

## Living Arts

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Art Review

### Mass Art's 'Wonderland' brings fairy tales to life

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Bonnie Collura's "White": Snow White in branches.

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"Wonderland" is wonderfully stimulating, an excursion into fantasy that suggests narratives without spelling them

out. Among the few artists who verge on actual illustration is Kiki Smith, whose multimedia installation features elements of the "Alice in Wonderland" episode in which Alice nearly drowns in a pool of her own tears. Smith's room has the very low door Alice couldn't fit through; inside is a floor sparkling with outsized glass tears.

Smith is the best known of the 17 artists Tung has gathered, most of whom haven't shown in Boston before, which makes the exhibition something of a revelation. Another artist who uses the Alice theme is Anna Gaskell, whose large-scale C-print depicts Alice tumbling upside down, skirt and petticoat flying, legs in the air. Gaskell's photographs are astonishingly vivid, hyper-real; being positioned near the gallery door, they set a tone for the whole show.

Linda Ross's installation "Flamingo Parlor" will remind you that Alice used that silliest-looking of birds as a croquet mallet. Glass flamingo heads, stand-ins for the usual stags with antlers, hang on Ross's parlor walls. She's taken a macho convention and feminized it. Some of the curvaceous necks emerge from bases cast from

Ugly stepsisters, old crones, wicked witches. Women in fairy tales are often unappetizing creatures, which inspired Massachusetts College of Art curator Lisa Tung to create her own "Wonderland" in which women artists explore the genre of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm. Visual artists have always dealt in make-believe, of course, but they've tended

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household objects including a bundt pan. Some are adorned with fake flower leis, an example of the kitsch that runs through this show.

Just as intentionally kitschy are the sculptures of Lilianna Porter, Bonnie Collura, and Mary Carlson. Porter works in many media; among her pieces at Mass Art are vignettes with tiny toy humans and animals gazing raptly at each other, each trying to come to grips with a different category of being. Collura is among the most adventurous artists in the show when it comes to media: Her large-scale works are made of foam, putty, paint, plaster, and other stuff, mixed as if in a food processor, to the point where individual elements are unrecognizable. Except for the Easter grass, which clumps in crevices. Collura mixes subjects as well as materials. Her "White" is basically Disney's Snow White, except that she's sprouting branches, like Daphne morphing into a laurel tree. Carlson's cement deer, reconstituted trees made of wood and sawdust, and leaves of chiffon and wire — they look like Calder mobiles — create a fantasy forest, waiting for the fairy tale to

happen.

Judy Haberl, an artist usually up to her neck in kitsch, here distances herself from it through photography — and ice. Her Polaroids depict worlds made of all manner of objects, frozen in fish bowls. The scenes seem remote and unknowable, like Sleeping Beauty's castle glimpsed through a curtain of brambles.

Ericka Beckman's "Cinderella," a half-hour long 16mm film transferred to video, is a riveting reworking of the tale, combining a flesh-and-blood heroine with animation, letting different realities collide, and further complicating matters with vertiginous camera work. Maria Marshall enters a child's world through her own young son, who stars in her laser disc projections. One is a classic nightmare, featuring the little boy lying in a box, unable to escape as snakes slither ever closer.

Animals with human characteristics play a big part in fairy tales and in this show. In Ellen Berkenblit's works on paper, a female protagonist, whose bulbous nose threatens to grow to Pinocchio proportions, communes with mice, bears, and other creatures. They stare at each other in quiet contemplation. (In a deft curatorial touch, Tung has positioned one of Carlson's deer so it is looking at Berkenblit's character, who is herself looking at a mouse.) Berkenblit couples a cartoonish style with sophisticated references: Hands are bulbous, like those of Picasso's classicizing period; backgrounds look like Kandinsky.

Amy Cutler does for a giraffe what Ross does for flamingos. In one of Cutler's small paintings on wood the patient beast serves as a maypole, its long neck wound with streamers. The Guerrilla Girls would doubtless approve of

Jennifer Nuss's Goat Girls, hairy hybrids engaged in high jinks. Nuss's technique — gouache on wrinkled Japanese paper — is as novel as her subject. The award for most adorable artwork goes to Kathryn Spence, for slouching, lumpy, barely-recognizable bears made of stuffed animals and furry bathrobes, completely coated in dried mud. They look like the everymen of sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz, only huggable.

Like Cutler, Hilary Harkness paints on wood, and with great technical skill. Her delicate depictions of an all-female world where women take over traditionally male occupations — such as working in a quarry — are stylistic cousins to Italian painting of the early Renaissance. The third painter in the show, Susanne Kuhn, creates jagged forests in a restricted palette of greens and neutral black and white. There's a gnome here, a glacier there, and art historical references from Casper David Friedrich to Neil Welliver.

Renee Cox takes the most overtly feminist approach of any of these artists. Her cibachrome photographs feature a black Wonder Woman, a giantess clad in a sleek suit that won't slow her down when leaping tall buildings in a single bound. Rebecca Doughty's figures are as ethereal as Cox's heroine is bold. Doughty has painted faces on acorns, a trail of them 6 feet long, looking vulnerable and forlorn.

"Wonderland" occupies both of Mass Art's main galleries; Tung had a huge amount of space to play with, and the overlapping themes and ideas come across clearly. Each artist is well-represented in this well-crafted show that invites viewers to dig into their imaginations and spin tales of their own.