

ONE CHILD'S EYE

Children's stories are monstrous. Psychoanalytically, our entire society is encapsulated in fairy tales.
Annette Messenger, Artist

Childhood is a dangerous place. It is populated with forests, beasts, darkness, shadows, witches, lies, temptation, jealousy, and (worst of all) parents. Cities and empires are created and destroyed over the course of the school holidays. Armies are decimated, rulers toppled, innocents saved, tea parties trashed, and everyone dies at least three times a day. The breadth of experience contained within childhood play and exploration is propagated and nourished by everyday experience with television, books, anecdotes, movies etc. Play is the result of our primordial impulse to interact with our immediate environment, and to extend beyond its restrictions to incorporate the contents of our fertile minds.

Why are these darker elements such a feature of children's stories, nursery rhymes and fables? Why do we not prepare positive lessons with happy characters? The short answer is that these stories are reflections of the real world – the hardships and challenges faced in real life are transformed into adventures and exploration in children's stories. Dark and light exists in the real world, not just in fairytales. Stories and fables provide a context for exploring the complexity and extremes of life. They are ultimately revelatory stories told against the dramatic landscape of the familiar good vs. evil battlefield.

Children are innately aware of their surroundings and its imaginative possibilities. Fantasy and imagination play a vital role in our development and learning. As parents and guardians we are responsible for preparing them for an increasingly complex world. We can paint a happy and positive picture of the world, but what to do when darkness befalls them? How will they discern what is good and what is bad? friendly or un-friendly? Children's stories have for centuries been transmitters of warnings, moral messages and practical instructions, and it is through these tales that we are able to develop (and hopefully) sustain a sense of *invincibility* to negotiate life's challenges. This is at the heart of human enterprise – the ability to forge ahead regardless of life's obstacles. If we are taught that we have no power over the challenges we may face, then we are destined to be disappointed and helpless when disaster arrives. If we feel invincible (even when we realise we are only human), then we will try to wield power over the things that try to pull us under. Tenacity and resilience come in handy when faced with the creatures of a child's imagination.

From Maurice Sendak's **Where the Wild Things Are** (1963) to JK Rowling's **Harry Potter** series (1997), Children's literature has absorbed the influences of the past (Aesop, Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, et al) and re-fashioned them for contemporary audiences. They are still imbued with fantasy, violence and horror. The children in Enid Blyton's **The Magic Faraway Tree** (1943) for example, are very eager to explore the mysterious tree-top world, all on their own, in the middle of the night. The settings and characters are of course proxies for the real world, yet the challenges faced by the children are more-often-than-not, a matter of life and death. Edmund in **The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe** (1950) is reduced to a craving mess by the White Witch's alluring Turkish Delight, betraying his siblings along the way. He crosses over to the witch's side due in part to his doubting and questioning personality, but soon redeems himself after seeing the error of his ways.

The world of a child's mind is evoked and described in the work of **Van Sowerwine**. Sowerwine explores these issues in her complex and enticing multimedia works. These worlds are filled with signs and symbols that confuse and disorient us. Her characters are resolutely innocent with their doll-like appearances and domestic environments, yet there seems to lurk a malevolent and possibly dangerous undercurrent. Is it real danger or imagined? Do our minds play tricks on us? The issue of perception vs. reality is important in exploring Sowerwine's work.

Sowerwine's sculptural works are 21st century parlour toys - penny arcade interactives cross-bred with a gaming console. The interfaces for her works are computer screen, mouse, mechanical toy, and plinth-based sculptures, yet within each there lies a hidden or briefly glimpsed Lilliputian world. It is here that Sowerwine plays with perceived notions of innocence and goodness. **Expecting** (2003) presents a small character (Charlotte) within a bedroom setting as if transfixed in a looking-glass. The work responds to our interactions with a teddy bear substituted for a computer mouse. Charlotte responds to the squeeze of the teddy by inserting a cord into her belly button (attached to the teddy via the screen / looking glass). As the teddy is squeezed, her stomach increases in size, until ultimately she removes the cord. She lies grunting on the floor until she suddenly delivers a naked child – tiny but fully formed - who proceeds to sit down and drink tea with the mother-child. Birth has been given to a new playmate. **Expecting** is a clarion call for human imagination – the crux of our creativity, the driving force behind industry and innovation, the seed-bed upon which belief, morality and philosophy are gently raised. It is a looped action within a computer screen, slow-paused on a moment, within the guise of vending machine-architecture. The literalness of the piece is shocking to adult eyes (yet our squeezing of the teddy makes us complicit in what has happened), yet a logical whimsy in the creative mind of the child. It is as if the child gives birth to an idea, or desire, springing forth from a nondescript everyday bedroom into the world like a daydream.

Intrinsic to these works is the inquisitive desire to touch and collaborate with them. The works exist as objects, but it is not until we intervene that the artwork truly comes into being. Sowerwine works within the filmic tradition of stop-motion animation. This laborious process renders inanimate objects with movement and character. This is most commonly seen in television shorts such as the incessant plasticine feud of **The Red & The Blue** through to more elaborate children's television adventure series' such as **Bill & Ben: The Flowerpot Men** or the **Koala Brothers**. Sowerwine is more closely aligned with international proponents

of the form such as Czech artists Jiri Trnka and Jan Švankmajer, Canadian Norman McLaren, UK collective Aardman and from the US, Brothers Quay and Tim Burton, yet it is the delivery of her works that sets her apart. The artists mentioned above are screen-based practitioners. Their works are created to be projected, transmitted or downloaded. Sowerwine creates *vehicles* for her animations – booth, box, or beast – that are crucial to the meanings in her work. Sowerwine retains the spirit of the fantastic in her narratives and use of media. There lies an excitement and experimentation with photographic processes and image making. The magic that is so much a part of photography and cinema is sustained within Sowerwine's interactives, as if complexity and wonder rose out of the simple materials. The inanimate becomes animate in her intricate tapestries of time - the dead can now dance. **Hold My Hand And We'll Be Safe** (2009) is a simple plywood box with a hole in which to view. A set of headphones channel the auditory atmosphere of the piece, whilst a small winding handle initiates the action inside the box. When viewed we see two figures within a shadowy atmosphere reminiscent of a film noir setting. The winding action makes one of the figures perform a repetitive jump rope. The figures are stuck in this movement, and the suggestion of the title – **Hold My Hands And We'll Be Safe** – becomes a tiny mantra for the innocent characters trapped eternally in this mysterious scenario.

The fantastic allows for a host of variations on nature. **Small Beasts** (2007) are two hybrid beings rendered in supple silicon. These sculptures make references to anime and toy culture. Sowerwine has allowed us to view inside their brains via protrusions in the sides of their heads. This window allows us to ponder the thoughts and dreams of these lonely figures. What are these creatures? Where have they come from? Are there more? Sowerwine presents us with these two lone figures (maybe the last remaining specimens) for our contemplation.

Sowerwine's films are a re-reading of childhood, using the slow contemplative art of animation. Her early films such as **Roller Coaster** (2000), **At Night and Visitors** (both 1998), are simple hand drawn animations together with objects such as dolls. There is playfulness inherent in these works that foreshadows Sowerwine's interest in the child's-eye view. **Doll Stories: Mary** (2002) and **Gillian** (2001) are much grander affairs, with a host of dolls eager to remove the shackles of their inert lives in the toy box. Sowerwine's vision is perfectly distilled in her award-winning short film, **Clara** (2004), which has been shown at film festivals across the world. In this beautiful and very personal film Sowerwine has realised a world in which the central character is cast into a state of turmoil as she deals with death of her sister. Her world is irrevocably altered and her enchanted childhood has changed forever.

Sowerwine's still photographs are carefully constructed vignettes that seem wrenched from a bigger, all-encompassing narrative that we are unfortunately not privy to. **Sophie** (from the series **Sharper Than A Serpent's Tooth** (2005)) is presented in two photos along with an image of a spilt meal on the floor. These seductive images force us to create a narrative. Logically, **Sophie** has refused to eat her dinner and thrown it on the floor - yet this is an unsatisfying and simple reading. Sowerwine is forcing us to use our imaginative capabilities to question these scenes and consider other readings. Our desire for logic is not enough due to the atmosphere and dream-like quality of the works. We could flesh out our own narrative with a hidden beast or unseen force, as Sophie feebly attempts to protect herself with a fork, only to lead us into more complex and beguiling scenarios. Similarly Sowerwine has, through the title of the series – **Sharper Than A Serpent's Tooth** - cast us out into the waters of possibility by bringing in another element, language, to guide or confuse us.

Sowerwine's works are puzzles for which there may be no logical solution. If we view these works through a child's eyes, we may regain access to new worlds of meaning and wonder.

Kent Buchanan

Curator, **A Child's Eyes: Van Sowerwine**, April 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WPCC Staff, Bronwyn Rennex & Catherine Benz at Stills Gallery, Sydney, Kentia Boyle at Experimenta, Melbourne, and many many thanks to Van Sowerwine.

Van Sowerwine is represented by Stills Gallery, Sydney

A CHILD'S EYES: VAN SOWERWINE

23 May – 28 June 2009

Children's Gallery, Dubbo Regional Gallery – The Armati Bequest



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