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## Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design

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By [Hettie Judah](#)

*Telling Tales* covers a discrete episode in the world of design that has seen function superseded by concept, and which is broadly associated with the influence of Design Academy Eindhoven under its former director Li Edelkoort. It is no faint praise to say that Gareth Williams, in his valedictory show for the V&A, presents the familiar contrariness, rigour and flirtation with disgust of the Eindhoven tendency, well-exposed in Continental exhibitions and fairs over the last decade, in a fresh and captivating light. *SuperStories*, the recent edition of the Hasselt Triennial, featured a similar cast of designers, but *Telling Tales* is a leaner, more muscular selection of design-art highlights, united under a clearer vision.

Divided among three highly styled thematic displays, the works seem much the stronger for having to fight for attention against the operatic scenography. Williams groups the 50 works on show around three storytelling traditions. The folktale finds us in the preliterate forests of northern Europe, furnished with onerous, slightly infantilised works by Jurgen Bey, Tord Boontje and Maarten Baas. The printed novel brings the next section into a baronial drawing room in which Jeroen Verhoeven's miraculous marble *Cinderella Table* (2005) shares metamorphic duties with Sebastian Brajkovic's rotated loveseat. The anxious, introspective stories of the age of psychoanalysis recall a trip through the nocturnal wing of a reptile house, the scaly monsters replaced by the scarcely less alarming sight of Wiek Somers's teapot in the shape of a pig's skull and Kelly McCallum's stuffed fox garnished with cast gold maggots.

Narratives are what we use to make sense of the world - the human brain is constantly in search of patterns, both on aesthetic and rational levels. Pattern, as Studio Job have pointed out in the past, is also one of the things that separates artists from designers; as something is repeated, it becomes banal. Few of the designers here (the most notable exceptions being Boontje and Matali Crasset) have embraced design at an industrial level. As fugitives from mass production they are also fugitives from the corroded meaning that comes with domestic functionality.

Limited editions are not always thus for reasons of conceptual snobbery; some objects are simply bloody difficult to make. In letting the pieces speak for themselves, Williams does skip rather lightly over the technical heroics of this storybook. Tomáš Gabzdil Libertínský's *Honeycomb Vase* (2007) involved the designer collaborating with live bees, and few of the other works - whether Julia Lohmann's *The Lasting Void* stool (2007), cast from a calf's body cavity, or the detailed marquetry of Studio Job's *Perished bench* (2006) - are much less audacious in their confection. For those still unconvinced by the 'upstart' notion of design art, surely few would resist the appeal of a good creation myth.

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