

Fig. 1 'Gnomes', *The Land of Froud* (1977).
Credit: Brian Froud.



A singular vision: Brian Froud's faerie world

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For Brian Froud (b. 1947) faeries really do exist, but they do not reside at the bottom of his garden; they have always lived in his imagination. In truth his imagination is fired by Dartmoor; he and his wife, model-maker Wendy Froud, have lived in the picturesque village of Chagford since the 1970s. Dartmoor exudes mystery; its nooks and crannies may be home to all manner of creatures. As we cross the windswept hills, Froud's mischievous goblins or beautiful fairies may be observing us from the roots of a tree or a rocky outcrop. Like her father, Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, Cheryl Henson has also been seduced by Froud's creations: 'deep in a primeval forest, I too would like to be a Froud Fairy'.¹

Froud's *World of Faerie* is close at hand, firmly linked to the natural world; he reveals the unseen, 'a more expansive view of our own world, revealing places, people and experiences we might otherwise perceive'.² Hence Froud resists the label of 'fantasy artist', claiming:

My art is a direct expression of how the world is to me. I imagine then the world is a living entity with a soul of profound depth and beauty. Faeries are an expression of aspects of this soul. They are sparks of the inner spiritual light of the world. A sketchbook for me is an exploration and a record of my search to touch and experience this light.³

While the artist who draws from life uses a sketchbook to record what he observes, Froud attempts to delineate what cannot be seen directly. To see faeries we have to believe in them; Froud has tutored us in *How to See Faeries* (2011) for over thirty years. His vision inspired the films 'The Dark Crystal' (1982) and 'Labyrinth' (1986), on which he worked as the conceptual designer in conjunction with Jim Henson's Creature Shop. He collaborated with Terry Jones, a screenwriter on 'Labyrinth', publishing *The Goblins of Labyrinth* (1986, reissued in abridged form as *The Goblin Companion: A Field Guide to Goblins*, 1996). A further collaboration resulted in the Lady Cottington series, initiated with *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book* (1994). *The Runes of Elfland* (2003) was in partnership with Ari Berk, Professor of Myth and Folklore, Central Michigan University. Recent publications include *The Heart of*

Faerie Oracle, authored by his wife, and *How To See Faeries* with *New York Times* best-selling author John Matthews. Froud is worthy to take his place in the long lineage of artists who have imagined faerie: Henry Fuseli, Richard Dadd, George Cruikshank, Daniel Maclise, Richard 'Dickey' Doyle, John Anster Fitzgerald, Joseph Noel Paton, Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac. Clearly Froud has drawn on these illustrious precursors but he has forged his own inimitable style. Heidi Leigh, curator of Animazing Gallery, claims Froud is 'the most important faerie artist of our time'.⁴

Froud, in partnership with Alan Lee (b. 1947), is said to have rekindled the interest in faerie and fantasy art with *Faeries* (1978). As in any collaboration, compromise was a necessity: 'We traded ... Alan would give me a nasty goblin if I'd sacrifice a noseless brownie. We tried to fix it so each of us would have his share of nasty and pretty ones. The nasty ones, of course, are always much more fun.'⁵ The partners hold each other in mutual respect: Froud considers Lee 'a magnificent watercolourist, a master of his medium', while Lee deems Froud 'superb at highly detailed work and bursting with vision and vitality'. In personality and style they balanced each other, with Lee the introvert and Froud the extravert: 'It makes a nice mix,' declared Lee. 'I quieten him down; he livens me up.'⁶ Together they redefined the traditional view of faeries as sweet and childlike, drawing on Victorian masters, notably Doyle, Rackham and Charles and Heath Robinson. As Heidi Leigh observes, in Froud's vision sensual beauty collides with the ugly and grotesque, while the serene jostles with the comedic. Froud embraces the paradox of faerie, which can be both halcyon and disquieting, as seen in *Good Faeries, Bad Faeries* (1998): 'he reveals the world of Faeries as he sees it, with no tempering filter or predilection for the safe and secure.'⁷ As Froud warns, 'It is wise to remember that faeries are not only good'.⁸

Faeries appeared at a judicious moment: late 1970s pop culture saw a revival of interest in the Pre-Raphaelites and Art Nouveau. Student walls were covered with posters by Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939) and Aubrey Beardsley (1872-98). With his style synthesising Pre-Raphaelitism, notably the paintings of Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), and the Golden Age of illustration, exemplified by Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), Froud is both a product and shaping influence of the 'flower-power' era.

Froud's faeries appear to spring fully formed in *The Land of Froud* (1977; Fig. 1), but they were a product of his youth and education. Born in Winchester, Hampshire, his family moved to Kent where he attended Maidstone College of Art. He began in the painting school but gravitated to graphic design, as this offered wider scope for his imagination:

There is a mystery in how a simple line can be so expressive of emotional intent. Just pencil and paper, a colour wash – all pretensions of grandeur are set aside. This can have a directness and honesty that can be more elusive in a more elaborate confection of paint, canvas and fancy frame. The outside form must reveal the inner truth.⁹

Froud is a superb draughtsman, his preference for the bounding line no doubt inspired by Beardsley and Rackham, who transformed the graphic arts at the turn of the 20th century. Both combined beauty with the grotesque and laced their images with humorous asides. Froud openly acknowledges his debt to Rackham:

There are many pioneers of Faerie exploration – storytellers, playwrights, writers, painters, illustrators – but the most influential for me was Arthur Rackham ... Rackham's drawings of trees with faces reminded me of how I felt when I was young – that there was an inner life to nature and that everything had its own intense personality ... Most of all, it was his juxtaposition of the grotesque and the beautiful that intrigued me. But it was his sinewy, organic line, which spoke of the certainty that humankind and nature were seamlessly bonded, that really inspired me. Thank you, Mr Rackham, for reminding me that I live in a natural world inhabited by a personified consciousness; that I live in a world of Faerie.¹⁰

'Personified consciousness' enables Froud to both animate and imbue nature with symbolic resonance; he sees the spirit that animates trees and plants. He draws on mythology and folklore to authenticate his vision. Both Froud and Lee have turned to Rackham, whose trees are distinctly anthropomorphised, drawing on the long tradition of the Dryad; when his trees don round spectacles, as seen on the frontispiece to Grimm's *Little Brother and Little Sister* (1917), they seem to resemble Rackham himself! Perhaps these spectacles allude to venerable age and wisdom; in *Somebody's Book*, an illustration for 'The Windmill' (1923), a bespectacled tree leans over the reader as if following the text.¹¹ Rackham's trees can be seen at their best in 'The Trees and the Axe' from Aesop's *Fables* (1912); they are indebted to Burne-Jones' 'Briar Rose' series (1885-90, Buscot Park), most notably the first in the sequence, 'The Briar Wood'.¹² Laurence Housman's (1865-1959) edition of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1893) contributed to the evolution of the 'spooky' tree, whose branches resemble limbs. While Lee conjured the Ents for *Lord of the Rings*, Froud creates richly wooded forests teeming with both beautiful and bizarre creatures (Fig. 2).

These hidden 'Faces in the Forest' are ever close, yet tantalisingly beyond reach. Froud believes faeries speak the ancient language of the land; to hear and interpret what they say inspires his images: 'What do the sinuous shapes of branch and trunk have to tell me? And the river's song? Why do I feel this way about the moss-softened rocks?'¹³ In the woods the veil between our world and Faerie becomes thin, allowing a glimpse across the threshold or behind the mask.

An intrinsic facet of the wild woods, faeries exist on the boundary of our world; Rackham's faeries also live beneath the trees, among their roots, as seen in *Faerie Folk*, the

Fig. 2



Fig. 2 'The Fairy Queen's Messenger', *World of Faerie* (2007). Credit: Brian Froud.
Fig. 3 'Indi, the Indecision Faery', *Bad Faeries* (1998). Credit: Brian Froud.
Fig. 4 'The Gloominous Doom', *Bad Faeries* (1998). Credit: Brian Froud.
Fig. 5 'A Damp Faery', *Lady Cottington's Fairy Album* (2002). Credit: Brian Froud.
Fig. 6 'Flying Faery'. Credit: Wendy Froud.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

frontispiece of *Imagina* (1914) by Julia Ellsworth Ford, and *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906); even from an urban park they observe us unseen. Under the auspices of George Cruikshank and Charles Robinson, goblins developed as a genre in their own right: drawing on the Brothers Grimm, Cruikshank's *Grimm's Goblins* appeared in 1876, while Robinson's *Book of Goblins, a collection of folk-lore and fairy tales* was published in 1934. In these works goblins and humans often interact; they are co-existent inhabitants of 'long ago, and far away'. Froud's creatures exist in a world of their own, in the 'Otherworld of Faery'.¹⁴ This is not the Land of Once Upon a Time; Froud's 'real' faerie-land is imbued with Power, 'magical power, incomprehensible to humans, and hence, inimical'; faeries are 'alien creatures with values and ethics far removed from mankind'.¹⁵ We are lured into this world by its mystery and strange beauty but we must enter with caution. Faeries do not welcome unbidden intrusions; the dangers are real.

Moreover, faeries envy mortals and all too often covet our belongings and even our children. Human babies are needed to inject fresh blood into the race; in 'Labyrinth' (1986) Sarah accidentally wishes her baby half-brother, Toby, away to the Goblin King Jareth; if Sarah does not complete Jareth's Labyrinth in thirteen hours she will lose him to the Goblin King. With the role of Jareth played by David Bowie, and Toby actually the Froud's own son, 'Labyrinth' has achieved cult status.

Froud sets out to define, through line and colour, the Otherworld of Faery, a 'world of dark enchantments, of captivating beauty, of enormous ugliness, of callous superficiality, of humour, mischief, joy and inspiration'.¹⁶ Capturing the nature of faerie is a difficult task, as Froud admits, as 'they are not normally visible and are elusive, mutable, delight in being "tricksy" and will not sit for long'.¹⁷ Froud attempts to 'classify' the Denizens of Faerie by drawing on legends, myths, folklore and poems. Apparently there are good and bad faeries, although good and bad coexist in all faerie creatures. Utilising the elements, faeries are divided into earth (gnomes, brownies, and kobolds), water (nixies, lamias and undines), fire (salamanders, daemons, and fire drakes) and air (sylphs, peries, and all winged faeries).¹⁸ But in addition to traditional faeries, taken from Anglo-Saxon, Welsh and Irish folklore, Froud creates his own classifications that appeal to modern sensibilities as well as children. The Bad Hair Day Faery tangles our hair during the night. The Foot Fungus Faery causes athlete's foot or ringworm, 'a fungal faery ring, personalised in miniature'.¹⁹ Another exasperating faery is the Pen Stealer, while the Fee Lion, who embodies a 'slight accusation', mimics a cat, the witch's favourite familiar, and is the source of faint scratching in the early hours or mysterious midnight mewings. Traditionally he is heard inside cupboards and bedrooms – always on the other side of doors; he is to blame when keys are locked in a car! The Fee Lion is the accusing voice in your head, as you fall asleep, compelling you to do all those little chores – feed the cat, clean the oven or write a thank-you note. These are clearly contemporary *lares*, the domestic spirits beloved of the Romans, who have adapted to our ways. Other Froud creations reflect modern-day angst: Indi, the Indecision Faery, is a

troublesome creature who can pop up anywhere; he's the one who won't let you make up your mind, forever weighing up the pros and cons (Fig. 3). We have all encountered The Gloominous Doom, who despairs and moans 'I can't do it'; he holds the 'globe of clear thinking' unexamined behind him. The globe contains all his lost hopes, turned heavy with his pessimism. 'It's too late now', he sighs wearily, 'It's all behind me now.'²⁰ (Fig. 4)

The Lady Cottington series humorously exploits the Cottingley Fairies by alleging that fairies can be pressed like flowers, as well as captured in photographs.²¹ The Cottingley Fairies caused a sensation in 1917; Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths claimed not only to have seen fairies but also to have photographed them. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, still mourning the death of his son in the Great War and in the grip of spiritualism, believed them. Convinced by the photographs, Doyle published *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922). In 1981 Elsie and Frances admitted to faking all but one of the photographs but insisted they really had seen fairies.²²

Rather than utilising photography, Lady Angelica Cottington, the 'infamous fairy squasher', captured images of fairies by pressing them in an album: 'messy but effective. I am perfecting my technique. One has to be very quick indeed, then a firm squeeze. One learns in time to ignore the little cries.'²³ (Fig. 5) In the third book in the series, *Lady Cottington's Fairy Album* (2002), Froud assures us that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Fairies has verified that no fairies were killed or injured in the making of the book. Rather, the images are psychic imprints, the fairies themselves flying away unseen and unharmed.

In the same book it is revealed that Angelica had an older sister, Euphemia, who captured her fairies photographically using a variety of novel techniques. Froud admits that Euphemia's photographs, like those taken by Elsie and Frances, initially appear to be forgeries based on paper cut-outs. But the later images and text are 'deeply convincing and appear ... to describe genuine fairy contact for the first time.'²⁴ Apparently Euphemia has truly encountered the faeries; driven by her desire to escape the strictures of Victorian society, Euphemia is lured into the woods by the faeries, where her passionate, natural, self is revealed. Like Christina Rossetti's Laura in *Goblin Market* (1862), Euphemia tastes the fairy fruit and is inevitably seduced by the 'gardener's boy'; her early death is attributed to her running off with the faeries. But a dark secret is revealed at the close of the book; Euphemia is Angelica's mother. This fairy child clearly needs to stay away from the woods!

The idea of capturing their image or being able to see faeries clearly fascinates Froud; *How to see Faeries* (2011), with John Matthews, uses paper mechanics – pop-ups, window insets, cut-outs and reflective mirrors – to enable us to see into the world of faerie. *The Faeries' Oracle* (2000), with Jessica Macbeth, offers us another way into faerie through symbols of the alchemical processes of transformation and sacred geometry; this divination set, following the tradition of tarot, numbers sixty-six cards featuring goblins, pixies, boggarts, and other faery folk first encountered in *Good Faeries/Bad Faeries*. By learning how to read the cards, the initiate will be able to connect with the faeries by opening a portal to their

world. *The Heart of Faerie Oracle* (2010) is a reworking of the tarot card theme, this time in collaboration with Wendy, who provides much of the accompanying text.

Wendy's role in creating the *World of Froud* should not be underestimated; Jim Henson employed this talented model/doll maker from Detroit to sculpt the lead characters for 'The Dark Crystal', the Gelfings Jen and Kira. Wendy's fabrication brought Brian's creatures into three-dimensional life; named after *Peter Pan's* Wendy, she is Brian's acknowledged 'faerie woman' Muse, a Divine Feminine: 'Dear Reader, I married one – finest of all Faerie – Wendy Froud. Enchantress, inspirer, and faerie muse'.²⁵ The spirit of Wendy's model work is closely akin to Brian's vision: 'I like to think of the figures I make as companions for a personal journey. I try to fill each one with healing energy that responds to the person who owns it, and conversely, I hope that the person who owns it will respond with a true heart connection' (Fig. 6).²⁶ The Frouds have forged their Otherworld in tandem:

I was introduced to Brian's work by Jim Henson on the day
I was hired to work on a new project called *The Dark Crystal* ...
I had never before seen fantasy painting and illustration that
touched me as Brian's did. I grew up loving Arthur Rackham's
illustrations, but these had a life and immediacy to them that
went far beyond illustration ... They were waiting to be released
from the page so that they could inhabit this world as fully and
immediately as their own. Ours is a marriage of heart and art.
It has remained one of my greatest pleasures to sculpt from
Brian's designs and see these creatures take form in front of us
in all their mischievous glory.²⁷

Their son Toby, having played the role of the stolen baby in 'Labyrinth', has also entered the world of Froud; he is currently working at Laika Animation Studios in Portland, Oregon, on the fabrication of puppets for the stop-motion film 'ParaNorman'. Perhaps, like Lady Angelica, being a faerie child, he could not avoid his fate: 'growing up in a home with two artists naturally encouraged me to follow their steps ... Seeing the creativity and passion that drives my parents has always been an inspiration to me'.²⁸ The Frouds latest venture is *Brian Froud's Trolls* (2012), which explores troll culture, revealing their home life, their outlook and even their philosophical thoughts through folklore, mythology and archaeology. With creatures echoing his conceptual design work for 'The Dark Crystal', it is hoped the much anticipated sequel will be put into production sooner rather than later.

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