

Advertisement



06 MAY 1998

# Seeing is Believing

## How photography killed Victorian Fairy Painting

When William Blake reported a fairy funeral in his back garden, it's doubtful anyone demanded proof of what he had seen. That, of course, was before the camera entered the picture. Photography attempted to make up for the supposed inability of previous generations to record visually what was 'really' there, by providing apparently objective evidence for manifestations that could otherwise only be supported on a subjective basis. Confusing art with a kind of faux-scientific journalism, one casualty of this somewhat misguided will-to-truth was the representation of fairies. Developments in photography demanded that fairies - symbolic remnants of a displaced people, fallen angels, heathen dead or the unconscious made flesh - relocate from their niche in the imagination of folklorists, dramatists and artists, to science's inhospitable laboratory. It was a move that, as it inadvertently sanitised, de-sexualised and trivialised fairy mythology, revealed elements of truth and fiction, and showed the boundaries between genres and media to be as layered and co-dependant as the pieces of a Russian Doll.

'I see only phantoms that strike my eye, but disappear as soon as I try to grasp them' wrote Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1769. 1 The difficulty of grasping phantoms and the myriad motivations for wanting to do so have, over the centuries, been manifold. During no period in history, however, was the attempt made more vigorously than in Victorian Britain, where phantoms assumed wings and found their way into painting. This move satisfied the period's schizophrenic thirst for an aesthetic that could accommodate the erotic without censorship and the spiritual without Puritanism. The recent exhibition at London's Royal Academy focussed on the golden age of fairy painting - between about 1840 and 1870, when Victorian England's hypocrisy was at its most entertaining. This period produced the wildly hallucinogenic and immensely popular paintings of John Anster 'Fairy' Fitzgerald, the almost supernatural powers of observation of Richard Dadd, and the microscopically painted, thinly veiled orgies of Noel Paton and Robert Huskisson, which masqueraded as meetings of fairy courts or pious religious allegories.

Exempt from the rules of propriety that governed the human world, fairy painters were given a free expressive rein, a convenient loophole in the logic of Victorian prudery. Towards the end of the century, however, sobriety, piety and rationalism triumphed. Laudanum, the opiate derivative widely used by painters (and Queen Victoria) was banned in 1868; in 1872 Bristol's John Beattie captured, 'like clay in the hands of an artist' apparitions in his camera lens; and fairies, increasingly purged of their complexity and sexuality, were 'diminished of their mythic force', becoming almost exclusively linked to children's fairy tales. 2 3 Photography's representation of this mythic dimension rendered their painting either frivolous or irrelevant.

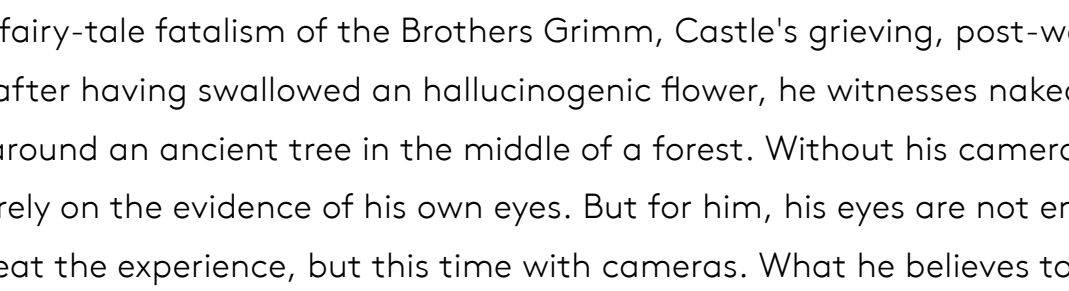
The 19th century's reaction to photography was described by Walter Benjamin as a 'fetishistic and fundamentally anti-technical concept of art'. 4 Would the camera's 'objectivity' invalidate the imaginary realm of painting? According to Benjamin it was this unresolved tension between the hierarchies of different media that lay at the heart of the period's ambivalence towards photography. Reality is a multi-layered state - the photograph, with its unique relationship to time and space, reproduces the most visible of reality's levels. But paradoxically, this relationship to visibility led to a rather simplistic understanding of 'truth'. 'Photography' complained Daumier, 'imitates everything and expresses nothing. It is blind to the world of spirit.' 5

If what you see is dependant upon where and who you are, is the image that you create to represent this experience - whether made from paint or light and chemicals - a journalistic one, or can it have broader, more 'artistic' claims? This is obviously not a question that was ever directed at fairy painting. In photography, however, the result is often what Benjamin describes as 'arty journalism'. 6 Two recent film releases, Photographing Fairies (1997) and Fairy Tale - A True Story (1998) provide a case in point. 'Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality', observed Brecht, and this just about sums up the strange case of the Cottingley Fairies, an incident that was to be the inspiration for both movies, the coda to a century of public fascination with the spirit world, and an illustration of the camera's confused relationship to sight and belief. 7 The story shares uncanny similarities with the event that inspired the 19th century's obsession with the spirit world: in 1848, in Hydesville, New York, the Fox sisters, Maggie (aged 13) and Kate (12) communicated in their home, by means of raps and knocking, with the spirit of a former, murdered lodger. Now discredited (the girls tied an apple to a string which they banged against the floor), their prank, signifying the beginning of an empirical fascination with the spirit world, initially acted as a stimulus, but ultimately a death knell, to Victorian fairy painting.

In 1917, Elsie Wright (aged 16) took a photograph of her ten-year old cousin Frances with a group of dancing fairies in front of a waterfall in Cottingley, Yorkshire. It was 'the first photograph of her life - a photograph, which was, over the next few years, to become one of the most vigorously debated in the whole strange history of psychic photography.' 8 A second photograph, taken by Frances, of Elsie with a gnome appeared three weeks later. The negatives came into the possession of Edward L. Gardner, of London's Theosophical Society (motto: There is no Religion Higher than the Truth) in 1920. Theosophists believe that as humanity develops, more of the phenomenological world will become visible. If the photographs were real, it meant that for the first time beings had materialised at a density sufficient for the images to be recorded on a photographic plate. An excited Gardner visited the girls and supplied them with two new cameras. They created three more fairy images. For over 50 years, Elsie and Frances asserted that they really had photographed fairies. Then, just before they died, they confessed that the fairies were really paper cut-outs. 'From where I was' commented Frances in December 1982, 'I could see the hatpins holding up the figures. I've always marvelled that anybody ever took it seriously.' 9

It seems hard to believe, but the images, which now look unequivocally fake, created a furore. Ironically it was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (creator of Sherlock Holmes) and Harry Houdini (master of visual trickery), who were amongst the girls' most vociferous supporters. It's also ironic that, according to Elsie, she and Frances felt that deception was the only way they could make people believe in their fairy sightings, which to the end she asserted to be true.

Nick Willing's Photographing Fairies opens in Switzerland in 1912. The first few seconds of the film show a pair of superimposed eyes emerging gradually from the earth's more transient elements - snow, clouds and sky. It's an image that establishes sight to be as subjective and temporal as it is 'natural', physical and unmediated. Photographer Charles Castle is on an alpine honeymoon, when, in a snowstorm, his new wife falls down a ravine and is killed. Told by priests that she is 'in a better place, in the next world' he becomes profoundly indifferent to that of his own. His attitude is compounded by subsequent experiences in the trenches during the First World War - an environment that, with its 'bewildering landscape of indistinguishable, shadowy shapes, illuminated by lightning flashes of blinding intensity' was more 'visually disorientating than...19th century technical innovations such as the railroad, the camera or the cinema.' 10



Castle trusts cameras because they 'don't see things, they record what is there'. A pivotal early scene in the film shows him at a meeting of the Theosophical Society vocally denouncing the Cottingley photographs as fraudulent. According to his logic, the truth of an image is hermetically sealed in the image itself, a credo he articulates by noting the discrepancy between the movement of the waterfall and the movement of the fairy wings. The scene is deceptively straightforward - a fictitious retelling of an actual event predicated on a fiction which was meant to confirm a truth. But what is particularly noticeable about the scene is that the photographer's argument centres not so much around the existence or otherwise of fairies as on the potential of photography as a truth-revealing tool.

With the classic fairy-tale fatalism of the Brothers Grimm, Castle's grieving, post-war realism dissolves when, after having swallowed an hallucinogenic flower, he witnesses naked, humanoid fairies spinning around an ancient tree in the middle of a forest. Without his camera, Castle - like a painter - has to rely on the evidence of his own eyes. But for him, his eyes are not enough. He attempts to repeat the experience, but this time with cameras. What he believes to be a fairy presence is captured on film, a belief that results in his being condemned to hang for the death of a vicar he accidentally kills during a fight over the camera. 'You can't capture God on a camera ...it's not proof you need, it's faith' shouts the doomed vicar. This may seem an extreme reaction to what is fundamentally an argument about aesthetics, but the exchange is uncannily similar to one that raged in the pages of the 19th-century German newspaper Leipziger Stadtanzeiger in opposition to the new developments in photography in France. 'To try and capture fleeting mirror images', it thundered, 'is not just an impossible undertaking, as has been established after thorough German investigation; the very wish to do such a thing is blasphemous. Man is made in the image of God, and God's image cannot be captured by any machine of human devising.' 11

Fairy Tale - A True Story takes an altogether lighter, more optimistic attitude towards photography's relationship with representation, and, ironically, to truth-telling. Director Charles Sturridge has altered certain key narrative points to support his own version of the events. Still, revisionism has always been rife in the dissemination of fairy tales. Folklore and fairy tales evolved out of myths, which, as the embodiments of the cumulative experience of generations of country-dwellers, changed constantly. 12 Shakespeare, for example, who made use of contemporary folklore in A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest (the subjects of many 19th century fairy paintings) never mentioned fairy wings. Dickens, who had once commented that if he could have married Little Red Riding Hood, he should have known perfect bliss, engaged in a very public dispute with George Cruickshank, (who in 1823 had been the first British illustrator of the Tales of the Brothers Grimm), about the latter's tendency to transform fairy tales into religious tracts on the evils of drink. This constant re-interpretation - from oral folk tales to literary fairy tales, from culture to culture, language to language - was symptomatic of wider cultural changes taking place in Victorian England: the sublimation of ancient, rural mythologies into an increasingly urbanised and mercantile world.

Sturridge's film makes clear that if the world of fairies shares anything with photography it is their relationship to death, mourning and renewal. Elsie's father is filled with regret that he doesn't have a photograph of his dead son, a regret that prompts him to buy the camera that the girls use to take their fairy photographs. The girls believe their fairy photographs will help assuage the grief of Elsie's mother by convincing her that her son is, quite simply, in another dimension, a belief shared by Sir Conan Doyle, whose son was killed in the trenches. But whereas Photographing Fairies ends on a grieving note for a life not fully lived, Fairy Tale - A True Story ends with Frances, who has steadfastly refused to believe her father was killed on the Western Front, reunited with him after being woken by an (un-photographed) Fairy Queen and Court in her bedroom. Photography for Elsie and Frances functions as an entertainment and an expressive tool, but unlike Charles Castle, has ultimately had no role in the development of their already unshakeable belief systems.

Considering the amount of attention recently lavished upon them, it would appear that although diminished, fairies refuse to disappear. Perhaps, once again, bewildering developments in technology and increasing urbanisation are making other dimensions appear not so much improbable as desirable - but it's still a desirability tempered by our culture's uneasy acceptance of 'invisible' possibilities. Is the X Files ('The Truth is Out There') a new fairy tale? Are aliens the new fairies? If Victorian society became increasingly seduced by the attempt to domesticate, castrate and authenticate ancient folklore in order to control nature as a positive and material presence, the late 20th century is perhaps doing the same with outer-space - 'The Pope' according to a recent news story, 'has asked a team of top astronomers to try to find the fingerprints of God amongst the chaos of the cosmos'. 13 Proving faith - an activity abandoned by art and discredited by photography - has become, it would seem, rather problematic.

1. Jean Jaques Rousseau, La Nouvelle Heloise, part 2, p. 17, quoted by Martin Jay in Downcast Eyes - The Denigration of Vision in 20th century French Thought, Berkeley and Los Angeles: U.C.P, 1997 p.213
2. Rolf H.Krauss, Beyond Light and Shadow, Munich: Nazraeli Press, 1995 p.113
3. Charlotte Gere, Victorian Fairy Painting, London: Merrell Holborton, 1997 p.68
4. Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in One Way Street and Other Writings, London: NLB, 1979 p.241
5. Martin Jay, op cit., p.138
6. Walter Benjamin, op cit., p.254
7. Ibid, p.255
8. Rolf H.Krauss, op. cit., p.187
9. Ibid, p.196
10. Rolf H. Krauss, op. cit., p.212
11. Walter Benjamin, op cit., p.241
12. Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, London: Penguin, 1991 pp25-17
13. The Guardian, December, 1997

First published in Issue 40  
May 1998

Share this:

ART

Advertisement



**Building a Future from the Rubble: The Second Lagos Biennial**

**At MASS MoCA, Cauleen Smith Builds an Afrofuturist World**

**'World's Best Teacher' Plans to Use \$1M Winnings to Bring Artists into Disadvantaged Schools**

**Weekend Reading List**

**Weekend Reading List**

**Weekend Reading List**

**Tanz der Vibratoren**

**Think Tank**

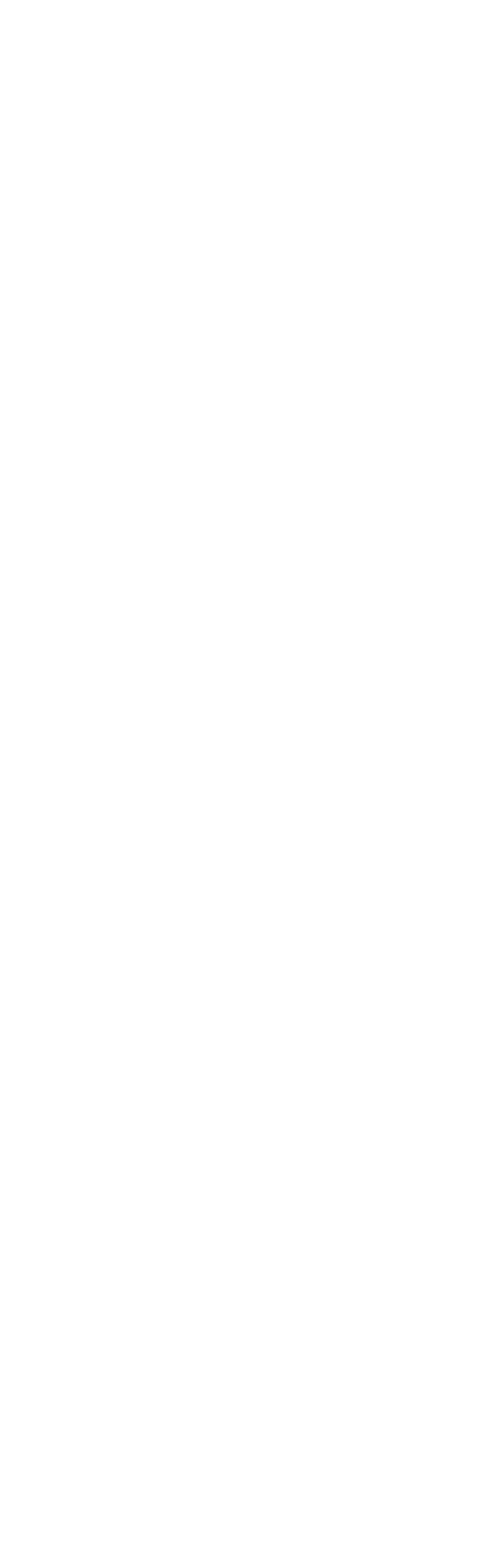
**Aufgeklärte Nostalgie**

**Postcard from Vienna**

**Postkarte aus Wien**

**Mark Prince's Top 10 Texts (and Film) about Painting**

Advertisement



## MOST READ

SEE ALL



The Threat to Freedom of Expression in Japan



I Learned Enormous Things: Hans Ulrich Obrist Remembers Marisa Merz (1931-2019)



Editors' Picks: Our Favourite Art World Holiday Destinations



An Afrofuturism Show With No Black Artists: What Went Wrong at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien?

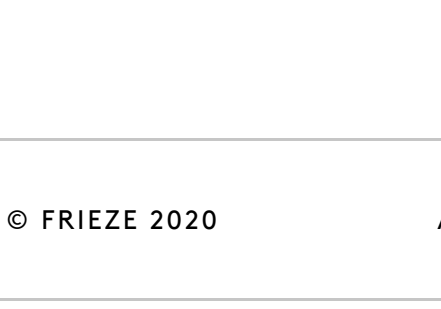


Pop Culture Is the Great Educator: An Interview with Peter Saville



'Learning How to Be Queer Again': Remember Douglas Crimp (1944-2019)

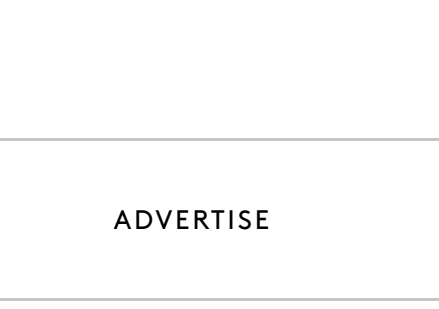
## LATEST MAGAZINES



frieze magazine  
Issue 209  
March 2020



frieze magazine  
Issue 210  
April 2020



frieze magazine  
Issue 211  
May 2020

# Subscribe now and save up to 40%

SUBSCRIBE

London  
1 Surrey Street  
London  
WC2R 2ND, UK  
+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York  
247 Centre St  
5th Floor  
New York, NY 10013  
+1 212 463 7488

Berlin  
Zehdenicker Str. 28  
D-10119 Berlin  
Germany  
+49 30 7675 80230

DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION  
Powered by OneTrust

© FRIEZE 2020

ABOUT

CAREERS

ADVERTISE

LEGALS

PRIVACY POLICY

COOKIE POLICY

CONTACT US