tomás Gabzdil Libertin's Honeycomb Vase made by the bees themselves. Boontje's contrasting Princess and Witch chairs explore our perceptions of

femininity with the frothy bridal Princess chair and the threatening, black and scaly Witch chair, with its sensual red interior.

We are bombarded with quotes from fairy tales, particularly focusing on Little Red Riding Hood, a tale long ago deconstructed to show the sexual metaphors within. In the exhibition handout, a newspaper-like booklet, the whole tale, reprinted from Grimm, is published in full along with an illustration by a maker not featured in the show, Barnaby Barford.

The second section literally made me stop in my tracks. The Enchanted Castle has two parts, the first a mirrored fest of 'marvellous and fantastical objects', the second more sober, but also heavily inspired by the Baroque. The music changes, becomes more edgy. We have moved away from the strange but peaceful beginnings of the story, past the threshold guardian and we have stepped into the enemy's terrain. Studio Job's Robber Baron series seems to sum this up perfectly – based on 19th century industrialists who amassed and spent huge fortunes, the gaudy, gilded and exploded bronze cabinets are violent pieces, and very knowing. As with most of the objects, it is impossible to imagine them in a domestic setting.



Robber Baron cabinet, 2006, Studio Job © Studio Job, Photo: R. Kot, Brussels

It seems different on the other side of the castle. British designers like Julian Mayor and Gareth Neal, whose respective computer designed chair and spare cut away cabinet seem restrained and almost out of place amongst the excess. Maarten Baas's mirror at first glance is an unexceptional 18th century style mirror, but when you look closer, you are unsettled again, as the wooden frame is charred and black. Scales are wrong – radiators huge, doll's house carpets expanded up to human size, teapots and skyscrapers teeter together in giant tulip vases. The visitor marvels, but comes away with a sense of disquiet.

But worse is to come. We reach the belly of the whale, the point where we fear the hero or heroine will be lost. Lighting is low, the walls are black and perspectives all wrong with theatrical trick corridors as if we were at a funfair. Drawing heavily on psychoanalysis and the terrors of the subconscious, the last section, Heaven and Hell, looks at mortality and designers who have produced work that responds to our troubled times.

'Taxidermy seeks to preserve life by celebrating death,' says Kelly McCallum, and her piece, 'Do you hear what I hear?' a stuffed fox with gold maggots spilling out of its ears is a traditional *momento mori*, and packs as powerful a punch as a medieval cadaver tomb with toads gnawing at the corpse. A red urethane rug (not very comfortable, like most of the objects!) called The Lovers depicts the amount of blood two people hold in their bodies. A child visiting at

Perished Bench, 2006, Studio Job © Studio Job

the same time as me asked the man with her whether it was real blood. She sounded worried. It was worrying. Even if Studio Job's Perished bench with its animal skeleton decoration seems more of a celebration of life than death, the presentation of the objects left me feeling unsettled – and there was certainly plenty of nervous laughter in the room.

But where was the return? The most important thing in a fairy tale is the ending – the return of the hero or heroine transformed by their experiences to a new, expanded, normality. We leave the exhibition in the midst of darkness and death, and although there is an attempt in some of the material to be upbeat – a cushion of an exploding atom bomb that encourages us to literally embrace our fears – when you are thrust, blinking, out into the bright lights and laughter of the V&A's main hall, you feel unprepared to greet reality. Where, in Heaven and Hell, you could ask, was Heaven?

So, does the exhibition work? The curator, Gareth Williams, wishes to explore Design Art and its narratives, whether it is 'a true movement or a commercial construct driven by the auction houses and galleries.' The visitor feels as if they have been on a journey, and they have been thrilled and chilled along the way through clever use of sounds, lights and mirrors. But is it all a fairground sham? *Is* it all a gallery construct designed to promote these gallery pieces? At times the spectacle of the stage sets takes over from the objects. Is this letting us see whether these pieces are truly art or good design? I'm not sure. There is some very fine craftsmanship, and some exciting ideas on show, but if you put all these pieces in a traditional white box gallery space, would they hold their own? Perhaps, as Williams says, it is too early to tell yet if it is a movement. But it was thought-provoking and I thoroughly enjoyed the exhibition experience. I came away from it with more questions than when I went in – but maybe that is a good thing, after all, maybe the best return of all is the start of a new journey?

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