

ONCE UPON A TIME... ARTISTS & STORYTELLING

Curated by the MA Curating Students from The Courtauld Institute of Art
Embankment Galleries, Somerset House, Strand, London
25 June to 26 July 2009

Once Upon a Time... Artists & Storytelling brings together artworks spanning some 150 years and a wide range of media to examine artists' ongoing exploration of the potential and limitations of storytelling in art. Featuring over 100 works including eight series of prints, drawings and watercolours from The Courtauld Gallery and five works from the Arts Council Collection by such artists as Walter Crane, Oskar Kokoschka, Paul Gauguin, Paula Rego, Gillian Wearing and Tracey Emin, the exhibition argues that the tradition of storytelling – visual as well as oral – is as relevant today as ever. This exhibition has been curated by students on The Courtauld Institute of Art's MA programme *Curating the Art Museum*.

Once Upon a Time... provides fascinating juxtapositions of historical and contemporary works, and examines the ways in which artists use storytelling to address topics such as truth, memory, loss of innocence, and sexual awakening. The exhibition is divided into two main themes: artists illustrating existing texts, and artists constructing their own personal narratives.

The exhibition begins with Fiona Banner's hypnotic audio work *Trance* (1997). In a continuous monologue, the artist incoherently recounts scene-by-scene fragments of Vietnam War films, formerly recorded in her book *The Nam*.

Visitors will then encounter a selection of works, which attempt to translate or reinterpret an existing text. Renowned Victorian artists Walter Crane, George Roland Halkett and George Cruikshank depict scenes from fairytales. Although these images were intended for children, the themes explored in these often sinister and disturbing tales are anything but innocent. Arthur Boyd Houghton's unsettling illustrations of nineteenth-century poems on childhood shift from a child to an adult audience. Both prints and poems find a counterpart a century later in the *Nursery Rhymes* series (1989) by the British artist Paula Rego, who describes her inspiration as coming from, in part "...nursery rhymes, children's games and songs, nightmares, desires, terrors".

The following section focuses on accounts of personal stories, either invented or experienced by the artist. Oskar Kokoschka's *The Dreaming Youths* (1907-17) and Paul Gauguin's *Noa Noa* series (1894-5) mythologise episodes in the artists' lives. Highly controversial at the time of publication, they deal with the awkwardness and profundity of sexual desire – Kokoschka in references to his first love, Lilith, and Gauguin in the exotic sensuality of the Tahitian women he portrays. Almost a century later, Gillian Wearing invites other people to mythologise their personal stories in her work *Confess all on video. Don't worry you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian...* (1994). Strangers, made anonymous by grotesque masks, confess their deepest, darkest secrets. Olivia Plender's *The Masterpiece, Issue 2 – Birth of a Genius* (2004) takes the form of both a comic book and a collection of drawings, and uses a fictional narrative to satirise the persona of the bohemian artist.

In the final space, Tracey Emin's video piece *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995) is a poignant and ultimately exhilarating autobiographical work which addresses many of the exhibition's key themes.

Once Upon a Time... Artists & Storytelling offers an exciting opportunity to engage with unique juxtapositions of rarely exhibited historic and contemporary works of art.

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