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Dirty Princesses

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debbiedoesdisney

MICHELE BEEVORS



We all grew up with Disney.

We have absorbed the iconography of Mickey's magical kingdom in childhood. Disney's vision is ubiquitous. These brightly coloured sanitised versions of Grimm and other tales have been part of pop culture since the 1920s; the images are slick, clean and family-friendly, the stories are child proofed. They are safe

The title provides the clue as to Beevors' approach to the topic. Her work is marked by an irreverent humour and a confrontational aesthetic. Her account is a deliberate clashing misremembered mishmash of popular cultural references, an extended visual mixed metaphor. 'Debbie Does Disney' plays on recognition, and uncertain memory, for comic effect.

When first encountering Beevors' oversized figures we confront the familiar. Yet this comfortable familiarity is immediately disrupted. These works are marked by a subversive return to the harsh cruelty of the original fairytales that have been homogenised and neutered by the Disney brand. Like the original tales these works are violent and crude and definitely not recommended for children. Yet at the same time these sculptures do contain the fascination of the Grimm versions of these tales in their depictions of the gross and the childish; indeed their sheer bad taste adds to their appeal to children of all ages. These works evoke the fascination with the forbidden. Despite the explicitness of some of these sculptures, these works are probably more disturbing for adults than for children.

The Disney studio's vision is often in stark contrast to that of the Brothers Grimm. Their original tales were not passive, not sweet, they were bloody, they describe cruel and violent acts; these stories were not polite. Their purpose was not initially entertainment for children; the brothers collected the folk traditions of German peasants and villages.

Although Beevors' works mark a return to the violence and implicit sexuality with which these original tales were imbued, the visual language that she uses is deliberately that of Disney's commercial products. These works are reminiscent not of the slickness of the animated movies but of their by-products, the

cheap souvenir toys, make-up, lunch-boxes, pencil cases or stickers. Unlike the often computer-generated images on the screen these figures have a crude power. They are deliberately clunky. Size matters here. These fibreglass creations are larger than life. These toys are colossal, out of the box and invading the Gallery.

The focus of Beevors' latest work is the Princess products that Disney began pushing about six years ago. Targeting girls, they promoted passive activities that were more suited to stereotypical understandings of behaviour suitable for girls, sitting, drawing, sleeping, rather than encouraging physical action. These adolescent heroines are often sweet, virtuous, chirpy, positive role models of passive femininity. Behaviour is categorised by age as well as gender. Youth is good, evil is adult, aged and corrupt.

Michele Beevors' vision of femininity, as projected in these sculptures, bears a closer resemblance to the behaviour of the schoolyard than the animated screen. In 'Bitches Brew More Cinderellas in a Tea Cup', for example, Cinderella slugs it out with her sisters, their faces distorted into nightmarish grimaces. Literally a storm in a teacup, this sculpture references not only the Disney theme-park ride, but in the raking slope of the saucer, it also calls up Géricault's 'Raft of the Medusa'. Unlike the protagonists of that painting, there seems little hope of escape from this childhood trauma.

Beevors' figures are not restrained, they are angry and sometimes grotesque; they represent women in extremis. Her sculptures portray betrayal, rivalry, eating disorders and death. These women are unreliable and sometimes self-destructive, for example, The Little Mermaid seeks to painfully force her body to conform to some unobtainable feminine ideal. Yet at the same time, in contrast to these images of self-defeat, is one of the few images of female triumph in this series. Only Jasmine, the conquering domestic servant, stands triumphant. Feather duster in hand, she holds up the head of George Bush in a not so subtle commentary on the current Iraqi war.

The ability of sculpture to take advantage of these visual links is obvious in these works. The scale, the interplay of shapes, the shifting perspectives as the viewer moves around

the exhibition creates a layering effect. Different meanings, different relations are uncovered that can sometimes undercut and subvert expectations depending on the angle that you approach these works. Beevors plays with the figures, creating new narratives and configurations, evoking the unexpected and surprising, sometimes shocking combinations that can be created in children's uncontrolled play with these toys. They remind us almost of a pile of discarded dolls. Simultaneously the fixed poses of the individual tableaux create a narrative of frozen moments, caught at the moment of greatest poignancy. These sculptures invade the gallery space.

Sculpture may lack the quality of instantaneous comprehension of two-dimensional painting, but it functions in time and its presence in our space gives it an undeniable immediacy that makes it hard to overlook. The three-dimensional elements are essential to the experience of these works. The scale too reminds us not just of the monumental works of art history but also of the fantasies of TV. Why do I think of 'Lost in Space' or 'Dr Who'? Beevors, like many of us, was raised through the television set. It has impacted on our morality, our knowledge and experience of the world. As she discovered when living in the U.S., it has become a cultural reference that can create bonds amongst foreigners and friendships can be created through the kinds of programmes we watch. Given the dominance of corporations like Disney in creating these connections, it is also important that we engage in some form of social critique of Mickey Mouse culture. The extent of that merchandising has permeated into the playground, the schoolroom and the bedroom makes the need for such a critique all the more necessary.

Gender, politics, popular culture and the commodification of cultural symbols have been consistent themes in Beevors' work. She has frequently made use of popular culture in her work, highlighted the ways that toys have not only provided fantasy role models for children but also introduced them to a lifetime of consumerism. In her large sculptural group, 'Psycho Killer and Friends' (2004) she also explored the links between Disney corporation, U.S. cultural imperialism and colonialism. Mickey, Pluto and Goofy are clad in colourful camouflage and holding weapons such as guns and hand grenades. In

these works, Beevors explicitly links Disney to U.S. interests internationally. This theme continues to permeate her current work.

While Beevors does critique the ideologies expressed in Disney's animation and marketing, there is still a deep-seated engagement in this world. The Seven Dwarves may be an anarchic, orgiastic collective of writhing figures, but they also reflect a kinship with the skills of the animators and cell-painters who created these early hand-crafted films. While Disney pushed his artists when producing Snow White, forcing them to work long hours for low wages, his employees apparently entertained themselves by producing crude orgy scenes involving Snow White and the dwarves. And after all, what did those dwarves get up to in the evenings before Snow White appeared?

Beevors' respect for these craftspeople is also played out in the labour-intensive nature of her own works. Each is carefully modelled, sanded and hand-painted, like a labour of love. These are not factory produced works, or an aping of a Jeff Koons slickness. These pieces are deliberately clunky, part of her focus on making, an approach that contrasts significantly with more classically inspired sculpture. This is not the polished aesthetic of Canova or even Marc Quinn, who plays with and then undercuts this aesthetic. The dwarves are the only nudes; and they mark a rejection of this classical language. For Beevors, she is not interested in making work such as Canova's as it would seem inappropriate. The colours are important in these works; the bright cartoon palette contradicts our expectations of what sculpture should look like. It enhances their similarity to plastic toys. There is an interest in the grotesque, the random, the discarded and the crude in Beevors' aesthetic, reminiscent of Paul McCarthy or Rachel Whiteread. These images do not represent ideals of beauty, but an embracing and celebration of ugliness, of anger. They bear the marks of their making on their surfaces. The making, the time, is an unexpected reminder of a work ethic that is often denied or missed in more polished productions. They are also explorations of formal problems, such as how to create something standing on its head, while not touching the ground; the challenge of the frontal demands inherent in the relief, where everything is frontal, and not active.



Michele Beevors' sculpture is an encounter with the familiar, but with a twist.

They are angry, yet their very audaciousness, their scale and their bright colours engage us. They dominate the space and challenge us, while the marks of their making remind us of the long process of their creation.

DIRTY PRINCESSES.

I have a friend who is a princess. After waiting for years she married a fine prince, bought the dream home, and adopted the designer cat. Some would say she was lucky, but these stories do not always have Disney endings. Not all princesses can get what they want, and the current political and social climate means it is well worth reflecting on the histories and impacts of the role-model princess – after all Brittney Spears made her debut on the Mickey Mouse Club.

A fairy story used to be a tale told and remade again and again by whoever was doing the telling. This narrative tradition goes back as far as the imagined locations of the fair princess who meets her destiny. That is until 1937 when an ailing production studio released its first animated feature film "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". Now one of many Disney Princesses, Snow White has to share her dreams with Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine, all of whom have royal title by marriage or birth. Mulan and Pocahontas are also included as princesses and recently the first African-American princess Tiana joined the gang. On the official Disney princesses website we are told how "Cinderella holds on to her hopes until goodness and beauty are rewarded and dreams that she's dreamed do come true." And that "by the time Ariel's wish to be human is granted, she realizes that there is something to be gained from a father's wisdom." Each princess is credited her own page and as we flick through the stories they become reduced into a myth of banal sameness. Possibly the most extreme rewriting of the princess story has been accorded Pocahontas, who not only had to suffer the loss of her tribal lands, the genocide of her people, and imprisonment for over a year, but the final indignity of having her marriage to an Englishman cut from the animated Disney tale.

Now Disney dominates the market in Princess stories, what are the options for a 21st century princess?

In the tradition of the 1967 Disneyland Memorial Orgy poster, Michele Beevors utilises the medieval technique of turning this sanctified world of the princess upside down. With a Bruegel-like excess princesses feud, frogs are kissed, and dwarfs are caught in the act...these are private fantasies played out in public. But do they offer us a tale any more truthful than the Disney originals?

Perhaps the only real option left for a princess is to be a porn star. Online Pocahontas porn is a huge industry, and harks back to the wonderfully smutty days of Debbie Does Dallas (1978) and the recently re-released Faster Pussy Cat Kill! Kill! (1965). The connections are not that tenuous. With a list of spin offs longer than a single wikipedia screen, Debbie does Dallas epitomises the real life dream of a princess ready to enter a grown up world: "everyone on the team scores when her pom-poms fly." However, it is the suppressed violence that seems to speak to current stories of public and private control. As one protagonist waxes: "Women! They let 'em vote, smoke and drive - even put 'em in pants! And what happens? A Democrat for president!" In both films women are accorded a dual role of villain and vixen, our pleasures are answered by theirs. But also in both the scale of activity is somewhat wrong. Is princess-porn enough?

In the world of Disney changes in scale give a sense of control and refuge, these environments make us comfortable and bleach out any sense of a space outside wracked by political and economic devastation. Even in the huge entertainment architectures of Disneyland every brick and lamp is about five-eighths true size, shrunk just enough to give a sense of comfort and security. This is a toy-world we can inhabit. Beevors takes things in the opposite direction. Her sculptures are bigger than they should be; they are disconcertingly well endowed, and open with their wilful acts of self-pleasure. Small things can be played with, but these dolls are not our playthings, and anyway they are too busy working through their own issues. What is perhaps most disturbing is the speed of the violence with which their stories can change. What else do we expect to happen when seven miners share a bed? In the first Disney movie, when Grumpy discovers Snow White in bed what does he say?: "Angel, huh? She's female, an' all females is poison! They're full o' wicked wiles." Beevors reminds us of the price paid for suppression of these wicked wiles. Should we be following the lead of the Disney princesses, and clean up all the nasty bits? Will this help us understand the ultimate goal of twenty-first century Princess propaganda? Even now many a virgin princess must suffer blood-loss in order to finally fall asleep, the blood a disturbing blot on her purity. To not

acknowledge this is simply an act of censorship.

Disney himself produced animations that required censorship due to adult sensibilities about children's abilities to understand the difference between on-screen and off-screen violence. And today, cartoons, games and music videos are still blamed for callous acts of extreme violence. Where is a line crossed? In Disney's Mad Doctor (1933) Mickey is strapped to a table and a rotating saw threatens to cut him in half. The scene is disturbing because it is so vivid. No longer able to laugh at the slapstick we become genuinely concerned for Mickey. This is violence as a reality that we cannot distance ourselves from. Can we really know how a child might read this image? Many children experience gross acts of violence daily, not just on screen but in the real spaces of the playground and the home. These real life experiences mean they are sophisticated in their understandings and abilities to empathise with characters before them. However the princess narrative is not only directed at children. Victims of domestic violence talk about identifying with a Disney princess, and possibility she offers to escape her situation: "I knew I could change him back into the prince I fell in love with if only I could love him enough."

None of this makes for pleasant viewing. Beevors makes us complicit in these acts of violence and self-harm, and these princesses reflect the disturbing private lives of contemporary society as they harm not only themselves but by implication us. Still, I prefer the sordid reality of these princesses to the mindless aggression of the gross merchandising machine that accompanies the new release of a Disney princess story, and reflects a contemporary social morality built on fear and complacency.

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link: the official Disney princesses website.
http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main_iframe.html



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