Sea, tears, rain

Janaina Tschäpe's art and aquatic fairy tales

When we met in her Brooklyn studio, Janaina Tschäpe said: 'the fairy tale is in *everything* I do'. And it's soon clear that it's a lived experience of fairy tales that infuses her art. For fairy tales change and grow at her fingertips: they borrow from the wider world around her and events in her life; they merge with myth and fable and religion. And this is in the nature of fairy tales, ever since their earliest origins. Never fixed, subject to all kinds of influences and rarely belonging to any single author, they are carried along in the flow of the imagination and are continually refurbished as they are retold – from before they were written down, to Disney and beyond.[i]

In Tschäpe's art, the wish-fulfilment that we so often find in fairy tales[ii] is given new inflections. We have, especially, an adult woman's desires in play; sexual, maternal, and relating to the natural world. There's a strong preoccupation with water in many of her works – the sea, tears, rain. This essay focuses on the relationship of this work to certain aquatic fairy tales, ancient and modern: stories which have thrived, perhaps significantly, in countries with long coastlines, where people face out to sea: Ireland, Denmark, Brazil.[iii]

Tschäpe talks animatedly about the importance to Brazilians of stories about Yemanja, the half-human, half-fish 'mother of the waters'; Brazil being the country where she spent her childhood and where she continues to live for part of the year. Yemanja is a merging of West African and Brazilian religious and mythological characters; she sometimes ensures the safe passage of those on the sea, and at other times claims them as her own (particularly slaves on the slave-ships whom she 'rescued' in this way). She is known by many names – including, incidentally, Janaina.[iv] And it is the artist herself who appears as a mermaid in her series of photographs called 'He Drowned in her Eyes as She Called Him to Follow'.

In Hans Christian Andersen's famous tale *The Little Mermaid*, the older mermaid sisters are of the type that casually entices sailors into the water to drown, found in fairy tales and myths[v] from all over the world. There is an Irish fairy tale, for example, in which a pirate chief wishes to keep his daughters from marrying missionaries and determines that the women will disappear into the sea, where they lure men to disaster ever after.[vi] There is a chilling moment, too, in *Peter Pan*, in which Peter Pan and Wendy are clinging to a tiny, shrinking island, when a mermaid 'caught Wendy by the feet, and began pulling her softly into the water'.[vii]

Mermaids are everywhere full of menace and indifference – and what's unusual about Andersen's story (the best known mermaid story of all) is that he determines that the youngest daughter, the little mermaid, will not only rescue a young prince from the sea but also fall in love with him. She then endures terrible sufferings to acquire legs in order to live on land and try to win his heart – and fails, however.

The photographs from the series 'He drowned in her eyes as she called him to follow' (with their individual *Anatomy of a Mermaid* titles) find their meaning somewhere in the midst of these mermaid tales. Tschäpe's character's feet and hands are rendered as hybrid water-borne and land-bound limb-endings (water-filled prophylactics acting as distorting lenses). We know from the title that this mermaid has succeeded in making her prince fall in love with her, and it is his fascinated gaze on her hands and feet that the photographs seem to record. There are volatile emotions in play. That teetering power that an individual has over the person he or she has seduced. Love experienced as a drowning, a swooning surrender of self, a descent into darkness. Crucially, we have no way of telling whether Tchäpe's mermaid is the saving or the malevolent, destroying kind. And this ambiguity is the power of the piece. The female character holds all the cards in this fantasy of seduction, this story of wish-fulfilment.[viii]

But this is all far too explicit. ‘He Drowned in Her Eyes as She Called Him to Follow’ best exists for the viewer in much the same shadowy place in the unconscious that the artist inhabited in the making of the work. Within this sphere – when this work catches us unawares – it has the power to transfix and enchant us: even beyond her allusion to mermaids, Tschäpe’s artwork can be said to be fairy tale in nature. According to Jung, art and fairy tales – and also dreams, myths and religious experiences – demonstrate the effects of what he called the collective unconscious. In Tschäpe’s art, we have an intoxicating mixture of two manifestations of the unconscious: art as fairy tale, fairy tale as art. And not only this, but she also ventures – as we have already surmised – into dreams, myths and religion.

Watching *Blood, Sea*, a video installation (2004), the viewer is surrounded on four sides by images of mesmerising, part-woman, sub-aquatic forms. Their many fronds waft in the water as they slowly turn; there are echoing sounds from the deep; we occupy this space with these almost life-size figures, and we too are submerged in the deepest marine blues, hazy turquoises, livid pinks, and blackness.

The creatures would appear to be free of impulses or even consciousness. They are outside of time, too, endlessly repeating their enigmatic gestures. Even after long scrutiny, the creatures and their movements remain unrecognisable. So just how does this piece take hold of us, in the darkness? There is a clue in the title. Tschäpe borrowed it from that of a fantastical story by Italo Calvino – which, as his preface explains, was inspired by the fact that 'our blood has a chemical composition analogous to that of the sea of our origins'.[ix] So Tschäpe's watery, half-human creatures are primordial, perhaps; beyond us and yet at the same time within us.

The Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz has written extensively about a Norwegian fairy tale called *The Comrade* in which a princess who has been bewitched must be dipped three times in a bowl of water in order to return to her true state. Here, von Franz makes a link between this submersion in water and certain Christian imagery:

> In general, water refers to the unconscious and going into the water and coming out again seems to have a certain analogy with going into the unconscious. The baptismal font in Christianity is frequently compared with the uterus of the Mother Church and has therefore a maternal aspect – one is reborn in

> the eternal womb, which is the water. It is the maternal place from which one came and to which one returns in a new form.[x]

In *Blood, Sea* Tschäpe offers us an experience of total submersion, and a return to our original, drifting, watery state: the artwork as womb, as font, as source of renewal. It is an expressly feminine fantasy that is extended towards us; the artist's experiences of religion and maternity melded within the creative act, perhaps. And while this possibility of redemptive experience is perhaps unusual within contemporary visual art, it is widespread in fairy tales, argues von Franz, where it is often expressed through imagery such as pools and streams and wells. Returning home after their encounters with a witch deep in the forest, Hansel and Gretel must cross a stream, as a symbol of their transition into maturity. In *The Frog-King*, a princess's golden ball tumbles into a well, setting into play an adventure in which a frog is restored to his true state as a prince, and a princess grows up and learns to love.[xi]

A series of Tschäpe's works on paper has the word Lacrimasa in its title. This is a variation of the word Lacrimosa (meaning 'tearful' or 'causing tears'), the title by which a famous sequence in the *Requiem Mass* is known. It describes the Christian day of judgement:

> Tearful that day,

on which will rise from ashes

guilty man for judgement.

So have mercy, O God, on this person.

Compassionate Lord Jesus,

grant them rest. Amen. [xii]

In the *Flora Lacrimasa* drawings, to give them their full title, there are fantastical plants with container-like forms that can hold and spill; the flowers here are wombs that will wither and die even as they perform their reproductive function, to rise again in the spring. Here is a tragedy that is feminine, intuited, subtle, that glances into religious and also vernacular story-telling traditions. Think of all the evocative common names for plants, such as Love-lies-bleeding, Weeping Willow or Baby's Tears, each one of them a story in miniature and each of them suggesting folk connections between plants and human emotions. What is clear is that through her art, Tschäpe responds, often unconsciously, to myriad strands of tales and wide-ranging allusions that she intertwines and makes anew.

There is also a video called *Lacrimacorpus*, the title of which the artist borrowed from a chapter in Jorge Luis Borges' *The Book of Imaginary Beings*[xiii] about a mythological beast called a squonk, or *Lacrimacorpus dissolvens*, a composite of the Latin words for 'tear', 'body' and 'dissolve'. This forest creature is ugly and shy and weeps all the time,

and will literally dissolve into tears when cornered. It comes as a surprise, then, to find that we are looking from a high vantage point at a young woman in mid-nineteenth-century dress who is standing in a formal room in a house of a similar era, with windows thrown open onto a sunny garden beyond. There is a sound that suggests that the woman is wound up like a clockwork toy and she turns, slowly at first, like a figure in a musical box. Gradually her movement increases in speed and she spins on and on until she is so giddy that she collapses into a heap on the floor. And then the video repeats and she begins again.

Tschäpe's *Lacrimacorpus dissolvens* seems haplessly caught up in an endless cycle of passivity and destruction, saved only by the gentle humour of the piece. She is nineteenth-century womanhood, destined for a role in life into which she dissolves, and reminiscent of the heroines in fiction who weep and faint and swoon at all critical moments. She is the adult equivalent, perhaps, of Lewis Carroll's Alice, who weeps at regular intervals and at one point shrinks and falls into her own pool of tears:

> 'I wish I hadn't cried so much' said Alice, as she swam about, trying to find her way out. 'I shall be punished for it now, I suppose, by being drowned in my own tears! That *will* be a queer thing, to be sure! However, everything is queer today.'[xiv]

Throughout this claustrophobic fairy story, what Alice wants to do is repeatedly denied her. It seems that both Carroll's Alice and Tschäpe's *Lacrimacorpus dissolvens* lead frustrated existences that similarly lead to tearful collapse; neither is able to enter the garden. There is, by contrast with other works, no wish-fulfilment to be found in this piece of Tschäpe's art, and redemption comes only in the form of humour.

Monsoon is a recent painting that features a tropical landscape. All natural processes of watery exchange and renewal seem to be heightened here. It is the scene of a terrible downpour, rendered by an over-loaded brush that has sent black paint dribbling down the paper in places. The foliage beneath seems to be rising thirstily to claim it. There is steam, as well, the product of an exaggerated rate of transpiration. And here in this painting, too, is a fantasy of redemption and wish-fulfilment: the world we have abused is watered and purified and remade.

A slippery creature lures a man into the dark depths of the sea. A great, unfathomable mass of water bathes us and creates us anew. Water rises, and then falls as bitter tears. Torrential rain in the tropical jungle: the earth and its plants are rapturous for it as never before. A story of stories is told and ends here.

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[i] See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 1976 (Penguin 1991, p. 63).
[ii] Think of Cinderella escaping her drudgery, or Jack-in-the-Beanstalk rising above poverty and ridicule.
[iii] The famous stories that the Brothers Grimm collected in the nineteenth century relate more specifically to landlocked Germany's forests, villages and towns.
[iv] See for example www.geocities.com/annafranklin2/blueandwhite.html
[v] See Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Vintage, London, 1995, chapter 23, for a discussion of mermaids in mythology.
[vi] Cited in Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Psychological Meaning of Redemption Motifs in Fairy Tales*, Inner City Books, Toronto, 1980, p. 57.
[vii] J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, first published in 1911 (Puffin, 2002, p. 129).
[viii] Another major work by Janaina Tschäpe, called *Untitled (Scream)*, also featuring a mermaid but not included in MIMA's exhibition, is discussed in an essay by Angela Kingston, in Angela Kingston (ed.), *Fairy Tale: contemporary art and enchantment*, The New Art Gallery Walsall, 2007, p. 82.
[ix] Italo Calvino, *t zero*, 1967 (Harcourt Brace, Orlando, undated, translated by William Weaver, p.39)
[x] Von Franz p. 24.
[xi] Bettelheim p. 164 & pp. 286-291.
[xii] This is a Latin hymn which is thought to have been written in the thirteenth century by Thomas Celano, and which has been set to music by many composers, including Mozart and Berlioz.
[xiii] Originally published in 1967; Vintage, London, 2002, p. 136.
[xiv] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*, Wordsworth, Hertfordshire, 2001, p. 49.