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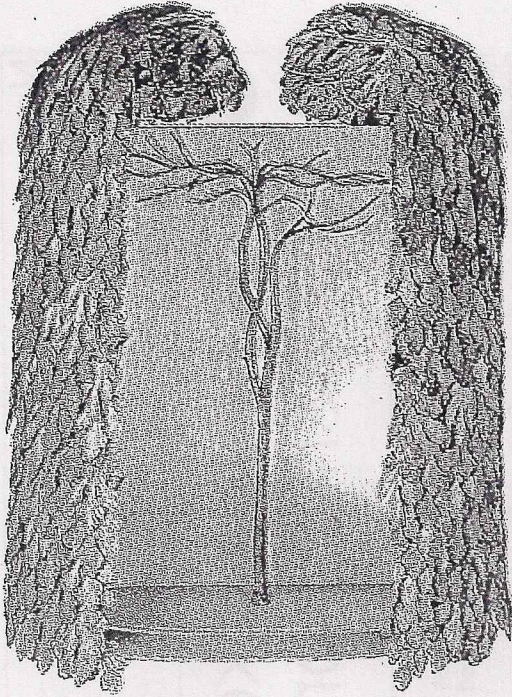
SURREAL HITS THE HEIGHTS

TELLING TALES: FEAR AND FANTASY IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

Victoria & Albert Museum, SW7

★★★★☆

PHILIPPA STOCKLEY



WHAT links a pair of slippers made out of moles, complete with toes and snouts; a stuffed fox with gold-plated maggots in its ears; and a lumpy red cushion shaped like a mushroom cloud, intended to diffuse "our horror of nuclear annihilation by allowing us literally to embrace our fears"? They are all in Telling Tales, a new show at the V&A. The exhibition also has a catchy subtitle.

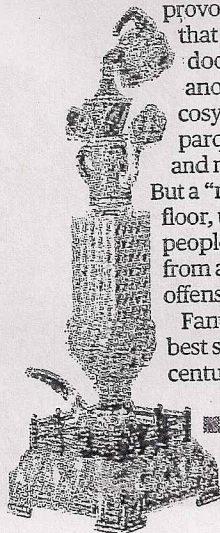
The curator, Gareth Williams, is a very good writer and theorist who has identified a strand in contemporary design and persuasively argued it with 50 pieces. His well-presented outing looks at what is now called "design-art". Designers make short-edition, fantasy-imbued items that are "self-motivated rather than commissioned". Or, as the entrance board says, "personal statements or manifestos" – which translates into very, very expensive design.

The show is themed in three rooms. The first, The Forest Glade, is dominated by Tord Boontje's Fig Leaf wardrobe, whose curved doors are made from 616 copper leaves enamelled by Manchester craftspeople, with a bronze tree inside to hang clothes on. The second, half-mirrored, room includes the Robber Baron series by Dutch duo Studio Job, inspired by 19th-century American industrialists. This is dominated by Job Smeets's extravagant works: a mirror-polished bronze-and-black table, an armoire with a hole blown through it and a jewel-safe with a clown's head on it.

Smeets's items are eye-catching and provocative, even cartoonish – but Marcel Wanders's gigantic polyester Bella Barbara bell is lazy. It is described by Wanders as "girls in fancy dress floating overhead" but you would not want this floating over your head. And Jeroen Verhoeven's Cinderella table, laser-cut from a huge lump of marble, most of it removed, begs the question about wasting valuable material.

The last room, Heaven and Hell, is the most provocative. A sheepskin-padded skull that two people can sit in with the door closed; a teapot cast like another skull with a water-rat fur cosy like a bonnet; a desirable parquetry settle of laser-cut rosewood and maple patterned with skeletons. But a "rug" of red resin puddled on the floor, using the blood-volume of two people, is not interesting, while a cast from a dead calf's stomach is both offensive and bland.

Fantasy? Yes. Fear? No. But it's the best show of surrealism so far this century.



Until 18 October. Information:
020 7942 2502, www.vam.ac.uk.

**Intricate: Pyramids of Makkum
tulip vase, by Studio Job**