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Shaping The Witch: A Visual Art Thesis

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Abstract

Shaping The Witch

This thesis is an exploration of the complex and interconnected nature of folklore, personal mythology, and re-enchantment as expressed through the lens of puppetry. I have drawn inspiration from the works of deeply reflective works concerning the psychological nature of mythologies of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, as well as the magical and beautiful work of artists Jim Henson, Brian and Wendy Froud, and Mercer Meyer. Through working in the medium of puppets, I have given consideration to the possibilities and limitations of these forms in expressing the complexity of narrative, personal mythology, the anxiety of disenchantment, lost and reclaimed identity, and a child-like freedom to reclaim enchantment. I have chosen the archetype of the witch to work with because of the ambiguous nature of her identity. Though I seek always to reconnect with the child within in the context of my work, I am also shaped by age and experience and I find myself connecting more and more with the older women, the ambiguous women, the controversial women through lense of traditional narrative. I have crafted three characters from three different European folktales: the Cailleach, a hag and divine ancestor from Celtic folklore; a Volva, a respectable and venerated sorceress from Norse folklore and mythology; and, Baba Yaga, the ambiguous and chaotic figure from Russian folklore. In order to shape these characters, I have sculpted, glued, twisted, and costumed them from a variety of materials. From a pile of stuff, I have given shape to these stories.
Context And Philosophy

Shortly after World War I, the sociologist Max Weber coined the phrase “the disenchantment of the West,” during a lecture given to student activists in 1918. But what is a disenchanted world? Weber was referring specifically to the industrialized world’s divorce from its legacy of magic and religion in favor of intellectual and scientific approach to morality, community, and identity. Society turned from worshiping at the altars of religion and instead went to worship at the altars of science. Weber understood, as many did and do, that in moving into the age of the machine and globalized consumerism, we have lost touch with something essential and precious. The startling removal from the analog that we have experienced in the post-industrial, disenchanted age has largely spurred my interest in analog arts and crafts, and, specifically in the context of this work, in puppets. The work of Carl Jung and of Joseph Campbell feel directly connected to reclaiming the enchantment that Weber alleges was lost when the world embraced the rise of the machine, and their musings on the complexities of narrative and identity also tie strongly into the medium of puppets in the context of this project.

Jung’s work has deeply influenced this project. Though one of the fathers of modern psychology, he was also arguably a mystic. He engaged with ideas that were and still are controversial, dealing with mankind’s capacity for manifesting things marvelous and strange. Among these explorations was the concept of the Collective Subconscious—a place where all of mankind is connected in a realm deep below the waking mind that allows us to communicate and receive information from one another on a level at which we are not aware. He also developed the concept of Synchronicity—essentially what he referred to as “meaningful coincidence,” or two events that have not necessarily caused one another, but are happening simultaneously and unexpectedly, and have a connection to one another. A famous example on which this principle is founded is a story he tells of a patient who, while in session, told Jung of a dream that she’d had the night before about a scarab beetle. They were interrupted by a noise at the window and when Jung went to look, he found a beetle that looked remarkably like a scarab tapping at the glass. His work, Man and His Symbols, goes beyond mere dream interpretation. Jung taps into the concept of these symbols as near mythological events, tendrils of the mystical current reaching into our unconscious minds and drawing us back to the place where our ancestors always dwelt. This work arguably shares strong DNA with myth and folklore, as it alludes to a common language that expresses anxieties and desires shared by the community of mankind.

Joseph Campbell has also deeply influenced the path of exploration I have walked in creating this project. His life’s work was founded on the significance of mythology as it relates to the self. Mythology—and, by extension, folklore—is a cultural exploration of moral and existential matters. These questions are posed and dealt with in the context of stories concerning characters who succeed—or fail—according to the principles, philosophies, and perspectives of each respective culture. Ultimately, myths are a reflection of the identities, anxieties, and truths of the people who developed them. They served as a wharf to which individuals could anchor themselves, furnished with the knowledge and the comfort that the path has been walked and the hero can prevail. Campbell’s work reached deep into the heart of mythological traditions the world over and sought to discover what we, as a society, left behind when we turned away from enchantment. But beyond simply a discussion of beliefs, both literal and metaphorical, from communities all over the world, Campbell delved
into these myths, searching for the lost spiritual truth that mankind has broken with in the West. In our efforts to assimilate cleanly into modern society, we have shed ourselves of the baggage of our roots, including the epic myths and the humble folk tales passed down by those who came before.

In the larger context of history, myth gave way eventually to folklore, epic sagas and creation tales adapted for the scale of the village, the family, the individual. However, at first glance drawing a hard line between myth and folklore seems easy. But as we delve into the roots of the modest folktale, it becomes clear that they are often adapted from these deeper myths. Baba Yaga, for instance, conjures immediately the image of a quintessential fairy tale witch. But upon further investigation, scholars believe that she is the last remaining vestiges of an ancient Russian goddess, perhaps a goddess of death or nature. In her present incarnation, she is what gamers would refer to as “chaotic neutral”-- neither good nor evil, but a ferocious force of nature who giveth and taketh away. Folk tales or fairy tales--between which the line is even thinner--are typically morally and socially instructive. They deal with more mundane anxieties, versus the epic scale of the myth, but are equally as valid in the sense that they reflect the identity and the preoccupations of the people who spin them. Literally, in the sense that they commonly have a strong relationship with women in Western society, who were burdened with the unending task of spinning and weaving fiber before the process was forever changed by the industrial revolution. Often, women would tell tales to one another and to the children to pass the time.
Inspiration and Influences

Hollywood has, inarguably, become the mythology of the post-industrial age. Instead of sharing our tales by the fireside, we turn on the television or go to the movie theater to express the cycle of the Hero’s struggle (or the deconstruction of). The film industry, since its inception, has worked to “progress” technologically in every aspect, as many other sectors of our society has. There have been exceptions to this, however. Specifically, in the context of this paper, I want to draw attention to the work of Jim Henson who recognized the value in the analog avatar of the puppet and its ability to act as a vessel for human experience and expression.

Jim Henson was legendary for elevating the humble puppet to the status of a legitimate medium within Hollywood filmmaking. And while he is most famous for the rag tag band of mischievous Muppets, he is also known for engaging with darker material in his films The Dark Crystal, and Labyrinth. The Dark Crystal was significant for the fact that it was the first feature film ever made exclusively with puppets, without any human actors appearing on screen (with the exception of some wide shots featuring a human actor running and jumping in a way that a puppet could not equal). Instead of alienating the viewer, the lack of human actors in The Dark Crystal invites the audience to step into a totally different reality, one which they may find more accessible in a way than a typical film. The movie, according to the Concept Designer Brian Froud, was essentially created as function following form. Henson wanted to create a dark fairy tale with puppets, and so the story was written and adapted to this desire, instead of the puppets being forced to adapt themselves to a pre-existing screenplay.

The film itself, while billed for the whole family, is dark and troubling, with subject matter that many would consider too disturbing for children. Henson, interestingly, believed that fear was a positive feeling for children to experience, a very Old World attitude to take. Before the Disney-era of fairy tales that are scrubbed clean of any true violence or brutality, children were accustomed to hearing tales of horrifying things happening to children who disobeyed or misbehaved. The idea that children are incapable of handling negative emotions seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon when examining what is considered appropriate for them in stories now, versus what was appropriate for them in stories in the past. In her paper “The Positive Impacts of Fairy Tales for Children,” VisikoKnox-Johnson explores how children (and therefore the adults that have been formed from these children) strongly identify with the figures in these stories that offer them the most substantial connection to their respective anxieties and how they handle those anxieties, and this is not limited to characters that are simply happy and friendly. Folktales and fairytales are ultimately an expression of our need to process and manage our hopes, anxieties, and fears, and Henson understood that this particular need is fed by a spectrum of experiences, not just the joyful side of fairy tales. I, myself, have chosen witches as the subject of this thesis because they are often reviled, feared, and even misunderstood. It is a common expectation (one that Henson broke) that puppets are harmless avatars for children that do not deal in dark subject matter. I have chosen, specifically, to go against that grain.

Wendy Froud, partner of artist and frequent Henson collaborator Brian Froud, was a key element of Henson’s success on his dark fairy tale films. Wendy Froud is a sculptor and
artist now famous for her work on Henson’s movies, her work on Yoda in the Star Wars movies (earning her the moniker, “The Mother of Yoda”), and her work producing beautiful gallery pieces that often feature fairies, or fairy-adjacent creatures. Froud, whether innately or through much personal and professional experience, understands the power that a puppet commands. In an interview on the On The Block Radio with Andrew Gurevich, Wendy Froud makes a very compelling point concerning the character Yoda. When questioned about how she feels about Yoda go from a puppet in the original Star Wars Trilogy to a character built completely in CGI, she responds by pointing out that people simply did not connect to the CGI Yoda the way they did to the original Yoda. This was, she asserts, because he was not a puppet. There is something so compelling and human in the analog form of puppets that cannot simply be substituted for another version of anthropomorphic imagery. This is expressed clearly in Froud’s work—though her sculptures remain stationary, their eyes twinkle mischievously as though they’re ready to move the moment you turn away. The nature of crafting puppets and puppet-like pieces shares a certain DNA with Michael Chekhov’s concept of psychological gesture. According to this technique, though actors may not necessarily be touching one another, they are imbuing their words and actions with a gesture that may be sensed energetically.

The works of Mercer Mayer and John William Waterhouse have also offered their share of inspiration and influence on this project. Waterhouse was not preoccupied with depicting fairytales as Mayer was, but he was preoccupied with depicting fantastical and enduring stories full of magic, romance, and tragedy. As a key figure in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, he unknowingly helmed the art of illustration as it had never been seen before. All of his works are essentially illustrations of familiar myths, legends, and classical works. Mayer’s work, though arguably more humble in subject matter and materials (watercolors, as opposed to Waterhouse’s breathtaking oil techniques), is no less gripping in its beautiful renditions of familiar stories. Though these artists created 2D works, as opposed to the 3D nature of this thesis, their keen ability to tell a story through visual art has been an enormous influence on my work and tie neatly into my explorations of mythologies, both personal and universal, as well as the connection to the concept of re-enchantment, a process I’ve come to view as an essential part of recapturing something vital that has been lost, both at the individual level and the community level. In considering how these works have influenced me as illustrations, or visual depiction of a narrative, I am also considering how I am departing from the 2D form with which I have historically been most comfortable with in order to express narrative in the 3D, with the more soulful and relatable medium of puppets.
Methodology and Materials

The design for these puppets was based on a technique commonly used by Wendy Froud to create her world-famous sculptures. Though she did not invent it, her use of it has proved to be a vital source of inspiration for me in my own work. I also consulted the work of countless other puppet and art doll artists to see how they managed these specific techniques in their finished work.

The puppets crafted for this thesis consist of a variety of materials. Aesthetic tendencies informed the decision around these materials and methods, as well as a desire to reconnect with a slower, more conscious method of creation that we have in so many ways radically departed from in the age of convenience. Their heads, hands, and feet were carefully sculpted from Super Sculpey Polymer clay with consideration for the expression of their specific personalities as gathered from folk stories concerning them. I did not consult references, but instead relied on the stories to shape the puppets. For each respective body, I shaped a rudimentary skeleton from aluminum wire that consisted of a solid spine and a pelvis that would allow each of them to stand without assistance. I then glued each sculpted piece onto the appropriate appendage. I then wrapped each aluminum skeleton carefully with cotton quilt batting, building up the silhouette of muscle until it reached the desired consistency. After the body was filled out appropriately, I wrapped it in athletic wrap to create a snug skin that held everything together neatly. The hair on each puppet consists of fine, high quality mohair that I glued carefully to their scalp to give the illusion of real hair growth. The costumes were each designed with each specific character and culture in mind and crafted carefully with hand stitching and glue where appropriate. And while historically accurate resources were consulted, this factor did not ultimately end up deciding each respective design. The designs were executed based on the best way to tell the story of each respective puppet.

It is worth considering that each medium in which an artist works has its own set of limitations and advantages. In working to craft puppets that represent specific and powerful witches from folklore, I have given over to the medium to guide the way the story will ultimately be told. While I have used their stories as references for crafting their forms, their forms were also ultimately influenced by the limitations of the materials with which I am working. Unlike a book or a set of paintings, my choice of medium demands that I manifest the universe of a personality in one small form. And it also demands that this form be as lifelike (not realistic, but lifelike) as possible, an avatar with which people can connect. Just as puppets that are created for film or the stage are often crafted based on the limitations of the puppeteers, these puppets are also beholden to this principle. Their posture, their appendages, their hair, their facial expressions are all consequences of the marriage of my skills and the medium with which I have worked to create these pieces.
Conclusion/Reflection

My desire to engage with the subject matter of fairy tales/folk tales in the medium of puppets speaks deeply to my personal nostalgia for a time when these things were taken seriously. Though I am not anti-science, industry, or “progress,” I am anti-disenchantment. This includes a distaste for our society’s obsession with the convenient and the digital. I am not anti-tech, but I am pro-analog. It is my belief that in reconnecting with what is real, it is easier to find our way back to the stories that we’ve left behind. This project has ultimately been an endeavor in rediscovering the pleasures of childhood stories, which are what we have inherited in lieu of mythologies and folk tales from cultures that we divorced long ago in the Western effort to create a global consumerist society. This is something, I believe, that extends well beyond myself as an individual. Our lack of connection to “magic” or “enchantment” coincides with a lack of community and analog connection outside of the vast network of social media.
Materials: Super Sculpey, wire, cotton batting, hot glue, mohair, cotton, cotton-silk blend, synthetic leather
Exhibit B: The Calleich

Materials: Super Sculpey, wire, cotton batting, hot glue, mohair, cotton, cotton-silk blend, polyester herringbone
Exhibit C: Baba Yaga

Materials: Super Sculpey, wire, cotton batting, hot glue, mohair, silk, cotton, synthetic velvet, RIT dye
Exhibit D: All Puppets Together
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