




*pixerina* **WITCHERINA**



Karen Arm  
Meghan Boody  
Bonnie Collura  
Margaret Curtis  
Amy Cutler  
Katharina Fritsch  
Margi Geerlinks

*pixerina* **WITCHERINA**

Hilary Harkness  
Claudia Hart  
Julie Heffernan  
Julia Latané  
Tracey Moffatt  
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## WHAT BIG TEETH

Bill Conger



I remember looking on as my grandmother turned the worn Golden Book pages. The images within impressed me indelibly. I can still see Gretel slamming the oven door on the witch's twisted feet, death-palored Snow White encased in her glass coffin, and Princess Aurora's pricked finger oozing magenta-tinged blood—grotesque images that were entrancing, horrific, and mesmerizing.

Like the candy cottage that conceals the oven, fairy tales conceal a darker world, and as they are told to children, that darkness inevitably leaks into the telling as if by accident. Most disturbing to my childhood were the evil maternal figures—child-eating witches, grandmothers with big teeth, evil stepmothers and assorted hags and crones. Drifting in and out of reverie, I would wonder if Grandma might, when not reading to me, secretly become a murderous witch planning my demise.

Recent experiences have returned me to the fossil remnants of those daydreams. One night singing Rock-a-Bye Baby, I realized that in essence I had been threatening my sons, telling them they might fall to their deaths from a treetop. Awakening to the cruelty wrapped in that familiar, music-box melody led me back to fairy tales.

### once upon a time . . .

Children's literature is part of children's culture, and folktales are part of that; not the public, social part, maybe, but the part each child keeps secret, and dreams about.

The tales might have been thought of, once, as having some usefulness in preparing children for a harsh and dangerous world, in which there is no tie of trust between the large and the small, or between men and women. But the world the folktales frame now, as a kind of darkness at the edge of things, is the world of childhood itself.

Before the Brothers Grimm documented some of today's popular European folk tales stories, the oldest tales existed in the oral tradition like living, breathing matter, slightly transfigured from telling to telling. In contemporary art many women are keeping the organic essence of fairy tales alive—using, retelling, and merging the symbolic content into contemporary myth new and improved. The artists in this exhibit draw on those fabulous fears of childhood, its darkness and mistrust, as a living cultural legacy.

### the little girl and the big bad wolf

"Pixierina witcherina" was an invented language, made up out of odd and exotic sounds—definitely non-English—used by Virginia Woolf to converse secretly with her niece.<sup>1</sup> As a code, its primary secret was the identity of its users—that secretly they weren't just aunt and niece, but they were also pixies and witches. Pixie and Witch represent two possible halves of a split female identity: young /old, innocent /sexual, free /powerful. Witch and Pixie bracket the socially normal "feminine." Your mom is not a witch or a pixie, but your fey Aunt Virginia just might be either. The lost arcadia of prepubescence is something we recall in artwork, with



**Elena Sisto, NOGUE, 1998**  
Oil on linen, 26 x 48 inches  
Courtesy the artist

nostalgia and regret. And sometimes, like during the Sixties and what remains of them in the culture, *Pixie and Witch*, like *Virgin and Whore*, can seem less like the imposed binaries of an overbearing patriarchy than like an intriguing group of possible future career choices for the enterprising little girl to consider.

*pixerinaWITCHERINA* is then, both about the youth-culture of Future Goddesses and about the shared, subversive culture of women, old and young. *Meghan Boody's Through the Looking Glass*-inspired photographic narratives in which a young girl, *Psyche*, encounters her alter ego, *Smut*, *Margi Geerlinks'* photographs of old women and nymphlike girls, *Julie Heffernan's* goddess-like self-portrait, and *Hilary Harkness'* Amazonian no man's lands offer us female protagonists who draw from the full menu of choices: virgin (the huntress and the sorrowing virgin; not the same at all, but each fun in its own way), nymph (sometimes a whore, but not always) and crone.

### a little change

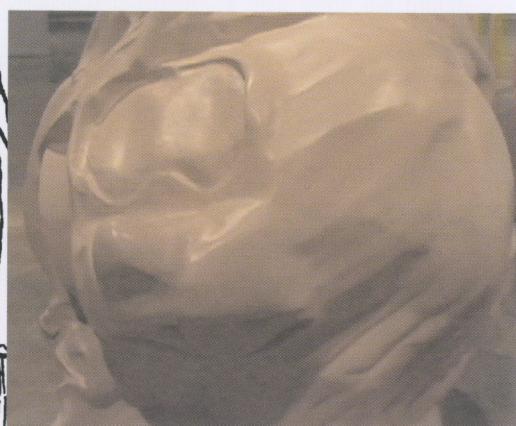
Moral lessons in fairy tales are also lessons in magic. And these lessons in magic are what prepare us for the metamorphoses of adolescence, and then, adulthood. Marina Warner identifies these transformations as metaphors for enlightenment, in which changes of shape "constitute the fundamental principle of nature, a rationale for its mysteries."<sup>2</sup> And the inevitability of these transformations, as it drives the narrative of the folktale, is also instructive: a frog has to turn into a prince, just as children have to grow up and become their parents.

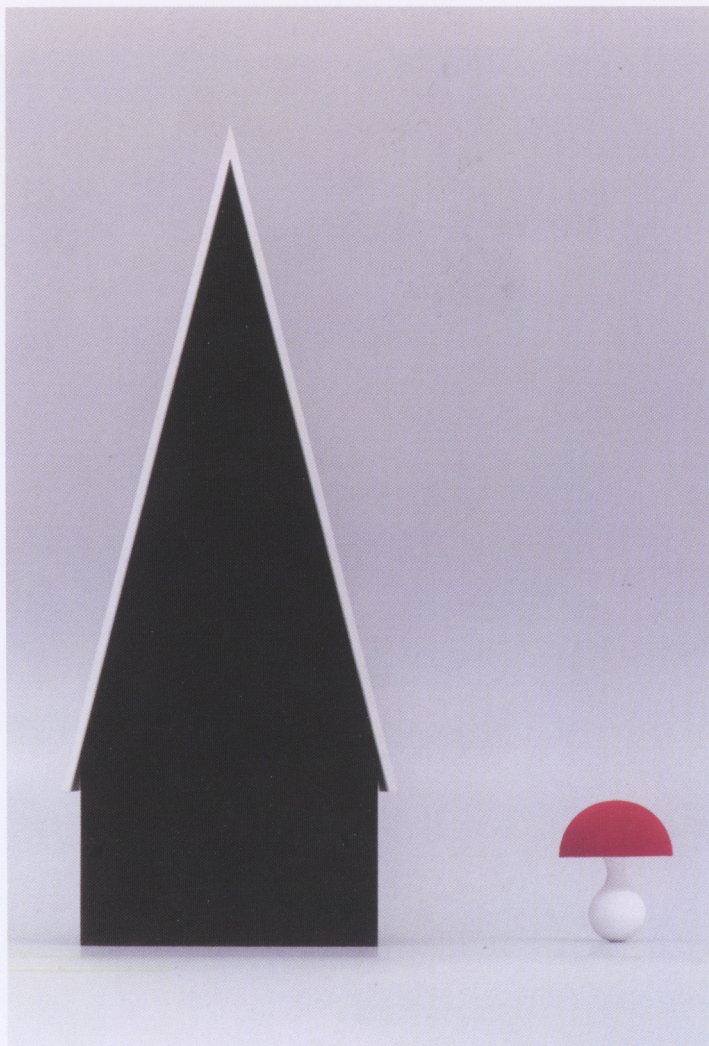
These recurrent shape-shiftings are a regular feature of both folktale and the work in this show. In *Bonnie Collura's* orgy of forms and identities, *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS*, human and animal forms (and even the cartoon presence of Mickey Mouse) bubble out to the surface. *Megan Boody's* characters, *Psyche* and *Smut*, are part rat, part reptile, even part insect. And in *Amy Cutler's*

**Meghan Boody**, *PSYCHE'S TAIL* detail, 2000. Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery, New York.

Illustration detail of three witches changing shape and flying on a broomstick. From Ulrich Molitor, *Tracatus Von Den Bösen Weibern*, 1495.

**Bonnie Collura**, *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS* detail, 1999. Collection Oak Park Bank, Chicago.

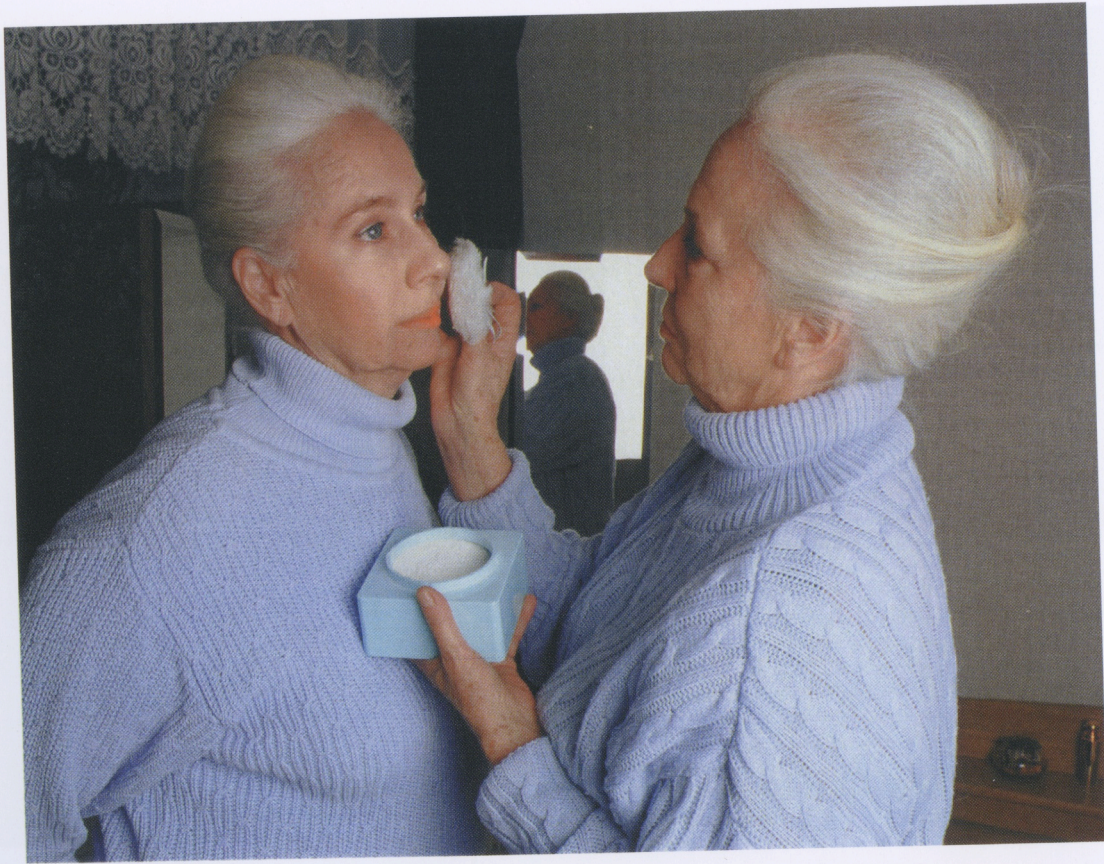




**Katharina Fritsch**, HEXENHAUS UND PILZ (WITCHHOUSE AND MUSHROOM), 1999

Wood and acrylic paint, 31 x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches and 6 x 4 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 4 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

Photo courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



**Margi Geerlinks**, UNITLED (TWINS), 1999  
Fujichrome, perspex, and dibond, 49 1/4 x 60 inches  
Courtesy Stefan Stux Gallery, New York



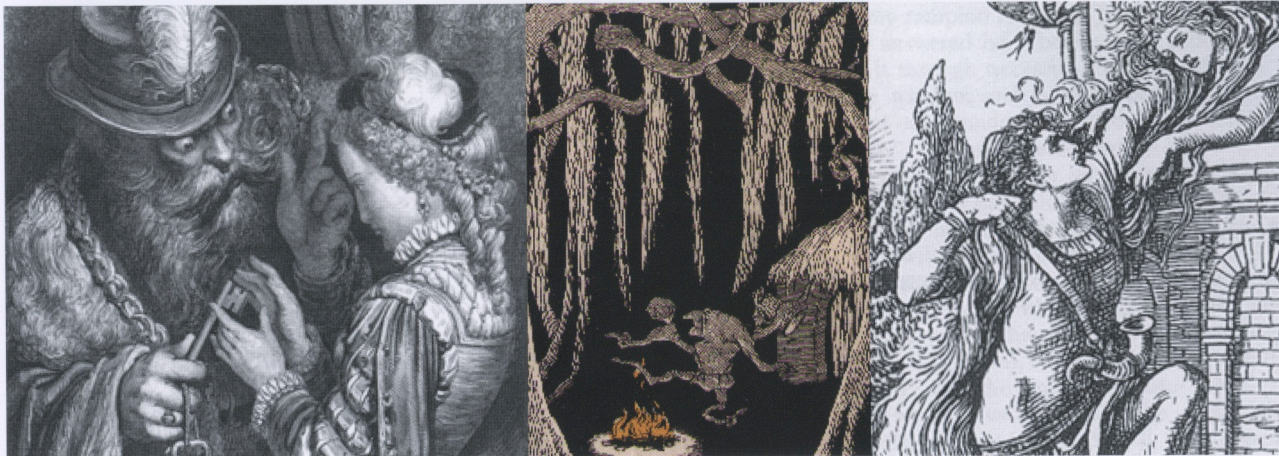
# INVOCATIONS OF FAIRY TALES

Maria Tatar



Fairy tales are up close and personal, telling us about the quest for romance and riches, for power and privilege, and, most importantly, for a way out of the woods, back to the safety and security of home. Bringing myths down to earth and inflecting them in human rather than heroic terms, fairy tales put a familiar spin on the stories in the archive of our collective imagination. Think of Petit Poucet, who miniaturizes David's killing of Goliath, Odysseus's blinding of Polyphemus, and Siegfried's conquest of Fafner. Or consider Cinderella, who is sister under the skin to Shakespeare's Cordelia and to Brontë's Jane Eyre. Fairy tales take us into a reality that is familiar in the double sense of the term—deeply personal and at the same time centered on the family and its conflicts rather than on what is at stake in the world at large.

That many of the stories recorded by Perrault and, a century later, by the Brothers Grimm had their origins in an adult culture becomes evident from the preoccupations and ambitions of the key figures. Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty* may act like a careless, disobedient child when she reaches for the spindle that puts her to sleep, but her real troubles come in the form of a hostile mother-in-law who plans to serve her for dinner with a sauce Robert. "Bluebeard," with its forbidden chamber filled with the corpses of former wives, engages with issues of marital trust, fidelity, and betrayal, showing how marriage is haunted by the threat of murder. "Rumpelstiltskin" charts a woman's narrow escape from a bargain that could cost the life of her firstborn. "Rapunzel" turns on the perilous cravings of pregnant woman and on the impossibility of safeguarding a daughter's virtue by locking her up in a tower.



Gustave Doré, illustration detail for Charles Perrault's *Bluebeard*, 1862.

Edward Gorey, illustration detail from *Rumpelstiltskin*, 1973.

Walter Crane, illustration detail from "Rapunzel" from *Household Stories by the Brothers Grimm*, 1886.

John Updike reminds us that fairy tales were “the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples.” (Updike 662). Once told by peasants around the fireside to distract them from the tedium of repairing tools, mending clothes, or kneading dough, they have now been successfully transplanted into the nursery for the entertainment and edification of children. Many of these tales, filled with bawdy turns of phrase and off-color humor, were not intended for children’s ears, though children were often in attendance when folk raconteurs spun their tales. And while the melodramatic plots and burlesque flourishes of those tales may once have captured the attention of children, the actual plots rarely accorded with the anxieties and desires of pre-adolescents, who were surely more interested in getting their next meal or in evading a chore than in marital matters.

If the matter of the old fairy tales has moved to the nursery, the manner of tale-telling remains, *mutatis mutandi*, very much alive in adult culture. In the form of gossip, jokes, rumor, scandal, and news, we continue to blend the real with the surreal, to mingle whimsy with truth, and to mix sober fact with burlesque fiction. Stories are our social and cultural capital, circulating among us in powerful ways and ensuring that we have ways of talking about our fantasies and anxieties, about what we value and cherish as well as what we hate and deplore.

With conspiratorial pleasure, the narrator of Margaret

Atwood’s “Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother” reports that there are always “some stories which my mother does not tell when there are men present: never at dinner, never at parties.” These stories, we learn, are told in domestic settings: “usually in the kitchen, when they or we are helping with the dishes or shelling peas, or taking the tops and tails off the string beans, or husking corn.” They are melodramatic tales, charting the consequences of “romantic betrayals, unwanted pregnancies, illnesses of various horrible kinds, marital infidelities, mental breakdowns, tragic suicides, unpleasant lingering deaths.” Like the spirited tales once spun around the fireside, these stories are “not rich in detail or embroidered with incident: they are stark and factual.” They encapsulate collective truths—the wisdom of the ages—about romance, courtship, marriage, divorce, and death, and they are passed on from one generation of women to the next. Gossip and gospel truth, gossip as gospel truth, these stories are received with reverent attention: “The women, their own hands moving among the dirty dishes or the husks of vegetables, nod solemnly.” (Atwood 14-15).

The old wives’ tales to which Atwood is referring continue a narrative tradition, one that has flowed largely through oral tributaries as women’s speech. It is fluid, mercurial, and volatile, unlike the fairy tales that were channeled into a print culture. Atwood’s observations about her childhood suggest that this oral tradition remains very much alive today, drawing its strength from



**Meghan Body**, PSYCHE SEES, 2000  
Fujiflex print, 56 1/2 x 41 1/2 inches  
Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery, New York



n ugly duckling becomes a beautiful swan. The overlooked and mistreated servant becomes the most beautiful and desirable woman at the royal ball. A frog becomes a handsome prince. So it goes in fairy tales, an unstable realm where objects are magical and personalities are in constant flux. Creatures and people are not always what they seem. The helpless old lady is actually a powerful fairy, or the hapless third son turns out to be the most successful member of the household. At the heart of many fairy tales is transformation and change.

As a literary genre, fairy tales are rather fluid in that they are considered children's texts as well as adult texts. Folk and fairy tales are much more complicated and subtle than many people think—they certainly have never been nor will ever be just simple stories created to educate and entertain children. They never have been and never will be. As British folklorists Iona and Peter Opie suggest in their "Introduction" to *Classic Fairy Tales*, "Further analysis may show the tale to be even less like the popular conception of them" (12). Rather than being simple stories for simple minds, the Opies argue that "Perhaps after all, fairy tales are to be numbered the most philosophic tales that there are." (12).

While fairy tales have become an important aspect of children's literature, they didn't start out that way. Folk tales were simply tales of the folk. As part of the oral tradition, the primary audience for folk tales was adult, although undoubtedly some children were listening.

When scholars Jacob and Wilhem Grimm were collecting folk tales for their collection *Kinder—und Hausmärchen* [1812, 1814], they initially thought they were preserving German culture for future scholars and did not consider children as their readers. For the Grimms, fairy tales were *like* children, not *for* children.

The same is true for literary fairy tales, those stories with specific authors who use folk tales as their models. While the best known of the French literary fairy tales are those written by Charles Perrault and published as *Histoires ou contes du temps passé: Contes de Ma Mere L'Oye* [1697], it was Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and other women writers who helped develop the popularity of fairy tales among the French aristocracy during the late seventeenth century. It is from the title of d'Aulnoy's collection *Les Contes des fées* [1678, 1679], which was translated into English as *Tales of the Fairies*, from that the term "fairy tale" is derived.

J.R.R. Tolkien has suggested in his essay "On Fairy-stories" that, "the association of children and fairy stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy stories have in the modern lettered word been relegated to the 'nursery,' as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the playroom, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused" (34).

While I have always appreciated Tolkien's metaphor of the fairy tale as a piece of furniture, the journey of fairy tale from adult literature to children's literature is a bit



George Cruikshank. Cinderella illustration from *German Popular Stories*, 1823, 1826.

Arthur Rackham, illustration from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, 1906.

more convoluted and ought to go on a little further. If it is a well made piece of furniture and survives for a hundred years or more, finally someone is going to go down to the basement, realize it is an antique, and put it back into the front parlor where it once again becomes an object of adult admiration.

Fairy tales have been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. They are powerful stories with amazing characters and plots that can be endlessly expanded and revised. Take “Beauty and the Beast,” add Charlotte Brontë, and you get *Jane Eyre*. You get the idea: fairy tales started out as adult tales, lost their status and became children’s literature, but now have been reclaimed by adult readers.

When Edgar Taylor translated Grimm’s tales into English as *German Popular Stories* [1823, 1826] he wrote in his “Preface” that he intended the stories “to tickle the palate of the young” (iii), and in order to direct the fairy tales toward child readers, he had the collection illustrated by the popular graphic artist George Cruikshank. Cruikshank’s brilliant black-and-white etchings are regarded as the high point of British book illustration, as Gordon Ray has noted in *The Illustrator and the Book in England*. John Ruskin considered Cruikshank’s illustrations to *German Popular Stories* equal to etchings by Rembrandt. With their comic sensibility and grotesque use of detail, Cruikshank’s images were pivotal in making fairy tales and literary fairy tales two of the most popular forms of children’s literature during the Victorian



**Amy Sillman**, FREUDIAN SLIP, 2000  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches  
Collection Gregory Miller, New York

**Karen Arm**

## UNTITLED (SMOKE #5)

2000  
Acrylic on paper  
20 x 17 inches

## UNTITLED (STARS)

2000  
Acrylic on canvas  
44 x 36 inches  
Both courtesy P-P-O-W

**Meghan Boody**

## PSYCHE SEES

2000  
Fujiflex print  
56 1/2 x 41 1/2 inches

## PSYCHE'S TAIL

2000  
Fujiflex print  
56 1/2 x 41 1/2 inches  
Both courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery

**Bonnie Collura**

## PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

1999  
Fiberglass, resin, and paint  
67 x 53 x 44 inches

## BERNINI'S PERSEPHONE (CRONE)

1997  
Plaster gauzing, foam  
10 1/2 x 18 inches  
Both courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery

**Margaret Curtis**

## BROKEN HORIZON

1998  
Oil on linen  
24 x 80 inches  
Courtesy P-P-O-W

**Amy Cutler**

## RABBITS

1996  
Gouache on paper  
17 x 22 1/2 inches  
Courtesy Eyewash

## TEA POT HEAD

1997  
Gouache on paper  
17 x 13 inches  
13 x 17 inches  
17 x 13 inches  
Courtesy the artist

## EGG COLLECTION

1999  
Gouache on paper  
16 1/2 x 22 3/4 inches  
Courtesy Eyewash

**Katharina Fritsch**

## MÜHLE, KRANKENWAGEN, UNKEN

1990  
Sound installation  
Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

**Margi Geerlinks**

## UNTITLED (GIRL)

1999  
Fujichrome, perspex, and dibond  
67 x 50 inches

## TWINS

2000  
Fujichrome, perspex, and dibond  
49 1/4 x 60 inches  
Courtesy Stefan Stux Gallery

**Hilary Harkness**

## VIEW OF A SLAUGHTER YARD

2000  
Oil on panel  
13 x 11 3/4 inches  
Collection Paul Hertz and James  
Rauchman and courtesy Bill  
Maynes Gallery

## DYING FROM HOME AND LOST

1998  
Oil on panel  
23 1/2 x 29 inches  
Collection David and Leslee  
Bogath and courtesy Bill Maynes  
Gallery

**Claudia Hart**

## NIGHTMARE FOR TINKY-WINKY

1998  
Acrylic on canvas  
30 x 60 inches  
Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery

Claudia Hart

A LOVE STORY INVOLVING 2 GUYS

1998

Acrylic on canvas

30 x 60 inches

Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery

Julie Heffernan

SELF PORTRAIT AS INFANTA DREAM-  
ING MADAME DE SADE

1999

Oil on canvas

67 x 58 inches

Collection Janice and Evan Marks

Courtesy Littlejohn Contemporary  
and P·P·O·W

Julia Latané

FAIRY RING

1999

Vinyl

192 x 192 x 84 inches

FAIRY RING

1999

Vinyl

120 x 120 x 84 inches

Both courtesy the artist

Tracey Moffatt

INVOCATIONS 13

2000

Photo and silkscreen on paper

48 1/2 x 43 1/2 inches

Tracey Moffatt

INVOCATIONS 9

2000

photo and silkscreen on paper

53 1/2 x 63 inches

Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery  
and Paul Morris Gallery

Maria Porges

WHITE MAGIC

1999

Wood, beeswax, applied text and  
image, plexiglass

44 x 34 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches

Courtesy John Berggruen Gallery  
and the artist

NAMES OF MAGIC 3

2000

Wood, beeswax, and applied text

21 x 24 x 6 inches

Courtesy David Beitzel Gallery and  
the artist

Amy Sillman

FREUDIAN SLIP

2000

Oil on canvas

60 x 50 inches

Collection Gregory Miller

Courtesy Brent Sikkema Gallery

Amy Sillman

TREE

1999

Watercolor and gouache on paper,  
mounted on linen

12 x 15 1/2 inches

Courtesy Brent Sikkema Gallery

Elena Sisto

SNOW WHITE

1998

Oil on linen

24 x 36 inches

NOGUE

1998

Oil on linen

26 x 48 inches

Both courtesy Littlejohn Contemporary



The images in *pixerina*WITCHERINA are wrested from the gritty past of folktale and its current Disnification, but the new context which these artists are creating has another task as well, a kind of declaration of independence.

*Bill Conger, Curator*

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