OUT OF THE ORDINARY

regenerating the imagination

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Masters of Arts by research at Charles Darwin University, Darwin, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

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Catriona Stanton
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Abstract

Poetic imagination, the importance of reverie and thinking beyond the known world, underpins the approach to this thesis. The desire to find a visual language founded on memoirs and the phenomena of the imagination, for me, leads to the notion of childhood. Childhood is a cultural construct, a late eighteenth century invention, revealing more about adult longings than the social conditions of the child. Home, the first world of the child, is explored as a site of security and discomfort through the architectural uncanny.

Fairy tales, the literary staple for many children, are inherent in this body of work. Is the forest a place of life threatening danger or is it a wilderness to nourish the soul? Is the wolf a predator upon the innocent young feminine or is it the signifier of sexual promiscuity? The aura of foreboding and fear that surrounds fairy tales is examined for function and exploited for effect. The abject, all that we find repulsive and despicable, is toyed with to reverse convention and open up a casket of horrors.

The unsettling and the strange are the predecessors to the making that occur in the studio. Soft sculptures, video footage, toothpick constructions, works on paper and digital photography are the mediums employed to explore the imaginary realm. A survey of curatorial themes addresses questions about the relevance of fantasy and fiction in the current political climate.
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Introduction
The forest of the fairy tale is a dangerous place, one where nightmares come true. Or one where you come up against things you don’t understand or are better off not knowing. It reminds me of the scene in *The Piano* where the woman is being dragged through the root landscape on the way to have her finger cut off - which is right in there of course, with Red Riding Hood, the wolf, the forest and the axe!¹

A trip to Ireland and Canada in 2002 roused long forgotten memories of childhood: Eurocentric fairy tales of woods, wolves, castles and snow (see Plates 1-5). Fur and ice are elements that are distinctly associated with my childhood stories rather than my lived experience so when these elements were encountered in a foreign land, a door was opened to an aspect of my poetic imagination that had not been aired for decades. I am particularly interested in the state entered into in order to access these residual imprints on the psyche. Poetic imagination, the importance of reverie and thinking beyond the known world, has been a major influence on the approach to the studio practice. It has been my intention to enter a creative space that allows the imagination to roam, re-engage with potent memories and dare to cross the threshold where meaning collapses. Embarking into the world of childhood can be fraught and provocative due to the idealised notions that we invest it with. As stated in the catalogue essay of *Mixed up childhood*:

> heavy images of childhood sit along idyllic ones, but we usually gloss over the contradictions. If childhood is depicted as a warm nest, it could be equally characterised as harsh, impoverished, repressive and scary......Childhood is an amorphous, gnarly category.²

This reactive and inviolable territory presents a wealth of archetypal resonances and possibilities.

A diverse range of mediums and techniques have been employed to explore the shadowy realm of the imaginary. I subscribe to Helene Cixious’ feminine sensibility that refuses to be reductive or unified but accepts slippage, a lack of cohesion and the loss of the authoritative voice.³ The multifarious elements comprising this body of work include constructions of cane and toothpicks, soft sculptures of faux fur, architectural structures of wood and hessian, twigs cast in bronze, video projection of morphing fur forms and bandaged children in black and white photographs.

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1. Mountain path  
Banff, Alberta, Canada, 2002  
Photo Catriona Stanton

2. Tipi, Banff Centre for the Arts,  
Alberta, Canada, 2002.  
Photo Catriona Stanton

3. Pine forest,  
Banff, Alberta, Canada, 2002.  
Photo Catriona Stanton

4. Faux castle,  
Banff, Alberta, Canada, 2002.  
Photo Catriona Stanton

5. Bridge,  
Banff, Alberta, Canada, 2002.  
Photo Catriona Stanton
different components have been selected and placed into relationship with one another in a series of installations. This approach, akin to foraging, is reflected in the text where reference material is wide ranging but not necessarily comprehensive.

The epistemological value of fairy tales and their ability to contact repressed ego disturbances is fundamental to my research. Jack Zipes, Angela Carter and Bruno Bettelheim have been intrinsic in understanding the historical, political, cultural and social conditions in which fairy tales developed. Bettelheim informs us that the polarised characters typical of fairy tales address the anxieties of the child which are often otherwise denied by parents. The unsettling nature of fairy tales leads to Freud’s notion of the uncanny or the unheimlich, literally translated as the unhomely, where the familiar becomes estranged through the process of the repressed coming to light. The child, who is often the protagonist and simultaneously the recipient of these tales, is grappling with life and trying to find ways of dealing with inner pressures. Fairy tales address some of these complex conditions including what Julia Kristeva coined “the abject” in relation to the inability of the child to separate from the mother and the demise of the subject. The protagonist's perilous journey is understood in terms of abjection where borders are transgressed and the terrain is ambiguous in nature.

Pondering this I wanted to explore the question of whether the poetic imagination has a place in today's highly charged political world of terrorism. Is it a place of escapism or is it a genuine engagement with how we experience the world? Is it possible to rupture existing social and political structures through offering imaginings of new Utopias? Can fiction and fantasy propose new subjectivities that are neither the universal subject nor the authentic other?

In the first year of my candidature I retreated into solitude with the intention of uncovering personal recollections. Writing without censoring first thing in the

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5 Ibid., pp. 9-11.
morning helped contact dormant memories. Drawing with watercolours was an immediate yet fluid way to bring these recollections into being (see Plates 6-11). As Louise Bourgeois states, “drawing is indispensable because all these ideas buzzing around have to be caught like flies or butterflies: you save them and use them”.

Producing ten to fifteen drawings in a session, often a recurring poignant theme announced itself. These themes were then explored in a variety of materials that had resonance with the idea such as fragile toothpicks, seductive fur and raw hessian. The sculptural possibilities of the materials were explored through play, allowed to evolve and then refined. This process culminated in an exhibition at Depot Gallery Sydney, titled Lost, in early 2006 (see Plates 12-16, 19-22).

Continuing exploration of the materials in the studio led to two further exhibitions in the second year of my studies. An exhibition at Raft Artspace, entitled Act Natural, provided an opportunity to show with two other artists: Neil Emmerson and Anne-Marie May. Notions of forest and mountain were developed as metaphors for the primordial battle with the self. Twigs cast in bronze formed a miniature forest when inserted into a wall. Tent forms were constructed of dowel and plastic to imitate the apex of a mountain. The final exhibition Estranged Tales is situated at the Charles Darwin University Gallery. The sense of foreboding that lies beneath the seemingly innocent appearance of fairy tales is what fascinates me. It has been my intention to reinstate the darker dimensions of the imaginary realm. Instinctual and primal urges create pathways to the abject and the uncanny. I have revisited some earlier imagery, works on paper and video footage, to dig deeper into the subterranean depths of my imagination.

A major objective of this research has been to discover a personal lexicon founded on the psychological ground of my childhood memories, encounters in foreign lands and relationships to inhabited space. The challenge has been to relinquish control of the materials and open a space for dialogue between my intentions, the materials and the process. My intention has been to breathe life into the process of art making by working with elementary materials and asking them to function as a conduit for meaningful communication.

The following chapters are structured according to recurring motifs that arose in the studio practice: the stairwell, tower, forest, mountain, and wolf. In each of the

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6. Catriona Stanton, *Two Headed Man*, 2006, pen and watercolour on 100% cotton 200 GSM watercolour paper, 24.8 x 17.3 cm

7. Catriona Stanton, *Bed of Trees*, 2006, pen and watercolour on 100% cotton 200 GSM watercolour paper, 24.8 x 17.3 cm

8. Catriona Stanton, *Running House*, 2006, pen and watercolour on 100% cotton 200 GSM watercolour paper, 24.8 x 17.3 cm

9. Catriona Stanton, *Stairwell*, 2006, pen and watercolour on 100% cotton 200 GSM watercolour paper, 17.2 x 12.3 cm

10. Catriona Stanton, *The Trees*, 2006, pen and watercolour on 100% cotton 200 GSM watercolour paper, 24.8 x 17.3 cm

11. Catriona Stanton, *Mountains*, 2006, pen and watercolour on 100% cotton 200 GSM watercolour paper, 24.8 x 17.3 cm
chapters I have chosen to foreground the artwork relating to the relevant motif. How the motifs operate in particular fairytales is used to extrapolate underlying themes. In Appendix 1 I have included what I mean by the term fairy tale and how it is relevant to this area of research.

In chapter one, I begin with the interior space of the stairwell in the childhood home. Home as wellspring of the poetic imagination is investigated through the writings of Gaston Bachelard. I examine miniaturisation as a device to open up fresh readings of the real and the imagined. Personal anecdotes on contradictory relationships to home, from nurturing to horrifying, prompt discussion on the architectural uncanny. Spiral staircases transpire into imaginary towers recalling the tale of Rapunzel.

From the interior spaces of my memories in chapter two I move to exterior spaces of forests and mountains with reference to Grimms’ tales. This is where the protagonists must venture out into the unknown. The woods are interpreted as the dark side of the psyche, a proposition illustrated through the story of Hansel and Gretel. Here, the struggle for individuation is understood through Kristeva’s theory of abjection.\(^{10}\) Sharp toothpicks characterise my renditions of mountains and forests in the studio. Spikes illicit the horror of abjection, a device identified in Angela Carter’s novel *The bloody chamber and other stories*.\(^{11}\) The enormity of mountains and the associated rapture and terror experienced in their presence is used to create a nightmarish vision.

From the interior/exterior of the stairwell/forest I then arrive at the carnal in chapter three. Here the wolf is explored as predator and seducer and analysed in relation to the untamed and instinctual sexual drives. Two interpretations of Little Red Riding Hood are referenced to unravel the multiple readings of this potent figure of fairy tales. Ambiguous fur forms lead us back to Kristeva and her discussion of the threatened subject. Barbara Creed’s notion of the monstrous feminine is also expounded upon in reference to the orifice like forms.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) Barbara Creed, *The monstrous feminine: film, feminism and psychoanalysis* (London:
Themes of fantasy, fiction and imagination can be seen to occur in contemporary art. Melbourne based curator, Juliana Engberg, speculated on the revival of myth and new Utopias in Melbourne’s 1999 Biennial.\textsuperscript{13} Richard Grayson, curator of the 2002 Biennale of Sydney, titled the event \textit{(The world may be) fantastic}, seeking out the weird and wonderful.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Where the Wild Things Are}, a survey show at the University of Technology Gallery, Sydney in 2005, undertook the make believe as its premise. The Venice Biennale in 2005 included numerous artists who traverse the terrain of fiction and fantasy. How do artists work with these themes and do they offer new subjectivities or identify deep seated collective anxieties? In chapter four, Contemporary Imaginings, I will examine these issues within this field of relevance.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.; Ewen Mc Donald, ed., \textit{(The world may be) fantastic: the 2002 Biennale of Sydney} (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 2002).
Stairwells and
Towers
A miniature set of stairs constructed of toothpicks perch precariously on the floor linking to a series of tracks suspended above. The tracks, not dissimilar to railways, arc up and down a horizontal axis casting linear shadows. In the corner a pier winds gently up to meet the wall. The platform tilts and curves on spindly legs to meet an s shaped track leading to the emptiness beyond. Another toothpick staircase is hung in the distance. Neither ladder nor stairs, these slanting steps abruptly end and begin nowhere. Occupying the central area are fifteen lengths of cane. Hung from the ceiling at varying heights, these verticals support spiralling steps. A sinker located at the base gently rotates each helix when the air is stirred. Close by on the floor a flexible ladder is wound into a coil and then loosely unravelled. The toothpicks point skyward imitating a fence 15 (see Plates 12-16).

A deliberate attempt to bring the child’s presence into awareness is undertaken with these miniature structures. It is nostalgia for the imaginary freedom of childhood which has instigated these works. Diminutive scale is a device which permits the imagination to roam freely into stored memories and unknown adventures. Susan Stewart in On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir and the collection reveals how:

the miniature offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularised and generalised in time – particularised in that the miniature concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the abstract rule, but generalised in that the instance comes to transcend, to stand for, a spectrum of other instances.16

A whole array of associations and impressions are triggered by miniscule renderings which gives license for the mind to wander and construct fictions. The attempt to recapture and reconstruct a remembered past reveals more about adult longings and attachments than what it is to be a child. In the catalogue of the exhibition Mixed-up childhood Craw tells us that “we view childhood through a nostalgic lens of care and envy, seeing it as something we have lost”.17 A sense of loss is what is being grappled with in these works, a yearning for home and the innocence of early years. And yet is there anything to be gained from foraging in the past? It might just be that concealed within those Utopian visions of childhood, lurking beneath the idyllic veneer is precisely what is desperately trying to be avoided in the here and now. Cruelty, brutality, injustice and vulnerability are all part of the gamut of conditions experienced by minors, typified by fairy tales discussed further into the paper. I seek to acknowledge what Craw and Leonard have declared; that “childhood is a conundrum”, a dilemma between the reality of a child and the fantasies projected on it by adults which ultimately shape the conditions placed on

installation Depot Gallery, Sydney. Photo Kristin Clarke

13. Catriona Stanton, *Coiled Track* (detail), 2006, cane, toothpicks, string and glue
installation Depot Gallery, Sydney. Photo Kristin Clarke

Depot Gallery, Sydney. Photo Catriona Stanton

15. Catriona Stanton, *Forest* (detail), 2006, cane, toothpicks, fishing line and sinkers and glue
installation Depot Gallery, Sydney. Photo Kristin Clarke

Depot Gallery, Sydney. Photo Kristin Clarke
Besides prompting nostalgic allusions, games with scale can also disrupt expectations transporting us to the realm of the fantastic or surreal. Stewart states that miniaturisation creates “an entirely new temporal world” which exists outside of our mundane lives. A small doorway can potentially open an aperture to a parallel universe where anything is possible. She uses the example of the miniature train set to exemplify how a reduction in scale transforms the utilitarian into a plaything:

In the further miniaturization of the table-top train set, we have an access to simultaneity and transcendence completed…. the movement here is correspondingly one from work to play, from utility to aesthetics, from ends to means.

This reversal in function is precisely what is being sought in the studio and with any luck might translate from the artwork to the audience. The inherent meaning and function of the object is challenged by its materiality. This parody of the minute, according to Bachelard, forces us to cross the threshold of absurdity which can be both amusing and liberating for the imagination. The hand manipulating the small at will is imagined as akin to playing God. Not only are we free to invent our own narrative but we set extraneous things in motion and ordain their fate. This is how the miniature comes to be read as a metaphor for “interiority and fictiveness”. The private wonderland of reverie and sovereignty is what makes the miniature so appealing.

The mock architectural constructions came out of the desire to find a visual language sourced from recollections and the phenomena of the imagination. I initially turned to Gaston Bachelard who fosters the poetic imagination with his deep regard for nests of solitude that can be found in the familiar corners of the home. He claims that “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream”. Following Bachelard’s lead I permitted myself to dream back to my childhood home. This required stillness, contemplation and the

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18 Ibid., p. 162.
19 Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, p. 57.
20 Ibid., p. 59.
21 Ibid., p. 57.
23 Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, p. 60.
valuing of nebulous memories and feelings:

The scene is set. 1974 Hay Street. The hall, the stairwell, the disjuncture, the cupboard under the stairs, the madness. A tiny thing becomes big, a big thing becomes small, wood becomes metal, present is ancient, the child is the mother of the woman, the inanimate animates my anima, the process is the finish.25

The stairwell in my childhood home signifies the dialectics of wonder and terror. One of my earliest memories is of standing at the bottom of the stairs, cool chequered tiles under foot, feeling the cavernous space of the stairwell, sensing the void and the fear of being lost in it. Here was the hub, the mediator, the point of arrival and departure, the core architectural structure in the house and what connected above with below. It was also the playground of my youth; sliding down the banisters, a massive slippery dip of mattresses, the physical challenge of jumping from landing to landing. The stairs harboured some of my deepest fears. Towering shadows of the murderous butcher, baker and candlestick maker ascending was a recurring nightmare of my early years. Then there was the obscure cupboard beneath, which, to my horror, devoured the cat. The cupboard possessed this uncanny ability “to elude the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming”.26 The stairs became a signifier of my creative reservoir in the studio practice. Banisters staging as fortress bastions, hospital beds as stallions, curtains as frontiers to spotted lands and chequered tiles as turbulent waters act as the hereditary signatures of belonging, signposts of my first universe.

This first world is characterised by the disturbing paradox of home as a site of both succour and estrangement. Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny originates from the German terms “heimlich/unheimlich” or the homely/unhomely which examines this duplicitous nature. In Gothic Sublimity David Morris elucidates that the uncanny derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but on the contrary from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it.27

“Dream-like visions of doubling and death” invading the intimate spaces of the home

“trigger our most primitive desires and fears”\textsuperscript{28}. Intellectual uncertainty is a defining feature of the uncanny as is the blurring of boundaries between imagination and reality, life and death.\textsuperscript{29} Freud uses one example by Ernst Jentsch where it is not clear whether the figure of a story is a real being or a robot and this uncertainty is not immediately resolvable. We have wandered into fertile ground; the adrenalin rush of the story, attraction and repulsion, compelled by something recognisable yet partly obscured, threatening to divulge horror.

In the \textit{Architectural uncanny} Vidler remarks that the house features prominently in literature and film as the source of horror through hauntings and poltergeists.\textsuperscript{30} This undermining of the site traditionally identified with security, comfort, and nurture reflects the anxiety of “urban estrangement” and “a fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home”.\textsuperscript{31} The horror movie exploits these neuroses haunting the darker corners of our intimate spaces to terrify our souls (one only has to mention Alfred Hitchcock to know what I am referring to) (See plate 17). Bachelard takes this prognosis further where the house is imagined as a “vertical being”, madness lurking in the cellar and rationality in the loft.\textsuperscript{32} The dread associated with the cupboard under the stairs highlights an apprehension of discovering the beast that occupies my own lair. Underlying the idealised suburban veneer is the potential collapse of psychic boundaries. These darker dimensions will be discussed further into the paper when we enter the woods in chapter two. Firstly, however, I want to demarcate the relationship between fairy tales and the uncanny.

In Freud’s account the uncanny cannot operate in the fairy tale. This is due to the understanding that “reality is left behind from the very start” of the fairy tale with the opening phrase “Once upon a time...".\textsuperscript{33} According to Freud the uncanny can only operate when there is uncertainty between the believable and the unbelievable, the real and the unreal. However Jack Zipes argues that the uncanny can be experienced through the reading and reception of the fairy tale. He asserts that:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Freud, \textit{The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud}, p. 244.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Vidler, \textit{Architectural uncanny}, p. ix.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., pp. 3 - 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Bachelard, \textit{The poetics of space}, p. 17.
\end{itemize}
the very act of reading a fairy tale is an uncanny experience in that it separates the reader from the restrictions of reality from the onset and makes the repressed unfamiliar familiar once again.\textsuperscript{34}

I am interested in this uncanny capability of fairy tales wherein we exit the familiar which is simultaneously unsettling and comforting. Transporting the reader to estranged territory and permitting access to repressed anxieties is an undertaking that evokes both reticence and morbid fascination.

Spirals feature prominently in the toothpick constructions and it is the permutations of the spiral that “offer metonymies through which to explore personal memories” and anguished mental states.\textsuperscript{35} The act of delving into the vault of our being rummaging for long forgotten details can be visualised as the motion of a corkscrew excavating deeper and deeper into our interior landscape. The vertigo of precarious psychological states can also be conjured up by the heady dynamics of the spiral. The sensations of being giddy, dizzy and light-headed, experienced when peering down a circular stairwell, are not dissimilar to the imbalance felt when in the grips of a nervous disorders. Chistiane Meyer-Thoss examines the psychological potency of the spiral in the work of Louise Bourgeois (See plate 18). The polar motions of the helix; one where there is a winding in is explained as an attempt to be in control through a tightening of the grip, the other is an unravelling out through the loosening of the grip, envisaged as life affirming trust.\textsuperscript{36} This highlights a dual nature, potentially intensifying into anxiety and depression or, antithetically, delineating positive growth and unfolding life forms. The doubling effect of rotation metaphorically corresponds to the uncanny where states recur and resurface in a cyclical rhythm. Frances Morris equates the spiral staircase, “technically the most efficient way of providing vertical access within a confined space”, with “those most private and mysterious spaces secreted within the everyday structures we inhabit, such as attics or cellars”.\textsuperscript{37} Hence correlations between the architectural structures; spiral stairs, attics and cellars with the psychological ground of secrets, memories and primal fears is reinstated and affirmed.

From the dark cellars of human fallibility I gradually ascend to the cloistered heights of the tower. The metered making of toothpick structures in the studio steadily evolves.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. p. 174.
\textsuperscript{37} Warner, \textit{Louise Bourgeois}, p. 8.
Skeletal structures made of cane and toothpicks are built to reach just above eye height. One tower has a core of spiralling toothpicks encased by vertical lengths of cane creating a cylindrical form. Another, consisting of an armature of platforms, sweeps to a tilted top storey. The third utilises diagonal crossbeams to create a stable edifice that inverts and extends vertically. This pylon is angular, narrowing in the centre and again towards the tip 38 (see Plates 19 - 22).

The single most pervasive image evoked in the popular mind by the term fairy tale is probably of a maiden in distress leaning from her tower window and searching the horizon for a rescuer.39 This assertion is debateable but may account for the emergence of the tower when working in the ambit of remembered fairy tales. Rapunzel's tower is the emblem of her imprisonment, a patriarchal edifice to incarcerate female sexuality due to the fear it incites.40 Margaret Atwood uses the term "Rapunzel Syndrome" to indicate being cut off from life.41 This condition, according to Sharon Rose Wilson, is brought on by the heroine internalising the negative conditions of her culture to the point where she herself embodies the mute, cosseted, frigid state she so desperately wants to escape.42 However, it is embodiment that offers a solution to Rapunzel's woes as she braids her hair to form a ladder and releases tears to restore the Prince's sight.43 The tower can be interpreted as being synonymous with the human condition, one which is confined, secluded and disempowered. Alternatively the tower can signify refuge: a fortress to ward off invaders, a sanctum for the sequestered soul to weave and spin in solitude, a chrysalis for the emerging being. No matter how you look at it the tower is “a socially created architectural structure”, in contrast to the wilderness of the forest.44 Reminiscing back to the stairwell of my domesticated beginnings has lead to the arterial chambers of folk lore.

40 ibid., p. 138.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Bettelheim, The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales, p. 149.
44 Wilson, Margaret Atwood's fairy tale sexual politics, p. 138.
17. Film still from Alfred Hitchcock’s Suspicion, 1941.

35.5 x 11.4 x 13.9 cm
Photo Christopher Burke.

19. Catriona Stanton
*Tower (Spiralling)*, 2006,
cane, toothpicks and glue
176 x 24 x 20 cm
installation Depot Gallery, Sydney
Photo Kristin Clarke

20. Catriona Stanton
*Tower (Inverting)*, 2006,
cane, toothpicks and glue
188 x 22 x 22 cm
installation Depot Gallery, Sydney
Photo Kristin Clarke

21. Catriona Stanton
*Tower (Leaning)*, 2006,
cane, toothpicks and glue
175 x 20 x 20 cm, installation
Depot Gallery, Photo Kristin Clarke

22. Catriona Stanton
*Tower (Spiralling)*, 2006,
cane, toothpicks and glue
176 x 24 x 20 cm
Photo Kristin Clarke
Forests and Mountains
Eucalyptus twigs, cast in bronze and inserted into the gallery wall, simulate a generic forest. The lighting strikes shadows on the wall. The old growth forest of the Australian bush and the dense woods of the northern hemisphere had become confounded in my imagination. What do these two types of forest conjure up and what happens when they are conflated? (See plate 23)

Simon Schama, in *Landscape and memory*, discusses our cultural framing of landscape. He writes:

> for, although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms they are in fact indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from the strata of the memory as from layers of rock.

Schama explains that human intervention in the landscape has been taking place for aeons and the concept of a pristine wilderness is an illusion. With this in mind, we can no longer look at landscapes detached from the narratives and activities that we imbue them with.

What cultural baggage is embedded in our perception of where we are located?

Murray Bail sums up a stereotypically Australian scene in his evocative novel, *Eucalyptus*. “At the same time (be assured)” he writes, “strenuous efforts will be made to avoid the rusty traps set by ideas of National Landscape, which is of course an interior landscape fitted out with blue sky and the obligatory tremendous gum tree, perhaps some merinos chewing on the bleached-out grass in the foreground” (see Plate 24). This view speaks of a sentimental attachment to the pastoral successes over an unruly barren land and exaltation of humankind’s ability to dominate nature. As revealing as this is in regards to the shaping of the landscape for purposes of identity and nationhood it does not examine how indigenous forests figure in the Australian psyche. The image I am seeking is of the native forest prior to clearing as evinced in early Australian folklore.

The compelling mystique enshrouding this country’s uncultivated topography is epitomised for me in the painting *Lost* (1886) by Frederick McCubbin and the film, *Picnic at hanging rock*, based on the book by Joan Lindsay. Both national icons address the cultural idiom of children lost in the bush (see Plates 25-26). *The country of lost children: an australian anxiety* written by Peter Pierce, connects this image of lost child with public insecurity felt at the time. The eucalyptus forest

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25. Frederick McCubbin, *The Lost Child*, 1886
   oil on canvas, 114.5 x 72.5
   National Gallery of Victoria, Felton Bequest, 1940.

26. Film still from Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975.
and its disorderly diversity prompted anxiety for the new arrivals from distant European shores, manifesting in numerous stories featuring children disappearing into the landscape.\textsuperscript{49} The recurring narrative of strayed children claimed by the bush is perpetuated by what Bail claims as one of the oldest fears, “the fear of the infinite. Anything to escape the darkness of the forest”.\textsuperscript{50} Here I recognise a poignant relationship between the known Australian bush and remembered figments of fictitious forests. The primordial fear of the void or the unknown is what permeates our consciousness through the image of the dark and/or unbounded forest.

To be lost is to have gone astray, to feel disorientated, confused and bewildered. To be unsure of the way is for me a defining condition of making art. It is also when the most creative moments have revealed themselves to me. I have found an analogy for this predicament with being lost in the woods of fairy tales. The treachery of the unknown endured by protagonists such as Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood is encapsulated in the image of the dark forest. In both stories, children find themselves all alone in the woods, without parental guidance and forced to rely on their own capabilities to avoid danger and navigate their way out.\textsuperscript{51} Hansel and Gretel are abandoned in the woods by their mother and reluctant father due to scarcity of food. Bruno Bettelheim understands this predicament of “finding oneself in a dark, impenetrable forest (as) an ancient literary image for man in the need of gaining self knowledge. … of man in search of himself”.\textsuperscript{52} He explains that battling the darkness of the forest is only an outer projection of the inherent darkness within which must be confronted.\textsuperscript{53} Hansel and Gretel commence as dependent victims of their parents’ whims and emerge from the wilds as canny masters of their own destinies.

While Hansel and Gretel were abandoned the lost children immortalised in Australian fables were lured from home by the “gentle seductiveness (of) the

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\textsuperscript{50} Bail, Eucalyptus, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{51} See Hansel and Gretel in Willard, Tales at the border: fairy tales and maternal cannibalism, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 15.
Australian bush". The forests of the Grimm's fairy tales are made all the more threatening due to the menacing characters which inhabit them whereas, according to Pierce, this was not the case with Australian versions of fairy stories in the later nineteenth century:

Australian tellers of fairy stories in the 1890s, necessarily writing with the Grimms in mind, naturalised the Germanic material earnestly, but often incongruously. They neither found nor fabricated plausible human threats to lost children.

This is also the case in the film *Picnic at hanging rock*. Four students of a young ladies college in Victoria, on an outing to a monolithic rock site on Valentine's Day, 1900, meander away from the rest of the group never to return. It is as if the girls are bewitched or "put under a spell" by the enigmatic landscape itself. In McCubbin’s painting *Lost*, a girl, engulfed by the stately gums and enshrouded in mottled foliage, awaits her fate. Here we see a "mystification of the Australian landscape, which invests it with a power to enchant and lure that is deliciously fatal".

This threshold between the familiar safety of home and the abyss of the unknown is often crossed out of fascination and an inexplicable compulsion. It could be suggested that the landscape possesses sexual connotations: a virginal, enticing, libidinous zone. The forest can be understood as a place where a sense of oneness with the world is profoundly felt, an experience described by Bachelard as losing oneself "deeper and deeper into a limitless world". The forest where we are lost, we are also found.

However this euphoria is lined by fear based on the knowledge that people do actually get lost and meet their demise in the Australian bush. Patrick White’s novel, *Voss*, is such an account in which the explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt disappears into the vast interior in 1848. *Voss* mythologises the loss of human life in the outback as well as encapsulating early Australian beliefs that this country is harsh, vacant, barren and dangerous. Since the publication of *Voss* in 1957, Indigenous knowledge systems have been recognised, acknowledging ancient ceremonial maps which inextricably link the bush with mythology. The ability to survive depended on

55 Ibid., p. xv.
56 Ibid., p. 160.
57 Ibid., p. 58.
58 Ibid., p. 164.
59 Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, p. 185.
knowledge of Dreaming tracks locating water sources and creation stories detailing
the hazards of the natural environment. Survival in the bush is serious business.

In 2001, on a trip accompanying Indigenous artists back to traditional land in the
Pilbara of Western Australia, I meandered away from the campsite at sunset. This
country was unfamiliar and beckoned with its delicate beauty. A strong urge to
penetrate deeper into the unknown, the willingness to become lost and lose oneself
in the vastness of the natural world, overcame me. It was only the falling darkness
that roused me out of this reverie with the sudden realisation that I was on the verge
of actually being lost. Adrenalin kicked in. I had to carefully pick my way back to
camp. Where were the bread crumbs when you needed them? The artists were
waiting, deeply concerned, as this was not their country and malignant spirits were
known to pursue wandering souls. I was promptly sent to my swag with a bible
placed under my pillow for protection! The fear of the Australian bush is well
founded both in the accounts of early explorers and in Indigenous intellectual
property. My mixed response of both rapture and terror when immersed in the bush
reflects both the desire to go beyond boundaries and the universal human instinct to
survive.

_Accessed 8th July, 2006_}

The use of spikes to construct imagined landscapes gives them an uncomfortable
dge. Toothpicks pierced through cloth and sunk into wax form a dense shifting field
of points atop a plinth. Cane verticals suspended like a stand of trees are encircled by
a proliferation of fine spikes. Dominating the space are two elongated tent-like forms
utilising bamboo needles to stitch hessian cloth to the wooden apex frames. Copious
amounts of these small sharp sticks also act as a lair when bound into a tight coil and
laid on the floor. A mindscape is rendered: sharp, pointed, prickly, spiny, barbed and bristly.

Kristeva's theory of abjection seems relevant here. The abject is "what disturbs
identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-
between, the ambiguous, the composite". These are places where "meaning
collapses", making us extremely uncomfortable. Tracey Willard's paper, "Tales at
the border: fairy tales and maternal cannibalism", examines abjection through the
fairy tale genre in connection with the mother/child relationship. The desertion in
the forest of Hansel and Gretel, for example, is interpreted as symbolic of the child's
27. Catriona Stanton, 
*Field*, 2006 
toothpicks, beeswax, tarlatan, 50 x 42 x 8 cm 
Photo Caroline Rannersberger

28. Catriona Stanton, 
*Cooled Track*, 2006 
toothpicks, string and glue 8 x 120 x 90 cm 
Depot Gallery Sydney. Photo Catriona Stanton

29. Catriona Stanton, 
*Spires*, 2006 
toothpicks, wood and hessian, 
installation Depot Gallery, Sydney 
Photo Kristin Clarke

30. Catriona Stanton, 
installation view of *Act Natural*, 2006 
Raft Artspace, Darwin. Photo Catriona Stanton

31. Catriona Stanton, 
*Spires* (detail), 2006 
toothpicks, wood and hessian. Photo Natassia Presland
need to individuate from the mother. Not only are the two protagonists cast into abjection by being thrust into ambiguous terrain beyond the boundaries and order of their cultivated life but they are also enforced to confront the abject bad mother archetype taking the form of a witch who threatens to devour them. According to Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic theory, as the child attempts to separate from the mother there is a splitting between the good and bad mother figures. The bad mother archetype, which takes the form of the cannibalistic witch in Hansel and Gretel, threatens to subsume the subject back into itself.

For Kristeva, then, woman is particularly implicated in abjection by virtue of being the one against whom the child has to develop subjectively. If woman culturally is defined as the one at the margin between culture and chaos, order and anarchy, reason and the abyss, then she typifies abjection...but for culture, she represents the dangerous zone against which culture must struggle to retain itself.

In the fairy tale genre wilderness is the domain of animalism and the bad mother archetype and hence an overtly abject space.

The novelist Angela Carter uses spikes and piercing imagery to emphasise the horror of the abject. Samantha Pentony exposes this device in her essay “How Kristeva’s theory of abjection works in relation to the fairy tale and post colonial novel”. She explains that in Carter’s reworking of the tale Bluebeard, the climax is repositioned to the moment when the heroine enters the forbidden chamber and discovers the mutilated bodies of Bluebeard’s previous wives. This is analogous to crossing “Kristeva’s imaginary boundary into the realm of death, mutilation, blood and horror.” Once inside the chamber she absorbs the gruesome scene incorporating “a metal figure hinged at the side....spiked on the inside” and the corpse of her predecessor “pierced, not by one but by a hundred spikes”.

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63 See Willard’s discussion on Melanie Klein’s theory of mother/child relations in Ibid.
64 Ibid.
66 Kristeva, The powers of horror: an essay on abjection, p. 13. Animalism is the theory that human beings are driven by physical appetites rather than spiritual needs.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
grotesque instruments of torture provoke a “cold ecstasy to know the very worst”.71 The piercing points of spikes are able to perform the role of operating as an ominous sign and are correlated with the shock of confronting the abject.

The diminutive prick coexists with the enormity of mountains. ‘Nomadic Mountains’ is the term I have coined for the elongated spire forms made of hessian, wood and toothpicks. The oxymoron seems relevant as the forms mimic mountains and yet they are lightweight tent structures. Despite appearing like dwellings access is denied with no openings or doorways. They are movable but not penetrable. Their ominous appearance is emphasised by the sharp protrusions pinned to the struts. A sense of displacement without refuge is suggested. Irit Rogoff speaks of the “unhomedness” felt by dislocated subjects as a result of mass population shifts.72 This is a rootless state experienced by the homeless, the excluded, the threatened and the transient. These dysfunctional makeshift dwellings were sought as a counterpoint to the miniscule stairwell constructions.

The sculptures’ contour is based on the iconic representation of mountains using the graphic of two apexes, one slightly higher than the other. This sign is derived from the silhouette outline of a caricature mountain range most likely to have been introduced in childhood as one of the basic symbols of visual communication. Umberto Eco explains that “any visual procedure reproducing concrete objects, such as the drawing of an animal in order to communicate the corresponding object and concept, is considered to be an iconic sign”.73 The abstract simplicity of the mountain icon translated into a stylized architectural structure leaves them open to multiple meanings.

The “archaic magnificence” of mountains and their proximity to the heavens symbolically associates them with transcendence.74 This is true for both the Eastern and Western traditions although Schama identifies the temptation to succinctly polarise the cultural history of the mountain as “occidental and oriental, imperial and mystical, Dinocratic and shamanic”.75 To demonstrate the distinct attitudes to mountains between the East and West Schama uses the example of the dragon

71 Ibid., p. 28.
74 Schama, Landscape and memory, p. 453.
75 Ibid., p. 410.
which supposedly inhabited these heights unanimously. The Chinese tradition “venerated the creatures as lords of the sky, guardians of esoteric, celestial wisdom” while “Christianity deemed them winged serpents, and as such, the embodiment of satanic evil”. There is a long history in the West of conquering the heights and belief in excising the demons that were thought to occupy them (see Plates 32-35).

This “holy terror” of lofty peaks came to be understood as the sublime with the arrival of Romanticism in the seventeenth century in Europe. Prior to Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful* (1757), Schama identifies the British academics Horace Walpole and Thomas Gray as providing the first testimony of the sublime. Gray describes the ensuing scene of the French Alps as:

> magnificent rudeness…on one side the rock hanging over you and on the other a monstrous precipice, in the bottom runs a torrent, called Les Guiers morts, that works its way among the rocks with a mighty noise, and frequent Falls. You here meet all beauties so savage and horrid a place can present you with.

Here we encounter the sublime, known from Burke, where the transcendent greatness of nature must be plumbed for its depths to encounter the profound. Mountains offer a diabolical presence due to their ability to elicit both the ecstatic and the fearful.

The mountain/spire forms created in the studio were prompted by nostalgia for the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains and lost European worlds. However the foreign attraction of mountain ranges simultaneously reminded me of displaced populations and fraught relations in the post migratory world. These forms function as a haunting backdrop to an imaginary scene.

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76 Ibid., p. 411.
77 Ibid., p. 449.
78 Ibid., p. 450.
79 Ibid., pp. 449-450.
80 Ibid., p. 450.
32. J.J. Scheuchzer,  
*Dragon of Mons Pilatus*,  
from *Itinera per Helvetiae Alpines*, 1702-11

33. J.B. Fischer von Erlach,  
*The Mount Athos Colossus from the Sketch of historical architecture*, 1721

34. Fan K’uan,  
*Scholar Pavilion in the Cloudy Mountains*  
early eleventh century

35. Joachim Patinir,  
*Landscape with St Jerome*,  
ca. 1515.
The Wolf
A sculpture made of faux fur hangs in a fertile mass. Suspended from the rafters is a narrow tube of fabric leading to a cluster of fur-lined cones. There are up to eighty of the conical vessels, shaped like Calla Lilies, drooping down from the central cylinder. Each cone has a seam that runs the length of the reversed fabric form, from tip to hair-lined opening. The colour of the fleece is a silvery fawn whilst the predominant wool backing is warmer in tone. Three tails dangle below the bulk of vessels (see Plate 36).

In this chapter a more intuitive experiential approach is implemented. I wanted to don the guise of the wolf to discover what it feels like to inhabit the skin of a wild animal. This is facilitated through the act of doing – in particular the doing that happens in the studio. At this stage of the process the stimulus for the making is derived from an encounter with a coyote on a sluicing highway in the Rocky Mountains of Banff National Park, Canada. The coyote stood unmoving in the path of the vehicle forcing us to stop, alight and observe the phenomena. The lone hungry stare of this animal deeply penetrating my disbelieving soul awakened a long lost identification with the instinctual wild self. This unexpected episode reignited memories of the archetypal wolf in fairy tales. The primal energy of the canine is grappled with in morphing folds of felt and fur.

Two sources particularly influenced me in the making of the work. One was Formless: a user's guide by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss and the other a monograph on the Brazilian artist, Lygia Clark. Formless has been instrumental in reminding me about materiality and its inevitable collapse. In the opening chapter Bois emphasises the “operation that displaces both form and content and instigates a slide towards lowness.” This shift of emphasis permits a relationship to materials that liberates the artist from academic training. Words such as entropy, scatology, dissolution, collapse, base materialism and carnal that feature in Formless have informed how I approached materials, allowed them to be in dialogue with the process and embraced the forces that work upon them.

The other source pertinent to the fur pieces is Lygia Clark’s sculptural works. The sculptures, which are to be either manipulated or performed by the spectator, invert and subvert the accepted notions surrounding objects. The forms known as Bichos (Animals) of 1960 -1964 are constituted of hinged planes of metal that are

82 See Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Women who run with the wolves: contacting the power of the wild woman (London: Rider, 1992; 1998) for myths and stories of the wild woman archetype.
36. Catriona Stanton, *Hanging Furs*, 2006, synthetic fur and cotton, 200 x 55 x 50 cm
Photo above Kristin Clarke. Photo right Natassia Presland
interactive wherein inside/outside, front/back are all redefined when manipulated (see Plate 37). Another work, Air and Stone of 1966, operates as a proposition, comprising the inflating a plastic bag, sealing it, positioning a stone on a corner and then squeezing the object between the hands84 (see Plate 38). Guy Brett expounds on the proposition’s significance:

The interplay of solid mass and empty space, of weight and lightness, sums up the whole of sculptural history, yet the object is analogous to a body, breathing between our hands and sustained by our gestures.85

I was struck by two of Lygia Clark’s expressions in relation to her sculptures: “full emptiness” and “interior time”. The artist announces, “that which a form may express only has a meaning for me in a strict relationship with its inner space, the full emptiness of existence”.86 Lygia Clark’s intention is to become consciously aware of this vastness of a full emptiness which creates interior time.87 This concept had a profound effect on how I approached the fur prototypes. I explored reversing the fabric, creating openings and passages: focusing on the negative space. Lygia Clark’s belief in the transitory experience has been embraced through a deeper awareness of valuing the present moment and the processes that occur in the studio.

Besides being an exploration of Lygia Clark’s notions of interiority the furs are also explorations of organic form. In 1999 I read Story of the eye by Surrealist writer George Bataille. In the accompanying critical essay Roland Barthes identifies Bataille’s use of an interchangeable pattern of metaphors. He establishes that Bataille’s globular/ocular metaphors (eye, egg, balls) are crossed with all the avatars of liquid (tears, milk, yoke, urine) creating a spherical chain of associations. The "metaphorical and metonymical" imagination of Bataille impressed me at the time and became influential in my creative process.88 Associative interpretation is a device I have applied to allow forms to morph and evolve. For example I start with the notion of a coyote which leads to the following chain: wolf, bear, Eskimo suit,

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85 Guy Brett cited in Ibid.
87 Ibid.
37. Lygia Clark, *Bicho de Bolsillo/Pocket Animal*, 1966, aluminium

38. Lygia Clark, *Object: Stone and Air*, 1966, plastic bag and stone
beanie, pouch, vessel, flower. Having developed a prototype through this procedure it is then multiplied and compiled into a unified structure. This methodology ensures there are no fixed meanings, rather an ambiguous reading of form and material.

A video monitor is lit with solarised colour; iridescent orange is intercepted by flashes of black and white. A one-eyed furred being hovers into view. The form opens and shuts. The neon blue eye blinks and splits apart becoming two eyes. The distorted length of a whiskered snout pulsates. The tip of a luminous ear rises from the bottom of the screen wavering before folding in on itself and transforming into a pouch poised on the horizon. The form spins outward, opening into a mirage of a mirrored dog approaching the screen. The eight-legged creature backs away to the horizon on the flat expanse.89

Yve-Alain Bois defines the informe or formless through its operations, one of which is horizontality. His account presents an alternative perspective from the traditional human vertical viewpoint being the animal mouth-anus horizontal axis. Bois declares that:

man is proud of being erect (and of having thus emerged from the animal state, the biological mouth-anus axis of which is horizontal) but this pride is founded on a repression.90

Moving from the vertical visual field to the carnal; the space the body occupies, provides a physiological understanding of the coyote or the wolf’s relationship to the ground. Previously I have been concerned with staircases, towers, forests and mountains which could be said to pertain to the vertical dimension. There is a skyward striving associated with the vertical, “allusions to the ideal of disembodied consciousness” and “a defiance of gravity”.91 Associated with the horizontal axis, parallel to the earth, you find the first rays of dawn, sexual intercourse, infants crawling and the corpse. Repositioning myself on the ground with all fours earthbound, the immanence of the sacred replaces transcendence and the physical realm is seemingly more tangible.92

The metaphorical significance of the coyote’s horizontal axis becomes apparent in the performance piece by Joseph Beuys, I Like America, America Likes Me. In 1974, when Joseph Beuys inhabited Rene Block’s New York Gallery for five days, he was accompanied by a wild coyote (see Plate 40). This orchestrated action was a spiritual ritual to heal the trauma and damage done to the American continent and

92 Ibid.
the Indigenous population by colonisers. Joseph Beuys recognised the high esteem the American Indians held the coyote in: one of its attributes being the ability to metamorphose into a human being by turning itself inside out through its anus. This fantastic occurrence repositions the anus as a site of transformation from its customary purpose of expelling excrement. Metamorphosis, a characteristic of the video in which one form morphs into another, is the facility of the shape-shifting coyote.

Eight vessels woven in the coil stitch technique are jumbled together. The small scale organic forms are created from natural fibres with trimmings of faux fur. The bound forms could be described as a pouch, tube, pod, clam, slipper and snout. These innocuous weavings are rendered potentially dangerous due to sharp pins piercing each orifice (see Plate 41).

The pinned and fur trimmed vessels, created using traditional women’s craft practices, allude to issues of power and sexuality. Animal furs, used for warmth and adornment for centuries, have evolved into the illustrious symbol of wealth and rank. In the Renaissance, trimmings of fur on formal attire were a trait of the aristocracy. For Leopold von Sacher–Masoch, in his late nineteenth-century novel Venus in furs, women wrapped in furs are symbols of power and beauty. Woman as huntress or dominatrix are now widely accepted notions surrounding fur-clad women. This is partially due to the strength and prowess associated with the animals the skins are procured from. Meret Oppenheim’s surrealist sculpture, Object (Le Dejeuner en Fourrure) 1936, stimulates a response through material association. The fur-lined tea cup elicits both seduction and repulsion with its erotic associations of hand and mouth coinciding with the fur from a skinned animal. The functional object is negated due to the presence of something animal (see Plate 43).

Simultaneously repulsive and seductive, the fur sculptures re-introduce the abject into my investigations. The provoked disagreeable sensation and the symbolic associations with the body combine to unsettle the viewers reading. In Julia

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94 Stanton, "Artist's journal," 16th July, 2006
96 fantasyartsnet, Meret Oppenheim’s object - the furry tea cup (Fantasy Arts), http://www.fantasyarts.net/Oppenheim_Object_furry_tea_cup.htm (accessed 29th October, 2005).
Kristeva's *Powers of horror* we come to understand that the abject threatens the subject, threatens life and threatens meaning. She elicits that:

> the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with the fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism...98

Society is constantly engaged in the task of demarking “the boundaries of self/other, human/animal, savage/civilized, me/not me”.99 Little Red Riding Hood is a fable that delineates this exact territory. The wolf threatens to eat Little Red Riding Hood, which, according to Willard, is symbolic of primitive urges and the desire to remain in an undifferentiated state. Little Red Riding Hood's eventual recognition of her immanent demise in the clutches of the wolf results in the choice to disallow the abject.100 An alternate reading of this fable is as a cautionary tale. Zipes interprets the moral overtones where innocent young girls of decent upbringing should suppress their sexual appetites or they will be swallowed by their own sexuality: the hungry wolf101 (see Plate 42).

This brings me to the reading of wolf as female monster through association with the vagina dentata. Willard points out that the wolf's sharp teeth and hairy snout associates it with the "fantasized image of the toothed vagina".102 In *The monstrous feminine* Barbara Creed critically examines male castration fears, the fear of being reincorporated into the mother, through the genre of the horror film. She cites examples where the vagina is repeatedly portrayed as "a terrifying black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces".103 The gnashing teeth of the fiercely protective wolf, is somehow correlated with the man eating woman or the femme fatale. Think of the term bitch in which the word for female canine comes to be an insulting remark when applied to a woman used to connote sexually promiscuity among other qualities. The predatory woman of untamed sexual drives cuts right to the heart of the deepest male fear of being castrated, consumed and...

100 Ibid., p. 12.
102 Willard, *Tales at the border: fairy tales and maternal cannibalism*.
Photo Caroline Tisdall

natural fibres, synthetic fur and pins, 35 x 60 x 80 cm
Photo Caroline Rannersberger

42. Gustave Doré, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 1883,
engraving.

43. Meret Oppenheim, *Object (Le Déjeuner en Fo
Fourrure)*, 1936,
fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon
reincorporated into the female body.

The wolf can connote the predator, seducer, instinctual protector, shape-shifter, the huntress and the hunted. It is precisely these contradictory attributes and ambiguous connotations that are the appeal of the wolf as a source of inspiration. Animality, corporeality and materiality have been given precedence in the studio as a result of delving into the symbology of the wild dog.
Contemporary Imaginings
Through my research I have become aware of curatorial themes that fall into the arena of poetic imagination, childhood memories and the fictitious. Over the last ten years exhibitions here in Australia, in neighbouring New Zealand and further afield with the 51st International Venice Biennale in 2005 have explored these themes. By examining the premise of these exhibitions and how they contribute to critical discourse I seek to discover how quixotic tales can be relevant in this age of terrorism. Besides offering new Utopias in the ‘happy ever after’ model of the fairy tale I argue that fairy tales and ensuing fictitious works of art have been used to communicate the plight of humanity allowing us to find a voice, within a safe space, to express and tease out some of the knotty and loaded issues around conflict, terror and vilification.

In 1998, Scottish curator Iain Irving brought together five contemporary German sculptors selected for their engagement with childhood memories, fears and fairy tales. The resulting exhibition: The House in the Woods, subsequently toured Scotland and Ireland. Irving disclosed his need to find artists contending with and perhaps refuting these stories “of lost children and siblings, shape-shifters, monsters, beasts, magical objects, changelings and faraway places”.104 The featured artists were: Thomas Schutte, Wiebke Siem, Mariele Neudecker, Martin Honert and Stephan Blakenhol. Irving asked himself about the relevance of fairy tales in undertaking this project, “wasn’t so much romanticism a little tacky?”105 He surmised that, despite this subject matter the tales were not ‘childish’ and that the imaginary space these works opened up played a necessary role in the rational sphere. “While dreaming is pleasurable”, Irving states, “it also has a function: it can be used for imagination, which is an aspect of thought able to suggest different social possibilities relevant not just for a fantastic, faraway past but for a contemporary, universal, real and tangible world.”106 This view reveals a Utopian wish-fullness where imagination equates with aspirations to overcome injustice. What becomes apparent is that these tales deal with the gritty business of power and oppression. Wiebke Siem’s piece consists of a series of fur suits hanging vacantly on the wall. These seemingly humorous outfits conjuring up the bogeyman also have a menacing aura about them, clearly evident when viewed in context with other pieces of her work. On further inquiry we learn Siem addresses “issues of museum status, 

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
classification, conservation and cleansing all of which touch on Germany’s past corruption of art and culture for political ends107 (see Plate 44). Maybe what Irving is suggesting is that the imaginary renditions of *The House in the Woods* are motivated by the desire to vanquish oppression and offer a more just society.

Australian curator, Julianna Engberg, also observes “a re-investigation of systems and models of utopias” within her selection of artists for *Signs of Life*, the inaugural Melbourne International Biennial of 1999.108 Amongst the 56 artists from Australia, Europe and the Americas are Robert Gligorov of Milan, with his video piece of a bird hatching in the mouth of a man (see Plate 45), Robert Gober of New York with his leather suitcase containing the grate of a drain affording a view into a rockpool and Danish artist, Nikolaj Recke, who installed a field of fresh clover. It seems Engberg was seeking a humanistic approach to this survey show where mythology and the unworldly sanctuary of the artist are revered propositions. In an online review, D.J.Huppatz pointed out that:

> Engberg situated the sublime as a search for higher meaning or spirituality that seemed nostalgic at times, as if trying to discover something lost, emphasising……psychological readings of the works that could bridge the gap between reason and imagination/dream/vision.109

I think nostalgia is a key term here suggesting disenchantment with current world affairs. Huppatz believes melancholy is being experienced due to increased technological change resulting in a sense of dislocation from nature and authenticity.110 This view implies that the imagination is being used to deny the demise of humanity in today’s mediated society. Angela Carter took a broader perspective. “As the past becomes more and more unlike the present” she announced, “and as it recedes even more quickly in developing countries than it does in the advanced, industrialized ones, more and more we need to know who we were in greater and greater detail in order to surmise who we might be”.111 Carter reinstated the importance of reflection and contemplation on the oral tales of times past to gain further insight into our inherent make-up and our future potential.

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110 Ibid.
Wayne Tunnicliffe, the curator of Strange Days (2000) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, firmly places the terrain of the fictional and the fantastic into the post colonial. Aboriginal photographer Tracey Moffatt, African-American installation artist Kara Walker, Swiss-born video artist Pipilotti Rist and American photographer Gregory Crewdson were the featured artists. All of these artists “problematisate subjectivities” and interrogate identity politics in their work. Tunnicliffe writes of the artists whereby “creating fictional worlds in carefully wrought, though usually ambiguous, visual narratives they combine fantasy and factitiousness to create dream-like and at times nightmarish visions.” The impossibility of the authorial subject; “the fully knowable self”, with the advent of post modernism is brought into relevance within this context. Tunnicliffe tells us that contrary to the art of the “universal subject of high modernism” or Hal Foster’s authenticity of the other in the “trauma art” of the 1990’s, these artists invent their own ambiguous identities which defy the generic. Walker presents “an ‘autobiographical’ alter ego with the “free negress” (see Plate 46), Crewdson “suggests his own demise as subject”, Rist creates “abrupt displacements” of the female figure and Moffatt’s “fragmented narratives” charge race relations with the uncanny. Tunnicliffe’s approach to the imaginary realm is edifying as it destabilises definitive subjectivities and allows for critical reappraisal of stereotypes.

The Biennale of Sydney 2002 had artist Richard Grayson as its artistic director. The theme (The World May Be) Fantastic was postulated as being about “how the fantastic collides with the real world.” Grayson argues that fantastic imaginings are beyond the “reach of state or political power” and allow the subject to be a “generative force” rather than submissive. He finds that these creative whims are noncompliant within the function of tempered discourses which is what makes them so pertinent. On ABC’s art and culture, Sunday Morning Session (26/5/02) Julie

113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., p. 8.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., p. 9.
119 Ibid.
Copeland interviewed contemporary art critics: Juliana Engberg, Saskia Bos and Ralph Rugoff about Grayson’s theme. In the discussion Juliana Engberg argued Grayson’s stance was highly optimistic and lacks a strong political element while Ralph Rugoff, arts writer and curator from San Francisco, claimed that the fantastic can operate in a nightmarish way and this can be applied to what is occurring in the world around us.\textsuperscript{120} It could be argued that passive resistance: the refusal to engage with existing meta-narratives by inventing one’s own, is a political act in itself.

The Auckland Art Gallery examined the provocative topic of childhood in early 2005 with a major international survey show, \textit{Mixed-Up Childhood}. Curators Robert Leonard and Juanita Craw selected works that addressed notions around childhood while also revealing artists’ impressions of the lived experience of their past. Artists included were Louise Bourgeois, Henry Darger, Christian Boltanski, Mikala Dwyer, Robert Gober and Sally Mann among many others. Leonard tells us that \textit{Mixed-Up Childhood}:

\begin{quote}
...is a show for grownups because it’s about how we understand childhood retrospectively, how as adults we reverse engineer our childhoods from our memories and our concerns, and the things that get lost and found in the process.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

\textit{Mixed-Up Childhood} exemplifies how dichotomies, polarities and contradictions can be eloquently expressed in the liberated zone of the fictitious. Sally Mann’s photographs documenting her children’s life in rural Virginia epitomise this. Craw explains how “her poetic images are troubling because they cross categories and endanger oppositions: nature/culture, innocent/ evil, adult/child, civil/feral, boy/girl”\textsuperscript{122} (see Plate 47).

In 2005 Tara D’Cruz-Noble, the curator of the University of Technology Gallery, Sydney delved into the fictitious realm of fairy tales and childhood memorabilia with the exhibition \textit{Where the Wild Things Are} inspired by Maurice Sendak’s children’s book. The artworks hail from Australian artists Sally Smart, Hany Armanious, Simon McEwan, Michelle Hanlin, Louise Weaver as well as Icelandic artist Sigga Bjorg Sigurdardottir and Hiroko Nakao of Japan. In a review Alex Mc Donald endorsed that:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{120} Copeland, \textit{The 2002 Biennale of Sydney: (the world may be) fantastic}
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
childhood fantasy is a useful launching pad for an art exhibition, if for no other reason because it triggers childhood memories, and has you reminiscing even before you step foot in the UTS gallery.\textsuperscript{123}

A good argument for bringing the punters in already feeling happy to muse on childhood, however it doesn’t clarify how the imaginary can figure in the current political climate. If we look at the work of one artist, Sigga Bjorg Sigurdardottir, we find that the imaginary has a particularly abject and haunting quality. Simply pencil and gouache on paper yet these humble drawings are gaping with sorrow and despair. (see Plate 48) Here the imaginary realm has become a place to exorcise traumatic events. Personal expression surely has a profound role to play in the ever proliferating crises that unfold daily, whether it be natural disaster, random bombing or vilification for adorning the burka.

A major curatorial theme of the 51st International Venice Biennale, 2005 proposed by Director Rosa Martinez was \textit{Always a little Further}. The concept was premised on the comic book character, Corto Maltese, created by Italian author Hugo Pratt.

Captain Corto Maltese is a wry adventurer of the seas from the early twentieth century who sympathises with the disadvantaged and downtrodden. Martinez explains her approach:

\begin{quote}

taking a fictional character as inspiration is a way of affirming that art is an imaginary construct and that fantasy helps us towards a better understanding of reality. In the baroque contemporary condition, we live both a drama and a paradox: we still believe in the need for reason, enlightenment and utopia, even if we have become their most ferocious critics from the new positions of post-colonialism, race and gender. Passion and melancholy, trust and desperation, pleasure and guilt, combine to define the critical approach to the world in which we live.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

This insightful proclamation explains the continuing evidence of wish fulfilment and fantasy in contemporary art while also explaining underlying themes of melancholy and disillusionment.

The role of the oral fairy tale as fictional amusement yet cautionary tale can therefore be seen manifest in the language of contemporary art. Carter identifies fairytales as being “not formal inventions but informal dreams dreamed in public”.\textsuperscript{125} It is possible to consider that art, in the genre of fantasy, is fulfilling this exact same function. The inventiveness of humanity is innate. The fact that “the human imagination is infinitely

\textsuperscript{125} Carter and Sargood, \textit{The Virago book of fairy tales}, p. xx.

44. Sigga Bjorg Siurdardottir, untitled, 2005, mixed media on paper, 53 x 40 cm


47. Sally Mann, *Hayook*, 1989, gelatin silver print, 48.2 x 58.1 cm

48. Sigga Bjorg Siurdardottir, untitled, 2005, mixed media on paper, 53 x 40 cm
resilient, surviving colonization, transportation, involuntary servitude, imprisonment, bans on language, the oppression of women” explains the refusal for its complete demise and its continuing evidence in contemporary art.126

Finally I want to mention an exhibition held in October, 2006 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne: *Uncanny Nature*. The show comprised of 13 local and international artists including Nick Mangan, Neil Emmerson, Hany Armanious, Tony Clark, Robert MacPherson and Anne Ooms of Australia. The works selected represent shifting states of reality in the natural world and psychological landscapes. Artist Anne Ooms presented a series of miniature Tolkenesque landscapes sitting atop plinths. In the interviews conducted on the ACCA audiofiles she reveals how the imagination bridges experiences of the outside world with our private interiors.

I have faith, as in a dream, that all these seemingly unconnected elements have some kind of connection and somehow my work is a way to intuitively find the connection between these disparate elements. I believe that psychically the health in that is that it is the artist finding a connection with themselves and with the world in which they live. So reconnecting, I would say, would be one of the underlying desires in my work. And meandering in the world and in ideas is a way for me to re-connect.127

Here the imagination plays a vital role in assisting us to reach deep into the psyche and stay connected to exterior events.

The above assortment of exhibitions are by no means representative of the wider contemporary art scene’s predominant themes and concerns but highlights an undercurrent that resurfaces intermittently. Grayson surmises that in highlighting the fantastic, fictitious, hypothetical etc in contemporary art practices does not herald this realm as predominant in art production, now or even in a broader time frame. In fact, he declares, that these approaches have been peripheral rather than central for a significant length of time.128

It is from these marginalised and often introspective voices we gain a sense of the conflicted times we partake in. Exposing human frailty, repositioning subjectivity and dreaming of an alternative reality are some of the ways this is being expressed.

126 Ibid.
128 Mc Donald, ed., *The world may be) fantastic: the 2002 Biennale of Sydney*, p. 12.
Fantastical creativity has many motivating factors from escapism to catharsis. The hope for new possibilities and the ability to invent new ambiguous identities are some of its optimistic longings. However it seems a large proportion of art in the arena of the imaginary transpires from a troubled world of disintegration, upheaval and insecurity. Repressed unconscious desires, the dissolution of neat dualities, melancholia, abjection and uncanny phenomena are some of the manifestations witnessed as a result of these dark times. Reflecting on these haunting images we begin to better understand who we are and are becoming.
Conclusion
We are in difficult times and the imagination helps us come to terms with this. Deep-seated collective anxieties about our children, technology and disconnection from nature, the proliferation of racial violence and climate change permeate the artworks previously discussed. There may well be a longing for a more just and harmonious world and yet it is through exposing the darker dimensions of the contemporary condition that we begin to comprehend our predicament. Only through identifying the shadow within are we able to cease projecting onto the other. The themes of injustice and subjugation fill fairy tales and yet they offer hope and new possibilities through imaginative solutions and symbolic abstraction.

It is the imagination that allows personal discovery. This discovery is not purely of a Utopian nature but permits insight into known reality. This requires going to places that scare you, approaching what you find repulsive and airing anxieties. Bachelard reminds us that “the child knows a natural reverie of solitude….the dreaming child experiences cosmic reverie - that reverie that unites us with the world”. Through reconnecting with the imagination the boundaries of reality are loosened and the tangible world ceases to be so dense.

_Out of the ordinary: regenerating the imagination_ has allowed me to develop insight into a personal lexicon which is grounded on the memories of my childhood. Delving into my recollections a wellspring of creative imagery emerged. The time permitted in the studio has fostered a deep regard for process and the inherent qualities of the materials employed. An acceptance of an aesthetics of difference has been undertaken due to a willingness to cross thresholds and discover. The exploration of the imaginary has allowed for reprieve and repose for the senses generating visions of strange wonder.

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Appendix 1: Fairy tales

The term fairy tale is unwieldy and difficult to define due to its ancient origins and constantly evolving forms. Angela Carter sums it up nicely as a “figure of speech” used:

loosely, to describe the great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a time and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth…the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor.\(^ {131}\)

The defining features of fairy tales are: fictional characters who frequently encounter imaginary beings, indefinite place or time and sources of amusement that can also function as cautionary tales.\(^ {132}\) The term takes into account oral folk tales, classic fictional literature and contemporary rewritings.

For the purposes of this paper I refer to the popular renditions of Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood compiled by the Brothers Grimm and first published in 1812. The Grimm’s intention was to foster an authentic Germanic tradition. According to Jack Zipes they did their fair share of adaptation to suit the bourgeois sensibilities of the time.\(^ {133}\) However the Grimm’s fairy tales dish out all the hardship, disappointment, misfortune and propensity for cruelty that are part and parcel of being human and typical of the oral tradition. Despite the calamitous subject matter, the tales are told with such flourish and inventiveness that they become a source of imaginary freedom and immense pleasure.\(^ {134}\) It is this ability of these fables to communicate the bleak accounts of human frailties such as abandonment, sibling rivalry, parental neglect, exploitation, deception, infertility and mortality in such an enchanting manner that makes them so cherished.

In more recent times these tales have been bleached of their violence, reconstructed with happy endings and are clearly moralistic in their reading to suit modern notions of what is appropriate for children. These Walt Disney or Golden book versions of fairy tales are not what I am concerned with. The brutality of life lived in poverty and the often catastrophic events that pepper a Grimm’s tale are what make them so compelling.


\(^{134}\) Carter and Sargood, *The Virago book of fairy tales*, pp. xi-xii.
There are also references to contemporary writers, Margaret Atwood in relation to Rapunzel and Angela Carter in regard to Bluebeard who bring their own modifications to these narratives. These rewritings bring in a contemporary feminine perspective. The tales are the source of recurring motifs in the imagination. They are also potent tools for accessing anxieties that demarcate childhood and the estranged territory of secrets and primal fears.
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