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The uses of enchantment

Anna Belenki

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
In
The School of Art

By
Anna Belenki
B.F.A., NYSCC at Alfred University, 2001
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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
The Uses of Disaster	2
The Uses of Enchantment.....	4
Material and Aesthetic Influences.....	8
Conclusion.....	12
Vita.....	13

Abstract

This work begins with the decorative arts. It is inspired by the seductive color and line of Iznik tile from the Ottoman Empire and the ornate decorative flourishes of eighteenth century Chinoiserie wall paper that depicts fantastic landscapes and fanciful animals. The bears, cats, birds, snakes, and dogs that appear in the tiles are the protagonists of a fairy tale yet to be written. The uses of enchantment are endlessly fascinating. Enchantment fulfills our need for fantasy, beauty, meaning and reassurance. It connects us to the past and equips us to face the present, secure in the knowledge that all's well that ends well

Introduction

The intent of my work is to examine the relationship between the experiences of my everyday life and the theme of enchantment. I have created a pictorial diary that consists of a series of tiles that illustrate a specific period of time and correlate to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. My visual vocabulary derives from the history of eighteenth-century European decorative arts, the influence of fairy tales, and the tension between confronting unpleasant realities and the need for escapism and meaning.

The Uses of Disaster

Almost a year ago from this writing hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. The devastating effects of the hurricane, coupled with the inaction of local and federal aid agencies, created a crisis of epic proportions. In the days that followed, the media relentlessly exploited the opportunity to portray the events in a sensationalized way. The real suffering endured by people who were displaced from their homes and communities was often overshadowed by the perceived threat of chaos and lawlessness portrayed in the news. In every respect the situation seemed utterly and hopelessly demoralizing.

I remember talking with friends who described feeling terrorized and immobilized by their televisions that delivered an endless stream of human misery via CNN and broadcast news. “It’s like watching a train wreck, “ one of them reported, “I’m filled with dread but I can’t tear myself away.” At least in that regard I felt lucky to be without electricity in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

A few weeks later I came across an article by Rebecca Solnit published in Harpers magazine, which proposed something that at first seemed counter intuitive. Titled “The Uses of Disaster: Notes on Bad Weather and Good Government,” Solnit explores the connection between natural disasters and psychological states. She points out that a natural disaster “can be understood as a crash course in consciousness” and cites the work of sociologist Charles Fritz who in 1961 published a study titled “Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies.” In this work, Fritz posits that natural catastrophes can produce mentally healthy conditions.

Fritz and Solnit draw similar conclusions, namely that “disasters shake us loose from ordinary time . . . [from] preoccupation with the past and future.” Forced to focus all

of our attention on the present moment, this type of consciousness provides “a temporary liberation from the worries, inhibitions and anxieties associated with the past and the future...,, This shift of awareness...speeds the process of decision making and facilitates the acceptance of change.”

The Uses of Enchantment

Almost a year ago from this writing when the lights went out and stayed out for nearly a week, I found myself inexplicably drawn into a collection of fairy tales. At the time, I could not explain why I was so completely absorbed by these stories, only that they seemed somehow important and utterly satisfying to read. I was engaged in a type of escapism. I didn't suspect that I would remain preoccupied with the subject of fairy tales or know of the influence they would have in my work. During this time, I started reading Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Importance and Meaning of Fairy Tales*.

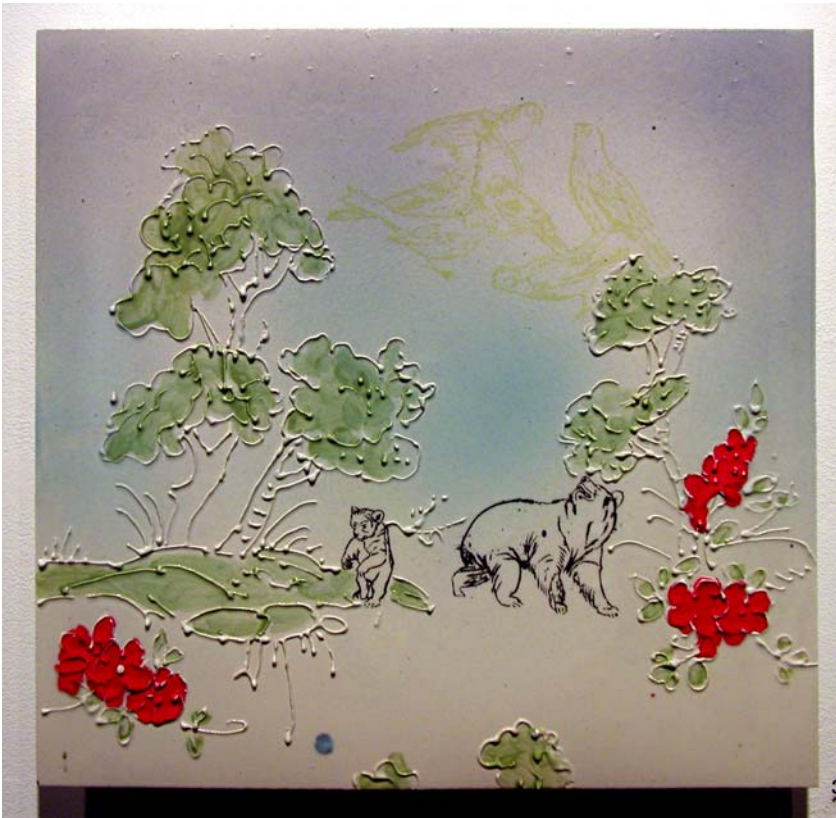


image 1. Into the Woods, screen printed earthenware tile with sliptrailing

The premise of *The Uses of Enchantment* is that fairy tales are essential to human development and psychological maturity. The stories, which have endured virtually unchanged since the time of preliterate societies, represent the most important stories we have and are often found across cultures.

Bettelheim is careful to distinguish fairy tales from other types of stories that teach a moral lesson, such as fables or heroic myths. He argues that the didactic nature of fables always emphasizes the importance of correct behavior, while fairy tales remain more ambiguous. Their role is to enrich our imaginations and expand our understanding of the world around us, all the while assuring us that things will work out for the best.

While there is no specific formula to fairy tales, the protagonist almost always has to face a catastrophe or endure a trial that ultimately enriches her or restores her to wellbeing. The one certainty in the fairy tale is the happy ending: “While the mythical hero experiences a transfiguration into eternal life in heaven, the central figure of the fairy tale lives happily ever after right here on earth among the rest of us.”

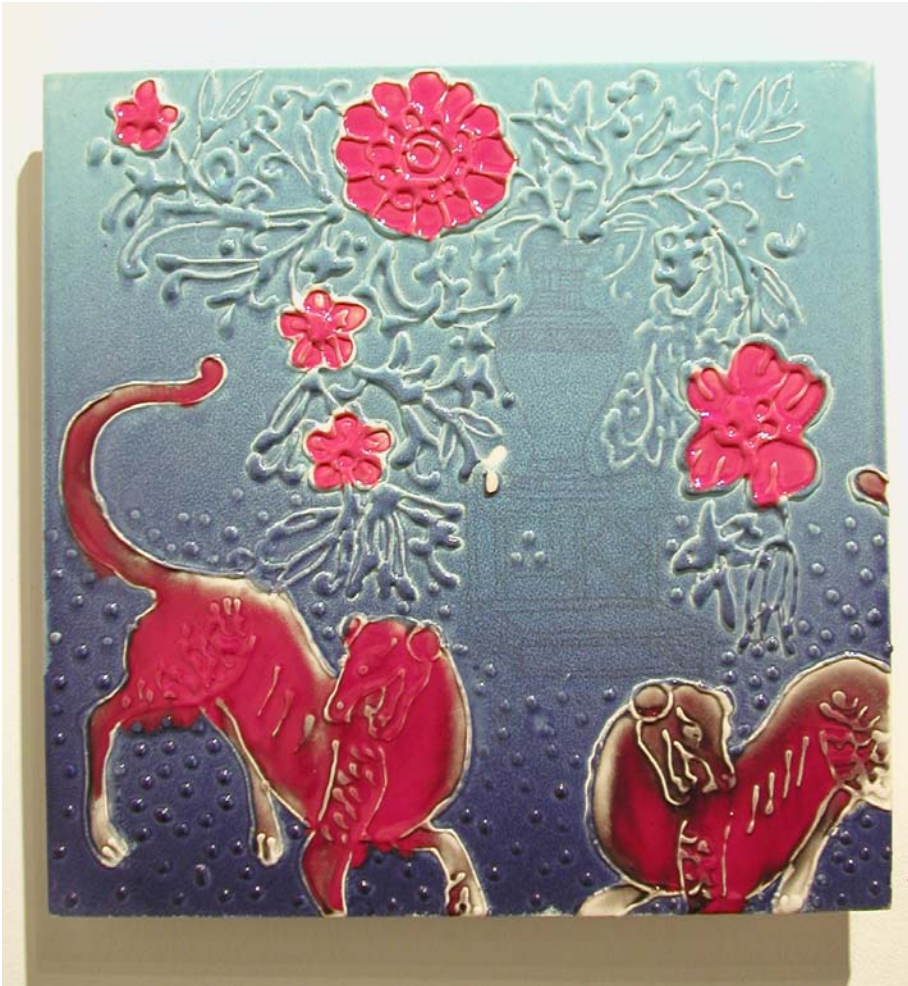


Image 2. Discovery of a secret leads to happiness, earthenware tile with sliptrailing

In hindsight it makes sense that I would be drawn to these stories in the wake of a catastrophe since fairy tales are about facing and triumphing over adversity. The happy ending assures that the most deplorable and threatening circumstances can be overcome when approached with cunning and wit.



Image 3. Happy Ending, screen printed earthenware tile with sliptrailing

Material and Aesthetic Influences

The work that I am presenting for my thesis show consists of a collection of pictorial ceramic tiles. It's important that they exemplify their ceramic properties, even while they exhibit some painterly tendencies. The permanence of the material, the color, opacity, translucence and reflectiveness of the glazed surface, the technique of their manufacture, all of these things are part of their object hood. Many of the images are embellished with motifs borrowed from the past via decorative art objects. The look of the tiles is specifically influenced by two sources: (1) eighteenth-century chinoiserie wall paper, which incorporates fantastic landscapes and animals into decorative schemes; and (2) the lyrical properties of Iznik tile from the Ottoman empire.

Aesthetically, the work looks fancy, decorative, and nostalgic. The images are inspired by—but do not specifically illustrate—fairy tales. Rather than draw on familiar tales, my aim is to assemble a menagerie of characters and depict them in situations that allude to a narrative without explicitly spelling one out. The repertoire of protagonists includes a bevy of familiar animals: cats, birds, dogs, snakes and bears, and humans dressed in costumes.



Image 4. Bad Timing Earthenware tile with sliptrailing



Image 5. Petrushka, screen printed earthenware tile with sliptrailing

The theme of a journey is represented in one tile by a hot air balloon and in another by a ship. The hot air balloon suddenly appears as a ubiquitous presence in eighteenth-century wall paper and originates in Portugal in 1709. This once cutting edge technology, which presented Paris with its first aerial view (a miniature perfection of itself), now represents nostalgia and escape.



Image 6. Cats discuss the fate of the world, screen printed earthenware tile with sliptrailing

The pictorial elements of the tiles are depicted using two types of representation: the animals consist of flat, single color screen prints and appear in a standardized format, while the environments in which they are sustained are depicted three dimensionally through slip trailing. Although the animals have a familiar association, the slip, which protrudes from the flat plane of the tile, functions as both a line and the shadow of a line, and represents the fantasy element of the work. I aim to make these images work on more than one level, mimicking the format of the fairy tale, which can appear obvious or imbued with meaning.

Conclusion

The uses of enchantment are endlessly fascinating. Enchantment fulfills our need for fantasy, beauty, meaning, and reassurance. It connects us to the past and equips us to face the present, secure in the knowledge that all's well that ends well.



Image 6. Three languages, screen printed earthenware tile with sliptrailing

Vita

Anna Belenki was born in 1972 in Leningrad, in the former Soviet Union, before it became a geo-political non-entity. She immigrated to the United States with her family as a child and grew up in New York City. She received her Bachelor of Fine Art with a concentration in ceramics from The New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.