

Fig. 1: *Wolf Hood*, 2015, pencil on paper,
h40.7 x w57.5 x d2.2cm, © Tomoko Konoike.

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Murmurings of Furs: Curating the Exhibition *Tomoko Konoike: Fur Story*

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The exhibition *Tomoko Konoike: Fur Story* was held from 11 May to 28 June 2018 at the Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University, where fairy-tale scholar Catriona McAra works as University Curator. The exhibition was born out of two sets of conversations. The first consisted of the many inspiring conversations I have had with McAra on fairy tales and visual arts since we first met and presented in the same panel at 'The Fairy Tale After Angela Carter', a seminal conference organised by Stephen Benson in 2009 that explored Carter's legacy in fairy-tale re-creations and scholarship. The second was the many stimulating exchanges I have had with Konoike since I began writing on her work through the prism of fairy-tale studies.

Tomoko Konoike is an interdisciplinary artist who uses various media, including painting, sculpture, animation, picture books, handicrafts, and performance, and also creates installations through her interactions with researchers in such fields as archaeology, cultural anthropology, psychology, religious studies, and fairy-tale studies. Born in 1960 in Akita Prefecture in north-eastern Japan, she now lives in Tokyo and has held exhibitions worldwide.

The specific concept of the exhibition was based on a paper I gave at another pivotal fairy-tale conference, 'Thinking with Stories in Times of Conflict', organised by Anne E. Duggan and Cristina Bacchilega in 2017. This conference, which addressed various social conflicts using insights from critical and creative fairy-tale practice, led me to consider the role that fairy tales can play in rethinking our relationship with non-human animals in today's world where human beings' ever-expanding desires constitute a serious threat to other species and the natural environment.

As the title *Fur Story* indicates, the exhibition aimed to listen to the stories that animals tell through their furry surfaces. Non-human animals have often served as the subject and the motivation for both artistic creation and storytelling, as if animals urge us to create and recreate their images in stories that speak to our primordial senses. As McAra points out in the 'Curatorial Acknowledgements' for the exhibition, the tactile quality of the fur in the fairy tale can be found in the works of surrealist artists and writers such as Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning, a subject which McAra has explored extensively in her critical and curatorial practices.

The exhibition interweaved Konoike's artwork focusing on the theme of animal skin with fairy tales about human-animal entanglements told in past and present Japan and Britain, two regions of the world geographically and culturally distant from each other. The narrative texts juxtaposed to her works included 'Princess Melon', a Japanese folktale



Fig. 2: *Diorama*, 2013, mixed media,
h81 x w130 x d123cm,
© Tomoko Konoike.

about a girl who is born from a melon and is killed by a hairy demon who puts on her skin to impersonate her; the Scottish tale 'Black Bull of Norrway', and Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride'. Through the juxtaposition of these images and narratives, the exhibition tried to let the murmurings of animals be heard.

It is not that all of Konoike's works selected for this exhibition were based on specific fairy tales. Rather, her works embody a more complex and radical development of the interaction between narrative and image which has existed since human beings began to tell stories about their encounters with wild animals and to paint pictures of them on the surface of caves, some tens of thousands of years ago. Indeed, animals have played an important role in her oeuvre since her earliest works in the late 1990s. Especially prominent is the motif of wolf-girl hybrids that she has reworked in various media. The representation of animals and human-animal hybrids in her work, however, underwent a radical transformation after the earthquake and tsunami in north-eastern Japan (Tohoku) on 11 March 2011, a disaster which also led to the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident. For those living in Japan, the combined natural and manmade disaster in Tohoku has posed a fundamental question regarding human beings' relationship with nature, urging them to rethink radically the ways in which social, cultural, and economic activities have been organised and conducted at the expense of the natural environment

and its non-human inhabitants. Konoike states that her experience of the Tohoku disaster made her move away from the use in her previous works of animals as symbols and metaphors, which she retrospectively recognises was a way of masking the deep, instinctive affinity with non-human beings that she has felt ever since her childhood.

Konoike's drawing *Wolf Hood* (2015, Fig. 1), created as the front-cover image for a new Japanese translation of Charles Perrault's 1697 collection of fairy tales, reflects a transitional state of how animals were represented in her work before the radical change. The merging of the wolf, the girl, and the woods transvalues the three, unsettling the conventional perceptions of their nature and their place in a cultural hierarchy. This transformative merging of the human and the natural realm can be also found in the installation *Diorama* (2013, Fig. 2), a colourful diorama of a mountain in four seasons, in the middle of which is embedded a giant girl's face looking up at the sky.

In order to move beyond the metaphorical representation of animals, Konoike began to focus on the materiality of animals and created a series of works representing bridal kimonos for marriages between different species, a motif found in traditional fairy tales across cultures. In this series – three of which were included in the exhibition: *Red River (Kimono)* (2015, Fig. 3), *Red Water* (2015), and *Fish* (2015) – the motif of interspecies marriage is reinterpreted as an entry into the natural realm that entails the radical transformation of the human sense of self. These bridal kimonos, made of cow hides

Fig. 3: *Red River (Kimono)*, 2015,
cowhide and mixed media,
h372 x w295cm, © Tomoko Konoike.
Photograph by Hamish Irvine.



Fig. 4: From the picture book
Book Burning: World of Wonder,
2007, pencil on paper, 41.8 x 50.9cm,
© Tomoko Konoike



and painted with images of non-human creatures and natural elements such as water, will become the imaginary brides' new skins after the interspecies marriage takes place. Significantly, whereas the non-human partner in Western fairy tales of such marriages, as in the case of 'Beauty and the Beast', is usually a human being in disguise, many of the animal partners in Japanese tales such as 'The Crane Wife' are animals by nature and, after a period of married life in human form, reveal their true animal form.

It is also important that these kimonos represent another aspect of human beings' relationship with other animals, one predicated on violence and exploitation, which has often been narrativised in fairy tales. Painting on animal skins foregrounds the fact that human beings have always killed animals to use them as resources such as food, clothing, and tools.

In addition to these large installation works, small drawings, such as those from the picture book *Book Burning: World of Wonder* (2007, Fig. 4), were exhibited. These pencil drawings depict various non-human animals, including birds, butterflies, a squirrel, and an otter, as well as human-animal hybrids. The fine, innumerable lines representing the fur, feathers, and scales of non-human creatures evoke visceral feelings in a way different from her large leather pieces mentioned above. The DVD animation *mimio-Odyssey* (2005) animates these fine pencil-drawn lines, visually evoking the murmurings of all the creatures and plants living in the forest.

In her major solo exhibition *Hunter Gatherer*, currently being held at Akita Museum of Modern Art, Konoike takes her demythologisation of the human-nature dichotomy a step further. She states:

Our present culture has developed from the prototype of hunter-gatherer culture ... which can proceed only towards the direction of 'dragging things into the human sphere.' The role of art lies in dismantling this prototype and converting it to something new.

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