

Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 1



Fig. 4

Fig. 5



Fig. 1: Samantha Sweeting, 'Bestilialia (I never imagined life without you)', performance installation, 2008.
 Fig. 2: Samantha Sweeting, 'He loved her and sometimes she loved him too', performance installation, 2011.
 Figs. 3-5: Tessa Farmer, 'Nymphidia' (detail), 2011; insects, plant roots. 'The Fairy Horde and the Hedgehog Host' (detail), 2010; taxidermy hedgehog, bones, insects, plant roots, shark tooth. 'Captive Bumblebee', 2010; insects, plant roots.

Happy Endings and Uncommon Beginnings

A review of

'Conteuses: An Evening with Kate Bernheimer', 7 June 2013

Joanna Coleman

We stood hesitantly at the door of a Georgian London house, and, after enough time had passed for us to wonder whether we had failed to find a requisite secret passage, were ushered, via the barking of a dog, past images of Antarctic lands elegantly arrayed in the evening light, through a kitchen awash with champagne, to a long back garden where the fairy-tale scholars stood underneath a blossoming sycamore tree.

This surreal evening was organised by surrealist scholar Dr Catriona McAra, who welcomed us with grace and enthusiasm, while dressed in black and white as Lucy Gold, one of Bernheimer's central characters. We were hosted by Danielle Arnaud, whose transformation of her London house into a contemporary art gallery explained the Antarctic images and crystalline iceberg illuminated in the attic. Chatting beneath the sycamore stood Kate Bernheimer, described by Helen Pilinovsky as 'a latter-day Rumpelstiltskin', 'turning the straw of the two-dimensional modern stereotype of the fairy tale into the gold of complex subversion',¹ Samantha Sweeting, shape-shifter of modern art, and Tessa Farmer, whose fairies have infiltrated everywhere from the Museum of Natural History to Tasmania. Other guests were writers and editors from Bernheimer's shortly to be published collection of re-written myths, including Aamer Hussein and Elanor Dymott.

Later, gathered among the Antarctic images, Dr McAra welcomed us to an evening of discussion, collaboration and celebration. She drew parallels between the Salon writers of the 17th century and the artists present, who, following in the footsteps of Angela Carter, Dorothea Tanning and Leonora Carrington, as well as their fairy grandmothers, deftly subvert genre, delighting and horrifying their readers in equal measure. In this conversation between female fairy-tale custodians and creators, McAra invited us to ponder the role of contemporary feminist practice in the tales woven, fabricated, diagrammed or digitised in the 21st century.

Bernheimer's new novel, despite being entitled *Happy Endings*, provides a corrective for anyone expecting reassurance and comfortable justice. The novel's heroine has committed suicide and is employed by unnamed powers to accompany other suicides in their final moments. The atmosphere of the extract we heard was that of a haunting lullaby, beginning with the description of a town in the wake of an erupted volcano – ash everywhere, like snow. Uniformity, a technique identified by Max Lüthi, Bernheimer's 'aesthetic and ethical guru',² as typical to the fairy tale, is here achieved not through artifice but through natural disaster; this is not a city of gold or silver, but infinite ash. *Happy Endings'* particular version of uniformity seemed both ancient and modern, uniquely relevant to a contemporary world in which our own wondrous artifice is bordered by the threat of catastrophe.

The sense of disaster as the background to enchantment was echoed in the second piece Bernheimer shared with us. The first part of a series of short films co-created with Noah Saterstrom, it narrated the tale of a brother and sister trying to survive in the cruelty of a post-apocalyptic space. Whether that apocalypse be the loss of the parents or the loss of fellow humanity is not specified – like a modern Hansel and Gretel, the children are simply trying to reach home. The beautifully sketched images and haunting narration echo the mood of *Happy Endings*, both of which seem to take as a topic the magic that happens not before but after despair.

Bernheimer's pieces were followed by presentations from Samantha Sweeting and Tessa Farmer. Sweeting is an interdisciplinary artist who plays with the boundaries of human/animal, privacy/public, intimate/open. The video is a meditation on her recent art installations, which include the intimate study of metamorphosis, breastfeeding and nurture, 'Bestilalia (I never imagined life without you) (Fig. 1)', and 'He loved her and sometimes she loved him too' (Fig. 2), in which the act of sleeping beside another becomes an art installation. A woman with the head of a donkey, a lamb suckling from a human mother, the animated corpse of a slaughtered hare, and a white bed amidst a forest of fur in which strangers share a single night all weaved together to create an unsettling, challenging and beautiful exploration of the meanings of safety, comfort and companionship.

Tessa Farmer is a sculptor who specialises in 'life-size' fairies. Bewitching miniatures of roots, leaves and insects, these fairies, we were told, are skilful enough to harness bees and bend beetles to their will, wreaking havoc across museum cabinet and gallery space, and aiming to destroy us all. The installations, from a dead possum assailed by bees and beetles (fairy artillery) to a fairy nest within a mummified, medieval dog, were grotesque and bizarre, and the fairies intricate creations of ruthless horror. They at once charm us with their detail and make us ponder uncomfortably just what our own actions would look like, were we to be 1 cm tall and installed in a museum (Figs 3-5).

In Jack Zipes' most recent book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, he posits that the fairy tale is essentially a utopian genre, where 'the course of things is ordered in such a way that it fully corresponds to the demands of naïve morality, in other words, to our absolute instinctual

judgement of what is good and just.³ I wondered, at the end of the evening, where Farmer's machinating fairies, Sweeting's lamentations on slaughtered road kill, or Bernheimer's apocalyptic cities fitted within this concept of the good and just. Bernheimer's fascinating response was that the fairy tale is utopian because it is a space in which there is no limitation. Providing us with a way of thinking needed today more than ever, fairy tales are places of unlimited possibility where the way forward is often the gravest, the strangest, and the greatest. The fairy tales of Bernheimer, Sweeting and Farmer are not for children, nor indeed are they for adults. They are for anyone who takes imagination seriously, who recognises the fairy tale as entirely other, while acknowledging its urgent relevance to the modern world. The 7th June was a thoroughly unique evening in which this possibility was fostered and celebrated.

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References

1. Helen Piliunsky, 'The Complete Tales of Kate Bernheimer: Postmodern Fairytales in a Dystopian World,' *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*, Susan Redington Bobby (ed.) (Alabama: McFarland, 2009), 150.
2. Kate Bernheimer, 'The Fairy Way of Reading (and Writing): an Introduction,' *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, 30 (2013). <http://www.thevolta.org/ewc30-kbernheimer-p1.html> (25 June 2013).
3. Jack Zipes, *An Irresistible Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Kindle edition, n.pag.