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Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design, review

Telling Tales at the V&A is a show that crackles with wit.

By Richard Dorment

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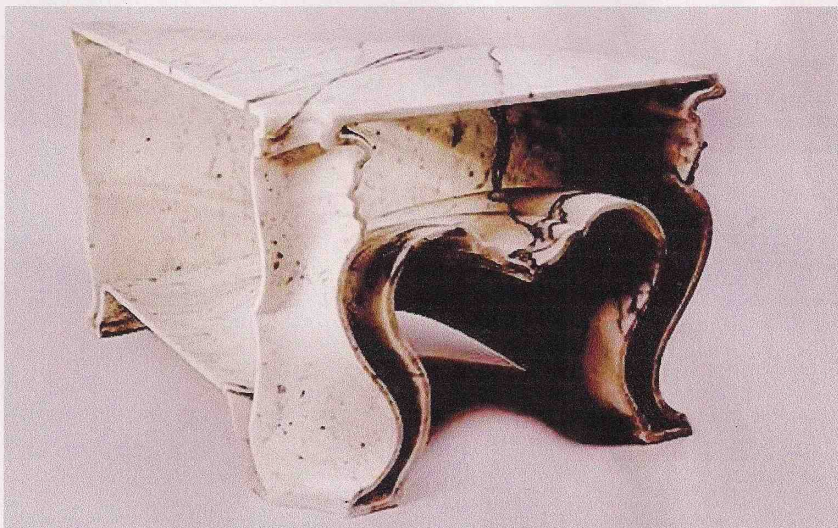
As maddening a show as I've seen this year, Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design at the V&A is not to be missed. The objects in it hover somewhere between art, craft, and design – and most of them are so extravagantly, luxuriously over the top that only the very rich or seriously eccentric would consider putting any of them in their home. But, hey, that's why the good Lord gave us museums.

The designers, most (but not all) from the Netherlands, don't "do" beautiful, or practical, and haven't heard about good taste. When they set out to design a chair, the last thing on their

minds is whether a person could sit on it. But the mixture of synthetic and natural materials and the computer-generated manufacturing techniques are used to make forms that look like nothing you've ever seen.

Everything in the show crackles with wit. What's more, the conceptual installation, a series of stage sets that starts in a forest, moves on to a palace and ends up in a nightmare is as truly a work of art as anything else in the show. That I hated it is neither here nor there; it will be remembered for years to come.

As we enter the "Forest Glade" of the first gallery, we're confronted by floor-to-ceiling photos of bare braches against a darkening sky, and the sounds of twittering birds, crackling twigs and the footfall of someone walking in the undergrowth. But for all the menace, many of the objects are more enchanting than menacing. I liked a bathtub in the form of a wooden rowboat designed by Wieki Somers to keep the water in, not out. At once seductive and threatening, the Petit Jardin chair by Tord Boontje, constructed out of stylised plant fronds, has a decadent, orchideous beauty: think Katharine Hepburn in the conservatory in Suddenly Last Summer. And because the fronts are made of laser-cut



Enchanting: Cinderella table, 2008, at the Telling Tales exhibition, the V&A

steel, the chair threatens to impale anyone with the temerity to sit in it. I was less taken with Boontje's twee Princess's Chair pretty antique chair veiled in white tulle like a bride, though its partner, the 'Witch' chair in scaly black leather had a certain sullen, repulsive presence.

In the "Enchanted Castle" section, whimsy gives way to visual excess, as in Studio Job's "Robber Baron" suite of richly gilded cast bronze furniture so elaborate it makes ornate late Victorian furniture look like Bauhaus design. Then there is Boym Partners' chair covered in a replica of Veronese's erotic scenes with Venus and Mars.

In "Heaven and Hell" I found one object I'd actually like to have taken home – the La Divina Commedia chaise longue by Niels van Eijk and Miriam van der Lubbe in which the writhing figures of the damned from Gustave Dore's illustrations to Dante are laser-engraved on to sheets of white polypropylene that look like marble.

Truly disagreeable objects like the moleskin slippers (including bits of mole) and Kelly McCallum's Do You Hear What I Hear? – a stuffed fox with golden maggots in its ears, struck me as modern day memento mori. It is in this section that the show descends in terms of exhibition design into incoherency. For in order to create a sense of unease and anxiety the designers have deliberately put the works of art behind barriers, with too-small viewing apertures placed either below or above eye level so that we have to strain to even to catch a glimpse of the objects. But what is the point of a show in which you can't see the works on display?

And this brings up my most serious criticism. We look at design in a different way than we look at fine art. What I want to know about a chair or table or objet d'art is what materials it is made of and how it is put together.

It is precisely this information that is so hard to dig out (though it does appear at the back of the catalogue). And so for example, I was taken by Tord Boontje's Fig Leaf wardrobe when I saw it. But it wasn't until later that I learned that its outer carapace is constructed from more than 600 hand-painted copper leaves. I know I'd have looked at it with a heightened attention had that information been given on the label. Still, for all its flaws, the show is impressive.

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