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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/3193>

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ALL THE BETTER TO SEE YOU WITH

By

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B.F.A., Murray State University, 2012.

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and Design

Department of Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Reid Broadstreet

Tammy Burke

Tiffany Calvert

Mary Carothers

Zhanna Goldenthul

Barbara Hanger

Katie Hudnall

Eli Keel

Katie Ovechkin

Rachel Singel

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ABSTRACT

ALL THE BETTER TO SEE YOU WITH

Monica Stewart

April 19, 2019

All the Better to See You With is a body of work that deals with the inherently complex relationships between fairy tales and feminism. Consisting of an installation of hand-embroidered life-size or larger, papier-mâché female body parts and a series of six mixed media works on paper, this collection of work uses the imagery of fairy tales to address the violence of female experience. Through an exploration of the role of women in both the writing and literary function of fairy tales, we can see connections between the truth and fiction of women's work and violence against women.

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INTRODUCTION
ONCE UPON A TIME

Enchantment in these stories is the state of being disguised, displaced in an animal's body or another's identity. Disenchantment is the blessing of becoming yourself.
—Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*

The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit.
—Adrienne Rich, “Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution,” in *Essential Essays: Culture, Politics, and the Art of Poetry*, edited by Sarah M. Gilbert.

The quick pace and supernatural imagery of fairy tales creates a language that is rife with metaphors and allegories for the ways we experience everyday life. Fairy tales are also particularly strange spaces for women. While often moralizing or, conversely, toppling patriarchal structures, fairy tales repeatedly feature women and girls who exist in liminal places: as princess and monster, lucky and unlucky, free and bound.

While personal experiences and observations of these kinds of liminal spaces provide the impetus for my work, I find uncanny relationships between real life and fiction more often than not. After a rift in my family left me longing to redefine myself, as well as understand more about my ancestry and genetic make-up, I searched for places where the complications and troubles of life are addressed. While DNA tests and genealogy proved valuable, I became more and more interested in attempting to grasp the

folk beliefs and traditions of the cultures that are related to my genetic makeup.

Ultimately, I turned to German, Italian, Russian, and related European fairy tales. Like the Brothers Grimm collecting stories and oral traditions to define “German-ness,” I found I was using the imagery and themes of these tales to define my experiences and myself.

Fairy tales, like life, are places where families fall apart for inexplicable reasons, fortunes are made and lost through small actions, seemingly impossible tasks are achieved with help and kind actions, power dynamics shift, and the unthinkable and the inconceivable occur regularly. As writer, Rebecca Solnit so succinctly states in *The Faraway Nearby*, “Fairy tales are about trouble, about getting into and out of it, and trouble seems to be a necessary stage on the route to becoming.”¹ Trouble, transformation, and hybridity are all part of the rich conceptual fabric of fairy tales, yet they are also coupled with abject imagery and extreme violence.

While I, like most inexperienced readers of fairy tales, was aware that they were much darker, violent, and grotesque than the sugary adaptations we, in the West, are fed as children, I became more and more fascinated with the role of women in these tales, as well as my own spectatorship and enjoyment of the magical horrors I voraciously read. Am I culpable in my participation in the reading of these tales? What does it mean to both revel in and relate to a fairy tale, especially when a female character is dismembered, eaten, or rolled down a hill in a barrel full of nails?

Women protagonists in these tales are forced to hide, or alter their appearance and behavior, in order to achieve their desires and survive to the end of the story. Other

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (London: Granta Books, 2014), 13.

heroines may also survive, but they often lose fingers, arms, feet, or their heads in the process. This rich and prolific imagery of fairy tales have become part of the visual language I employ in this body of work to addresses my own observations and understanding of the ways in which women move through the world, and the ways the world moves through women.

My research has led me to begin to consider taxonomies and the evaluative structures seen within fairy tales and the female body. I draw on abject imagery from fairytales to allude to transformation, female agency, dysfunctional familial relationships, as well as the magical and grotesque. Through the creation of an exhibition made using primarily media and materials associated with both fairy tales and women's work, I attempt to manifest aspects of fairy tales with a physical presence in a way that relates to a modern female experience. By combining often visceral and bodily imagery with the medium of paper, I aim to create allusions to both the playful and the perverse.

Liberating and pigeonholing, age-old and refreshing, cliché and wholly unique, fairy tales continue to captivate and provide us with contradictory metaphors to investigate ourselves. How do we reckon with the dualities of fairy tales? This body of work does not have all the answers; but there is truth in fiction, and the threaded needle tells the tale.

CHAPTER I
TELLING THE TALES: TRUTH AND FICTION

Just what tale is being told when examining fairy tales and folktales, as a whole, can be difficult to unravel. If we examine the roots of fairy tales and their origins, we find a complex web with myriad secondary sources and anonymous tellers. As writer and essayist, Angela Carter states, fairy tales are “anonymous and genderless. We may know the name and gender of the particular person who tells a particular story, just because a collector noted the name down, but we can never know the name of the person who invented the story in the first place.”² This anonymity both mimics the impossible task of accessing the past and debunks the myth of unique authorship, while opening up the tales to generations of past, present, and future tellers.

Carter goes on to observe, that fairy tales disregard the idea of individual, artistic genius, arguing, “fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of domestic arts.”³ And indeed, the idea of domesticity is key to fairy tales. Not only are fairy tales full of the domestic labor of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, they were likely told during such tasks by the sources of philologists and collectors like the

² Angela Carter and Corinna Sargood, *Angela Carters Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 2014), xii.

³ Angela Carter and Corinna Sargood. *Angela Carters Book of Fairy Tales*, xii.

Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson.

As folklorist Valerie Paradiz asserts in *Clever Maids: The Secret History of The Grimm Fairy Tales*, “More than half of the two hundred-ten fairy tales included in the Grimm anthologies had a woman’s hand in them, whether they were recorded from her storytelling or recorded by her as she listened to another storyteller. These were sisters of the Wild, Hassenpflug, the von Haxhausen, and the von Droste-Hülshoff families. They served as fairy tale think tanks to whom Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm turned for the majority of the stories.”⁴ Is it any wonder then that there is so much spinning, sewing, and cleaning present in folk and fairy tales? Of course, these tales were highly edited, translated, retold, and republished numerous times over just the course of the Grimm’s’ lifetimes, transforming from stories told by women, among women, to tales told *to* women by men; a very different kettle of fish altogether.

Is it possible to get back to the original texts of these stories told by women? In her essay, “Fertility Control and the Modern European Fairy-Tale Heroine,” folklorist and scholar, Ruth B. Bottingheimer, makes a case that probably not, as “the pen, nearly always held by a male hand, inked directions for what women should and should not do and what constituted as feminine and unfeminine behavior.”⁵ Bottingheimer elaborates that the numerous constraints on women’s fertility and social roles, in tandem with the prevailing male voices in literature, created an environment rife for fairy tales. “Why did the Grimm’s’ girls suffer? In part because popular ‘knowledge’ willed it so. The proverb

⁴ Valerie Paradiz, *Clever Maids: The Secret History of The Grimm Fairy Tales* (Perseus Books Group New York, 2005), xi.

⁵ Ruth B. Bottingheimer, “Fertility Control and the Modern European Fairy-Tale Heroine, in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. Haase, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 38.

[of the time] was ‘Männer tun, Frauen leiden’ (men act, women are acted upon). The proverb meant that women are passive, but the word ‘leiden’ allows a second meaning, ‘suffer’ and it was more often than not justified from pulpit to podium as the just consequence of Eve’s folly.”⁶ With a history rooted in almost genderless ambiguity and female domesticity, fairy tales were twisted and turned over centuries by male authors to better reflect patriarchal standards of the religious and societal conventions of the day. And while this paradigm may seem outdated, our current political climate is no less fixated on women’s reproductive rights and limiting them. The layered narratives and vivid imagery of female characters of fairy tales are just as steeped in hegemony as they are in magic and enchantment, and can still ring true in contemporary contexts.

To this end, the complexity and usefulness of fairy tales, those collected by the Grimms in particular, as a Western feminist tool have been argued about since the 1970s. In his essay, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship,” scholar Donald Haase deftly attempts to untangle the impossible task of laying out a history of the discord regarding fairy tales as a feminist tool, arguing that, regardless of the debate, “the intersection of feminism and fairy-tale studies has created a powerful synergy that has dramatically and permanently affected the way fairy tales are produced, received, studied and taught.”⁷ That this debate cannot be solved by a general consensus, but only by individual readers, makes fairy tales and folktales even riper fodder for feminist reinterpretations and manipulations by artists and writers alike. Their potential for retelling is endless, and the canon is rich with images we can immediately grasp or that bewilder us based on our level of familiarity

⁶ Ruth B. Bottingheimer, “Fertility Control and the Modern European Fairy-Tale Heroine, in *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. Haase, 38.

⁷ Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 31.

with the tales themselves.

But whether or not we are fully immersed in the Grimm corpus or any particular folk or fairy tale tradition, stories—especially those descended from an oral tradition—still have power. Folklorist and scholar Jack Zipes observes, “Stories not only contribute to the making of our narrative selves but also to weave the threads of social relationships and make life social.”⁸ Stories at their core are our basis of connection with others, and the discourse we have with stories allows us to define ourselves. As Rebecca Solnit astutely states, “We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to blind. Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning. The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them, to pause and hear silence, to name them, and then to become the storyteller.”⁹ The act of telling a story, and visualizing the imagery of stories is so potent that it is no wonder that fairy tales still carry a huge cultural weight and continue to infiltrate popular culture, literature, theatre, and the visual arts. Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White, and the language associated with them, can conjure up enough meaning with just a mention of their names or any language associated with them (“What big teeth you have!” “Mirror, mirror on the wall . . .”).

With all the staying power and potential interpretations that fairy tales evoke, it is no wonder that countless artists have employed their characters and tropes to communicate some aspect of the female experience. Kiki Smith, Paula Rego, Carrie Mae Weems, Amy Cutler, Cindy Sherman, Rachel Perry, and many, many other artists have

⁸ Zipes, Jack. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4.

⁹ Solnit, Rebecca. *Faraway Nearby*. NY, NY: Penguin Books, (2014), 4.

used fairy or folk tales that either feature or reference female characters in their work. With this exhibition, I too attempt to take on my own retelling.

For my body of work, I focus on fairy tales derived from areas of Europe that relate directly to my own genetic make-up (English/Scottish, German, Italian/French, Russian, and Scandinavian). Each tale deals in some way with a heroine being eaten, dismembered, or beheaded by a male, be he father, brother, husband, or creature. The overlap these stories have within cultures is fascinating. Taxonomies and elements of the husband's test of the bride and her discovery of his bloody chamber full of dismembered brides in *Fitcher's Bird* by the Brothers Grimm (German) can also be found in *Mr. Fox* (English/Scottish), *Bluebeard* (French), and numerous other iterations. And yet, many key points remain the same: the heroine's curiosity gets her in trouble, but enables her to find out the truth; and her ingenuity sometime revives the brides that came before her and ultimately escape, and retaliate—at least in the Grimm's version, that is.

In the central body of this work, *Piecework (As Red As Blood)* [see Appendix Images], I created numerous hand-embroidered, papier-mâché and wire silhouettes. While there are a normal amount of torsos and legs, there are several more heads, arms, hands, feet, and fingers than there should be. This multiplicity of appendages aims to force viewers to question what they see, and search for patterns and meaning in the abundance of flat severed limbs. These additional body parts also alludes to the multiple tellers and authors of the tales. Fairy-tale numerology played a key role in the decision-making process for determining the number of extra appendages. To attempt to further their relationship to fairy tales, the extra body parts are all in sequences of numbers that recur in fairy tales: three drops of blood, seven dwarves, twelve dancing princesses, and

on and on.

The accompanying cut paper works also focus on the pool of fairy tales I've drawn on for the complete body of work. Each tale was chosen to relate to the conceptual aspects of the *Piecework* installation: themes of women in suspended or liminal spaces; women who are eaten, butchered or skinned; women who both lose and gain at the same time; and some heroines who survive through their own craft and resilience. For even though these tales have been reimagined, re-visualized, and retold, over and over again, (most often by men), their visceral imagery still has the power of metaphor. Even in this day and age, it is still (sadly) remarkably refreshing to see a woman regain her own agency.

CHAPTER II
FAIRY-TALE WOMEN, LANGUAGE, & TAXONOMIES

Madness and witchery as well as bestiality are conditions commonly associated with the use of the female voice in public, in ancient as well as modern contexts. Consider how many female celebrities of classical mythology, literature, and cult make themselves objectionable by the way they use their voice.
—Anne Carson, from “The Gender of Sound”

While the assertion that much of Western society’s history has dealt with the silencing of women to maintain a powerful patriarchal hegemony may seem to be a given, it is helpful to establish when examining women in fairy tales. Even if we accept that the imagery and narratives of fairy tales have relevant potential for feminist commentary in the arts, the potential for debate could still rest soundly in the passive language applied to these tales. Both applied by their collectors and fairy-tale scholars, the words used to describe fairy-tale heroines and the tales themselves largely deal with inscribing passivity and inactivity.

Torborg Lundell describes this practice in his essay, “Gender-Related Biases in the Type and Motif Indexes of Aarne and Thompson.” Lundell argues that the fairy-tale taxonomists Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson intentionally present the subdued and subordinate heroine in the categorization of fairy tales they created in their seminal work,

The Types of the Folktale, and in Thompson's related *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.

Lundell makes the following case:

Instead of being "inclusive," however, the Motif Index tends to promote a patriarchal view of the characters and their interactions, especially as they affect female characters. The Motif Index in general (1) overlooks gender identity in its labeling of motifs, thus lumping male and female actions and characters under the same, male-identified heading or (2) disregards female activity or (3) focuses on male activity at the cost of female. This is also true of the Aarne Thompson Type Index.¹⁰

Lundell goes on to argue that when female characters are mentioned in these taxonomies, no matter how central to the plot or active within the narrative, they are still described by Aarne and Thompson with passive descriptors or by the deeds of their male counterparts.¹¹ If misrepresentations, forced passivity, and obfuscation of heroines is embedded in some of the earliest fairy and folk tale scholarship, the possibility for feminist reclamations and reinterpretations are countless.

While the language and scholarship of fairy tales may be layered and steeped with hegemonic dialectics and societal expectations, so are most of history, literature, film, and art. To have a dialogue with the past is to acknowledge this. What fairy tales and these applied taxonomies do give us is the opportunity to grasp recognizable metaphors, be they visual or textual, and apply them to contemporary issues of feminism; chances for retellings. As author Phillip Pullman states in the introduction to his own book of fairy tale retellings, "The fairy tale is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration."¹²

¹⁰ Torborg Lundell, "Gender-Related Biases in the Type and Motif Indexes of Aarne and Thompson." *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1989), 150.

¹¹ Torborg Lundell, "Gender-Related Biases in the Type and Motif Indexes of Aarne and Thompson." *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, 151.

¹² Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Philip Pullman, *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm: A New English Version* (New York: Viking, 2012) xix.

Alteration. Spinning yarns. Words which ring of women's work and telling tales. As Angela Carter points out, "Old wives' tales—that is worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time it takes all value away from it."¹³ As women are so often aligned with lies, why not embrace fiction if it serves the purpose of telling the truth?

As important as fairy-tale imagery is to my work, text and language itself are also important components of the objects I make. Rhymes, double meanings, and plays-on-words function like a trail of breadcrumbs, leading the viewer to a closer understanding of underlying narratives. The language in my work also alludes to magic words, spells, and other incidences of marvelous language in fairy tales. As viewers are invited to literally read my work, they may be cautioned or given the words to transcend a difficult circumstance. Just as I manipulate imagery and language, I also alter my materials themselves. By cutting, rearranging, and embellishing both traditional and nontraditional materials, I create new works that enter the realm of objects.

The aforementioned central installation of my thesis exhibition, *Piecework (Red As Blood)* features embroidered text, of my own design and my own conception; a poem that requires work to be read, and no two viewers will read in the same way. Lines of this poem sometimes refer to the actual appendages they are embroidered on, (i.e. "Before you gamble away my hands") and thus to the fairy tale that body part and line refer to (*The Robber Bridegroom*, Brothers Grimm). Repeated throughout the poem and artwork are references to self-segmentation, self-alteration, and the threat of those changes being forced upon the narrator. Constantly repeated is, "i cut first before you can." This

¹³ Angela Carter and Corinna Sargood. *Angela Carters Book of Fairy Tales*. (London: Virago, 2014), xiii.

language is meant to represent the changes women make, be they small or large, to protect themselves, to hide, to get through unpleasant misogynist experiences they face, which can cause physical, emotional, social pain or no harm at all.

CHAPTER III

VIOLENCE: ALL THE BETTER TO EAT YOU WITH

So. . . how do you torture a woman?

Well, you can tie her up on the rack and rip her bones apart from the sockets. That's one way. Or you can tear apart her mind and her body. Now there's two ways to do this: You can pry her body away from her mind, or you can pry her mind away from her body. Either way, it works out the same thing.

—Carolyn Gage, *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc*

One day, when I was a freshman in high school, eating lunch with a group of friends and acquaintances, a boy told me I would never have to worry about being raped because of the way I looked. He went on to tell the rest of the young women at the table, whether or not they had the potential for rape in their future. As a woman, and one who has been fat for most of my life, my body has been subject to the judgments and the comments of others for as long as I can remember. I was used to reading the subtext of comments like this, and it was by far not the most invasive or unsettling exchange I had ever had, but this statement was, and is still incredibly interesting to me. How insulting! What a relief! To be verbally cast out from physical desirability and be pronounced saved from the threat of assault at the same time was bewildering. I had no comeback or retort, and kept my mouth shut. I weighed my options, and to pick a fight did not seem to be

worth the trouble.

Piecework (As Red As Blood) is intended to address incidents of misogyny like this, but also to consider the many ways violence, be it verbal, physical, or sexual, is enacted on women. However it is not meant to equate them in any way, but simply to acknowledge that they exist through the use of fairy-tale imagery and metaphor. While viewers may consider personal events like mine, hopefully *Piecework (As Red As Blood)* draws attention to both more dangerous events as well as the violence against women that occurs both in fairy tales and folktales, and happens to women all over the world every day. A quick Google search yields scores of statistics on sexual assault globally. (One in three women “have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.”)¹⁴ And it is equally imperative that we acknowledge that women of color and trans women are included in this conversation.

As our issues of sexism, sexual assault, and sexual harassment come more and more to the forefront of our country’s national conversations, media coverage, and legal proceedings, the women at the forefront are still being asked by the invisible male chorus of commentators, politicians, and anonymous internet trolls if they’re telling the truth. The link between language and violence is not tenuous by any means. From Anita Hill to Christine Blasey Ford, we have seen women questioned about trauma at the hands of men in positions of power, of voice, and of agency on a national platform.

These stories certainly do not have an ending where justice is served. Perhaps that is part of the appeal of fairy tales. You may put your sisters may be put back together

¹⁴ “Violence against women,” World Health Organization, last modified November 19, 2017, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

again. You can exit the belly of the wolf. Your father may gamble your hands away to the Devil, but you get a silver replacement pair. You survive. How many tales do we hear today where there are no survivors? The recent murder and dismemberment of Danish journalist Kim Wall at the hands of billionaire inventor, Peter Madsen on his private submarine is a little too close to *Bluebeard* for comfort.¹⁵ But while, *Bluebeard's* wife usually lives to see her brothers kill her would-be murderer, Kim Wall's body washed ashore in pieces over several days to Copenhagen. The wolves walk among us, and sometimes our job is to walk into their den. How do women alter and protect themselves to walk out and see another day?

In the fairy tales I draw upon for this body of work, women are eaten by wolves, their feet are cut off, their hands gambled away, their heads are separated from their bodies, etc. And while the grotesque imagery of closets full of dead women (*Fitcher's Bird, Bluebeard*), feet severed from legs to stop a dancing body (*The Red Shoes*), or arms chopped off by a brother (*The Armless Maiden*) may seem overly dramatic and grotesque, even completely absurd, are not horror films and true crime stories evidence of the cautionary tale in our own cultural zeitgeist? As Jack Zipes points out, "It is not inconceivable that people told numerous tales about serial killers thousands of years ago to alert others about these murders. It is not inconceivable that they also told tales about women's curiosity, indicating that they might endanger themselves if they were too

¹⁵ "Danish Court Sentences Inventor To Life For Woman's Murder In 'Submarine Case,'" Bill Chappell, NPR, last modified April 25, 2018, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/25/605619574/danish-court-sentences-inventor-to-life-for-womans-murder-in-submarine-case>.

curious and disobeyed an autocratic husband.”¹⁶ Zipes of course references Jacques Perrault’s *Bluebeard*, which has similar variations mirrored in *Fitcher’s Bird*, *Mr. Fox*, and *The Robber Bridegroom*, all of which function as both cautionary tales and patriarchal props.

Zipes goes on to assert that while other tales related to *Bluebeard* involve similar themes and plot techniques, such as prohibition, transgression, and punishment, “But what is distinctive about the Bluebeard discourse is that it stemmed from a misogynist strain of storytelling within patriarchal cultures. ‘Bluebeard’ is a tale about power, among other things, and who is in control of power, and why power should always be in the hands of men.”¹⁷ Though a prevailing interpretation of *Bluebeard* and related tales is misogynistic, a feminist approach is that a woman’s curiosity and craft are her finest weapons. Without them, she would never have found the room of corpses, her dismembered sisters, and the truth about what she had gotten herself into. Having survived her bloody marriage, our heroine(s) are able to rejoin her family and society. As scholar Christina Bacchilega asserts in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender Narrative Strategies*, “Put to different feminist uses, then, a gruesome fairy tale often deployed against women becomes recuperated as the story of successful, socially meaningful female initiation.”¹⁸ Whether in fiction or reality, violence, no matter how impactful or how insignificant, is a catalyst of change.

¹⁶ Zipes, Jack. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 53.

¹⁷ Zipes, Jack. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 54.

¹⁸ Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 138.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN'S WORK: SEWING TRANSFORMATION

Though violence works as an impetus for change in fairy tales, so equally does women's work. Sewing, spinning, and weaving are all presented, often, in the form of impossible tasks. As Rebecca Solnit elaborates, "Such tasks are always the obstacles to becoming, to being set free, of finding love. Carrying out the tasks undoes the curse. Enchantment in these stories is the state of being disguised, displaced in an animal's body or another's identity. Disenchantment is the blessing of becoming yourself."¹⁹ Through the repetitive tasks of making, heroines are enabled to sew their own stories and mend the wrongs enacted on them, to act and create as a means of subversion.

However, sewing and other forms of related fiber arts are still disputed with regards to their taxonomy as "art" or "craft." They are also subject to debate with regards to their usefulness to support feminism. Since the advent of the feminist movement, scholars and artists have debated whether or not these practices promote feminism, or are just a tool of the patriarchy. Just as complicated as fairy tales themselves, the women's work within them is just as controversial, and just as open to interpretation. One woman's needle and thread can be another woman's ball and chain.

¹⁹ Solnit, Rebecca. *Faraway Nearby*. NY, NY: Penguin Books, 2014, 13.

This is further complicated by manufacturing and industrialization. As artist Anni Albers states in *On Weaving*, “Modern industry saves us endless labour and drudgery; but—Janus-faced, it also bars us from taking part in the forming of material and leaves idle our sense of touch and with it those formative faculties that are stimulated by it.”²⁰ And, of course as critic and activist Lucy Lippard points out in her 1978 essay, “Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby Art’)”, it is a luxury to partake in the labor of making. “In addition, crocheting, needlework, embroidery, rug-hooking and quilting are coming back to the middle- and upper-class on the apron strings of feminism and fad. Ironically these arts are now practised by the well-off out of boredom and social pressure as often as out of emotional necessity to make connections with women of the past.”²¹ With the upscale craft stores and institutions of DIY and ETSY so prevalent in contemporary Western culture, and in conjunction with America’s shrinking middle class, the availability of materials, time, and resources have become more indulgence than homespun industry.

And yet, there is something irresistible about women’s work for many artists. For one, unlike almost any other medium, it has a largely female history. While undoubtedly, men were tailors, dyers, and weavers for centuries, women still practiced these arts in domestic environments. Our fairy tale heroines may complete fantastical feats of labor, but they are not totally based in fantasy. As Paradiz notes of Lotte Grim, sister and source to the eponymous Brothers, “Lotte Grimm swapped stories with her girlfriends when they met for tea or did their needlework together, a pastime that was popular among young

²⁰ Anni Albers, *On Weaving in Craft* ed. Tanya Harrod, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 27.

²¹ Lucy Lippard, “Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby Art’) ed. Tanya Harrod, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 33.

middle-class women of the age who could read and write. Once Jacob and Wilhelm had exhausted this convenient source, they established connections with educated women of the aristocracy, who had the leisure and time to ply the scholar brothers with scores of tales.”²² While many of the storytellers consulted by the Grimm’s were middle-class women, they were still beholden to restrictions of a patriarchal society. What other options did they have? And again, though the sneaky layering of many fairy tales’ origins remains class-less, we can never fully know their sources’ class or gender; their heroines’ work is often rooted in the work of their tellers, be it out of luxury or necessity.

Surely, the urge to make and create is a primal one, which does not know socio-economic status. Be it telling a story or threading a needle, practicing the act of repeating tasks to gain skill is an artistic pursuit. Rebecca Solnit makes the case for the interconnectedness of women’s work, storytelling, and mastery:

The fairytale heroines spin cobwebs, straw, nettles, into whatever is necessary to survive. Scheherazade forestalls her death by telling a story that is like a thread that cannot be cut; she keeps spinning and spinning, incorporating new fragments, characters incidents, into her unbroken, unbreakable narrative thread. Penelope at the other end of the treasury of stories prevents her wedding to any one of her suitors by unweaving at night what she weaves by day on her father-in-law’s funeral garment. By spinning, weaving, and unraveling, these women master time itself, and though *master* is a masculine word, this mastery is feminine.²³

Arguably, to sew, weave, mend, or tell a story is to attempt to access both the history of the art form and its female practitioners, but also to attempt to achieve their mastery.

As Lucy Lippard asserts, “Today we are resurrecting our mothers’, aunts’, and grandmothers’ activities—not only in the well practised areas of quilts and textiles, but also in the more random and freer area of transformational *rehabilitation*. On an

²² Valerie Paradiž, *Clever Maids The Secret History of The Grimm Fairy Tales* (Perseus Books Group New York, 2005), xv.

²³ Solnit, Rebecca. *Faraway Nearby*. NY, NY: Penguin Books, 2014, 131.

emotional as well as practical level, rehabilitation has always been women's work.”²⁴ Of course, Lippard uses rehabilitation with regards to mending and patching, but could not the term also be applied to both the retelling of stories and the rehabilitation of fiber-based practices? Walter Benjamin asserts in *The Storyteller*, “For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and the art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to.”²⁵ Under this paradigm, it is worth noting that fairy tales were being collected and published as industrialization began developing throughout Europe.

What does it mean to engage in the practice of embroidery, as well as other decorative arts (I would argue papier-mâché, and paper-cutting are related) as well as the retelling of stories? My intentions in the creation of this body of work are to both mimic the impossible tasks of the heroines of fairy tales and folktales, and to connect with a history of practice and work that is largely female. By routinely cutting, layering, and stitching, in my own way, I aim to imitate and achieve a similar means of metamorphosis of both the materials I manipulate and myself.

Rather than using fabric as a backing material for embroidery, I chose to embroider on papier-mâché silhouettes formed around wire. Intentionally, these objects are semi-translucent and resemble both skin and the pages of books. A specific Italian fairy tale by Giambattista Basile, *The Old Woman Who Was Skinned*, is part of the inspiration for this choice. This tale is also featured in one of the cut paper pieces. After many machinations, the interference of both lustful kings and questionably benevolent

²⁴ Lucy Lippard, “Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women’s ‘Hobby Art’)” ed. Tanya Harrod, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 34.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin *The Storyteller* ed. Tanya Harrod, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 77.

fairies, two sisters who begin the tale as old hags are irrevocably changed: one regains her youth, the other does not. After excessive pestering, begging and cajoling, the newly youthful sister angrily tells her (still) old sister that she paid a barber to flay her. Her sister goes out and convinces a barber to do just that, both the barber and the sister, saying mid-skinning, “Ugh, she who wants to appear beautiful must suffer!”²⁶ Again, this tale deals with both bodily harm, albeit voluntary, to fit into hegemonic standards and achieve patriarchal value.

Besides its skin- and book-like qualities, my reliance on paper to achieve this change is in large part due to its familiarity, malleability, and ubiquitous-ness. Paper may be manipulated in a hundred different ways, it maybe be made and unmade, as well as utterly transformed. A material that is both simultaneously fragile and strong holds the possibility for numerous iterations, presentations, and tellings of the tale. Paper-cutting itself also has a relationship to women’s work, leisure activities, and creative work. Toy-like, tenuous, and tedious, paper-cutting and paper itself are processes and materials that ally themselves both to the anonymous nature of fairytales, silhouettes, shadow puppets, marionettes, and environments that begin to border on the theatrical.

Silhouettes also allow for anonymity, which mimics the lack of physical description in fairy tales. So often heroines are not described at all, and if they are named at all, they are more often than not only barely described by their physical appearance or what they wear; Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, All-Kinds-of-Fur. Phillip Pullman further reinforces this idea by noting that perhaps the most apt visual representation of fairy tales is “the little card-board cut-out figures that come with the toy theatre. They are

²⁶ Giambattista Basile, Nancy L. Canepa, Jack David Zipes, and Carmelo Lettere. *The Tale of Tales or Entertainment for Little Ones* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016),102.

flat, not round. Only one side of them is visible to the audience, but that is the only side we need; the other side is blank.”²⁷

With regards to the embroidery in this piece, it too, like the fairy tales I draw on, is based on traditional folk patterns from Europe and Russia. This is again both an attempt to access the practices and visual interpretations of my own genetic makeup and ancestry, but also to make obvious connections to the imagery of folk and fairy tales. Geometric patterns, birds, flowers, and small figures all are based on Russian, Eastern European, and German traditional embroidery motifs and patterns. Similarly I also attempt to employ a limited variety of stitches that are related to these practices and folk motifs: satin, running, back, and cross-stitch. I attempt to both honor and understand these traditions and symbols while also including some of my own arrangements.

My early failed attempts to complete or correctly render patterns also seem to stand for the inherent futility of this endeavor. No matter how much I attempt to understand what it means to be part of any of the cultures that I share genetically, I can never fully achieve that understanding. However, just as fairy-tale collectors like the Grimms were attempting to define the folk traditions of a unified Germany, post-revolution Russians also sought to use folk traditions to redefine a new Russia.

As Rozika Parker observes in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, “Embroidery gained a particular significance in the movement to develop a new Russian costume. Artists and designers collaborated in the attempt to

²⁷ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Philip Pullman, *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm: A New English Version* (New York: Viking, 2012) xiv.

design clothes intended for industrial mass production.”²⁸ Again a debate about the usefulness of embroidery came into play, as Futurists like V. E. Tatlin felt that embroidery as a medium still smacked too much of the bourgeoisie.²⁹ Artists and designers had to justify the use of embroidery. Designer Nadezhda Laménova argued, “What used to be called trimmings has significance for the whole garment: it can strengthen the rhythms of plane, intensify the style. . .”³⁰ Unsurprisingly, even as one patriarchal society was exchanged for another, women’s mastery was still held in little regard.

European embroidery as a practice has its roots in recording; recording newly learned stitches, and creating samplers were all means of demonstrating skills, diligence, and virtue. Embroidery was often done as a means of decoration and embellishment, and meant to evoke the qualities religious and societal attributes, which the patriarchy desired women to inhabit, many feminist movements have rehabilitated embroidery to evoke very different qualities. When examining the Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, Parker asserts, “In their hands, embroidery was employed not to transform the place and function of art, but to change ideas about women and femininity. Far from desiring to disentangle embroidery and femininity, they wanted embroidery to evoke femininity—but femininity represented as a source of strength, not as evidence of women’s weakness.”³¹ In many ways, *Piecework (Red As Blood)* is a culmination of these two concepts; both a recording of knowledge, and a rehabilitation of practice; all the better to

²⁸ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017) 194.

²⁹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, 195.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 195.

³¹ *Ibid*, 197.

see the experiences of women with.

There are a number of other symbolic choices present in *Piecework*, and the accompanying series of cut paper works. That the color of the thread is red is obviously meant to refer to blood, a ubiquitous liquid in fairy tales and one that has special significance for women. Additionally, this choice is to relate to the traditional use of red thread in much of Russian and Eastern European embroidery and cross-stitch. While the long threads that hang from the paper appendages and pool on the floor may more directly reference sanguine substances, they are also intended to refer to both hair and the piles and heaps of materials and impossible tasks that fairy-tale heroines are constantly confronted with. A red thread also runs through all of the cut paper pieces on the wall, threading paper needles, attached to small paper keys, or running through the belly of a paper wolf. Not only is this meant to link the two bodies of work together, but it is also meant to refer to the stories themselves, to telling tales and spinning yarns.

CHAPTER V

THE END

By creating and embellishing a broken body through processes historically associated with women, I created my own impossible task. The making of this work is an attempt to understand my own relationship to women's work, violence, fairy tales, and ultimately an unattainable connection to the traditions and beliefs of my genetic ancestors. Having physically completed the task I set myself and attempting to tell my own tale in the process, it is safe for me to say that both fairy tales and women's work still have a great deal to offer artists, writers, and scholars alike, even in our own era. However, though these stories may survive in the mind's eye of Western popular culture, they may not be useful for everyone, and certainly do not speak for all feminists. As Angela Carter so astutely states, "Sisters under the skin we might be, but that doesn't mean we've got much in common."³² For me, the imagery and metaphors inherent in fairy tales, as well as their history and scholarship, offer a beautiful heap to untangle and the potential for a visual language that has many voices behind it besides mine that say, *be bold, be bold.*³³

³² Angela Carter and Corinna Sargood. *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*, (London: Virago, 2014), xvi.

³³ ³³ Angela Carter and Corinna Sargood. *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*, 9.

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APPENDIX: A LIST OF IMAGES FROM
ALL THE BETTER SO SEE YOU WITH

1. *Piecework (As Red As Blood)*, Installation View I, embroidery, papier-mâché, wire, and thread, 2019.

2. *Piecework (As Red As Blood)*, Installation View II, embroidery, papier-mâché, wire, and thread, 2019.

3. *Bluebeard, Fitcher's Bird, The Red Shoes, Little Red Riding Hood, The Armless Maiden, and The Old Woman Who Was Skinned*, Installation View III, cut paper, watercolor, graphite, thread, 2019.



1. *Piecework (As Red As Blood)*, Installation View I, embroidery, papier-mâché, wire, and thread, 2019.



2. *Piecework (As Red As Blood)*, Installation View II, embroidery, papier-mâché, wire, and thread, 2019.



3. *Bluebeard, Fitcher's Bird, The Red Shoes, Little Red Riding Hood, The Armless Maiden, and The Old Woman Who Was Skinned, Installation View III, cut paper, watercolor, graphite, thread, 2019.*

CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION:

2016-2019 MFA Studio Art & Design, University of Louisville
2012 BFA Studio Art & Design, Murray State University

AWARDS:

2019 Outstanding Graduate Award, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2019 Rising Star Award, Louisville Visual Art Association
2018 Best in Show, Paper Works, M. S. Rezny Gallery, Lexington, KY
2018-2019 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Louisville
2017-2018 Graduate Assistantship, University of Louisville
2017 Dr. Judith Temple Scholarship, Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts
2016-2017 Allen R. Hite Scholarship, University of Louisville

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:

2019 *All the Better to See You With*, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2019 *Freeze State*, Swanson Contemporary Gallery, Louisville, KY

2018 *University of Louisville MFA Open Studio Weekend Exhibition*, Louisville, KY
2018 *The Future Is Unwritten*, Revelry Gallery, Louisville, KY
2018 *New Works by Erin Nordemann & Monica Stewart*, Volunteer State Community College, Gallatin, TN
2018 *Paper Works*, M. S. Rezny Gallery, Lexington, KY
2018 *Common Threads*, Swanson Contemporary Gallery, Louisville, KY
2018 *Short Cuts & Paper Tales*, Revelry Gallery, Louisville, KY
2018 *University of Louisville Masters' Exhibition*, Open Community Art Center, Louisville, KY

2017 *Spring Student Exhibition*, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
2016-17 *Mazin Juried Art Exhibition*, Jewish Community Center, Louisville, KY

- 2015 *Artists in Our Midst*, Kaviar Forge Gallery, Louisville, KY
 2015 *Once Upon a Time*, The Studio Door, San Francisco, CA
- 2014 *Less Is More*, The Mitchell Gallery, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD
 2014 *Light of the Moon*, Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN
 2013-14 *Change: Work by Dawn Spyker & Monica Stewart*, Ivy Tech Community College, Sellersburg, IN

COMMISSIONS

- 2018 *Fabled Fragments*, a cut paper work incorporating six individual smaller papercuts used for play bills for Suspend Louisville's 2018 production series of short plays of the same name.
- 2017 *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, a 3 ½ x 5 foot layered cut paper work based on the Scandinavian folktale of the same name, on display in Oskar's Slider Bar, Louisville, KY.

TEACHING & WORK EXPERIENCE

2017-2019 Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

- Four semesters of full teaching responsibilities for a Studio Art & Visual Culture (ART 200) course for non-majors, including course development, creating lectures, presentations, tests, and art projects (both completed in and outside of class), grading, writing student letters of recommendation, as well as organizing class visits to local arts institutions.
- Structuring and coordinating in-class demonstrations in block printing, painting, applique, photograms, drawing, and paper marbling. Additionally leading, or assisting in demonstrations for other graduate teaching assistants' classes in photography, painting, printmaking, and book-binding.

2012-2016 Administrative Assistant, Advising & Assessment Centers
 Jefferson Community & Technical College, Louisville, KY

- Assessment Center duties consisted of assisting with the running of the Assessment Center by administering assessment tests, explaining scores to students, data entry, record keeping, and maintenance of computers.
- Advising Center duties included answering student emails, scheduling student appointments, assessing Service Indicators, Term-Activation, Self-Service Enrollment, Test Scores, and evaluating unofficial transcripts to ensure students are placed with the correct advisors.