



Judy Fox
Snow White
 2007
 P.P.O.W.

NOT A FAIRY TALE by Donald Kuspit

For a long time Snow-White lay peacefully in her case, and change not, as if she were only asleep, for she was still white as snow, red as blood, and black-haired as ebony.

--Grimm's Fairy Tale
Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs (

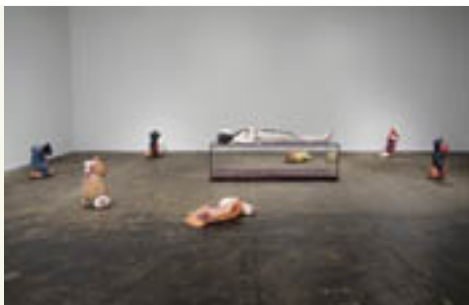
White frequently symbolizes purity, innocence, the spiritual. But by emphasizing the connection with snow, inertness is also symbolized. When snow covers the earth, all life seems to stop, as Snow White's life seems to have stopped while she is lying in her coffin.

Bruno Bettelheim
The Use of Enchantment
The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (

*Oh mirror, mirror on the wall,
 Who is the fairest of us all?"
 "Thou wert the fairest, lady Queen;
 Snow White is fairest now, I ween.
 Amid the forest, darkly green,
 She lives with Dwarfs -- the hills between.*

-- Grimm's Fairy Tale
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (

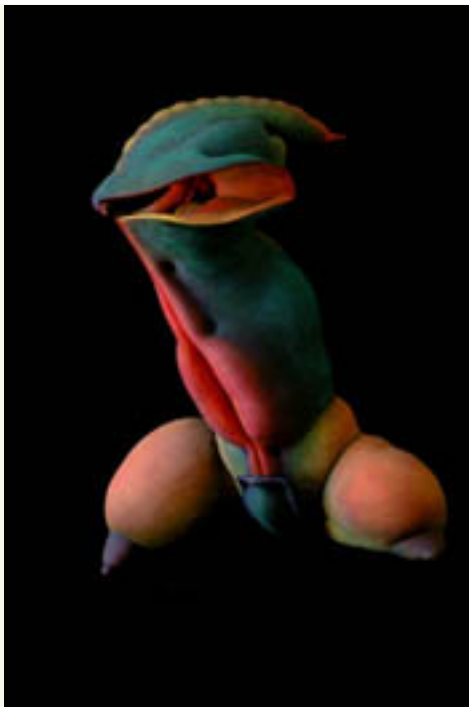
There she is, Snow White, one in a long line of fairy tale Princesses often asleep as they await their Prince Charming, that is, the Prince who can charm them out of their sleep with an adoring gaze and loving kiss. Her adolescent beauty is palpably alive in Judy Fox's rendering of her exquisite body -- a truly ingenious feat of representing the unrepresentable, for beauty, youth and freshness are always fading, always shortlived, and thus impossible to hold fast in definitive form, yet Fox conveys their timeless innocence and ideality, freezes them forever in all their make-believe perfection. One couldn't ask for a better rendering of the moment when Snow White lay in state, dead after taking a bite of the poisoned half of the apple her royal stepmother, in the disguise of an old peasant woman, tempted her with. The fairy tale tells us that Snow White was mourned for three days by the seven dwarfs for whom she worked and who never stopped working -- "work is the essence of their lives," Bettelheim tells us, noting that "dwarfs or gnomes, in Teutonic lore, are workers of the earth, extracting metals" (seven metals were commonly known, and each was associated with one o



Judy Fox, "Snow White and the Seven Sins," installed at P.P.O.W., Oct. 25-Nov. 24, 2007



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the traditional planets, thus gold with the sun, silver with the moon, etc.).(4) But "she looked still fresh and lifelike, and even her red cheeks had not deserted her" -- they look somewhat pale in Fox's rendering, but Snow White's lips are vividly red, reminding us that red is erotic in import, as Bettelheim notes, adding that the red apple she bit "evokes sexual associations," including "menstruation, the event which marks the beginning of sexual maturity."(5) Instead of "bury[ing] Snow White in the black ground," they placed her body "a case. . . made of transparent glass," so that it could be viewed "on all sides, and. . . wrote her name with golden letters upon the glass, saying that she was a King's daughter."

Fox seems to have fused the bier on which the dwarfs laid her out and the glass coffin in which they laid her to rest, but the point remains the same: Snow White is on permanent display, naked and vulnerable as the day she was born, and in the exciting naked state in which the Prince came upon her, desired her, married her and ended her virginity. Fox's Snow White body is true to the fairy tale facts: her biological mother, who died when Snow White was born, had wished for a child as white as snow, as red as the blood that fell upon the snow after she accidentally pricked her finger, and as ebony black as the wood of the frame of the window through which she was looking out at the snow as she was stitching her royal husband's shirts. Ebony black braids frame the body of Fox's Snow White, partially covering it, a sort of token gesture of modesty, however much they frame her pudenda, ironically isolating it for exhibition, indeed, making it the center of attention, certainly more central than her face -- even though, as the truth-telling mirror on the wall famously said, it was the fairest in the kingdom.

It was the beginning of Snow White's troubles with her envious stepmother, who was a runner-up in the beauty contest, but determined to win it -- to get the mirror to tell her that she, not Snow White, was "the pattern of beauty." It finally did, to her narcissistic satisfaction -- until the Prince awakened Snow White from her fatal sleep and the piece of poisoned apple lodged in her throat fell out. Wearing a variety of disguises, Snow White's stepmother tempted her with her own need for sensual pleasure, in the visual form of beautiful finery, an elegant comb and finally the rosy-cheeked apple that made her mouth water. The clever dwarfs warned Snow White that her stepmother would stop at nothing to kill her, and forbid her to speak to anyone who approached their dwelling, but Snow White still trusting and innocent of the world, and full of wishes -- she had become a dwarf in spirit, working all the time, and wanted some satisfactions, however superficial and small -- fell for her stepmother's bait, much as Eve fell for the snake's bait. The dwarfs



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were able to save her from the first two temptations, but were unable to do so from the third one, for the poisoned apple killed her instantly. (Snow White's biological mother was also royal; her stepmother was the King's second wife. As Bettelheim makes clear the fairy tale is about the relationship of mother and daughter, more particularly, between the [missing] good mother and [the all too present] bad mother. The fairy tale is also a bare outline of the stages in female development.)

But who are Fox's dwarfs? In this exhibition, they're masterpieces of monstrosity -- bizarre composites of body parts, mostly female: ample breasts, from which a gigantic vagina, seemingly engorged with passionately red blood, and often wide open so that the labia stand out, rises like a majestic stem, one time blossoming into a clitoral flower, white as snow, another time crowned by a sort of impishly twisted face. It is as though Fox wants to turn the vagina inside out, and then wrap it around the breasts, which often become oddly testicular -- in one work small testicles seem to grow from a huge vagina, which is flanked by bloated breasts (although it may be that the vagina has swallowed up the penis in intercourse, appropriating the remaining testicles, a sort of afterthought) -- as though the milk they seem full of has the fertilizing power of sperm. Indeed, sometimes the breasts support, like a pedestal, or surmount like a trophy, the phallically erect vagina -- the vagina in a state of orgasmic arousal, a sort of self-stimulating vagina, seemingly in perpetual masturbatory motion. What do these perverse creatures, with their confrontational grotesqueness -- brilliant feats of imagination, rare in the history of fantasy art, more organically surrealist than many officially surreal works, more ingeniously sculptural, formally original, emotionally powerful and narratively complex than other female body sculptures, for example, those of Kiki Smith -- have to do with the fairy tale dwarfs? And what do they have to do with Snow White, the epitome of female beauty, devotion, loving kindness?

Everything and nothing. In a unique transformation, Fox has turned the virtuous, hard-working dwarfs into "the seven cursed deadly Sins," as they were called in medieval times: pride, envy, sloth, intemperance, avarice, ire and lust. They are indeed fatal, first for the psyche, then the body, and the enemies of work. And yet they're hyperactive, inwardly alive and outwardly animated, obscenely dynamic and seductively ugly, altogether impure in contrast to the passive, beautiful, attractive but pristinely untouchable dead body of pure Snow White. This inversion of the meaning of the dwarfs throws us back on Snow White's psyche: they're her fantasies, the dream creatures of her monstrous imagination, nightmarish symbol



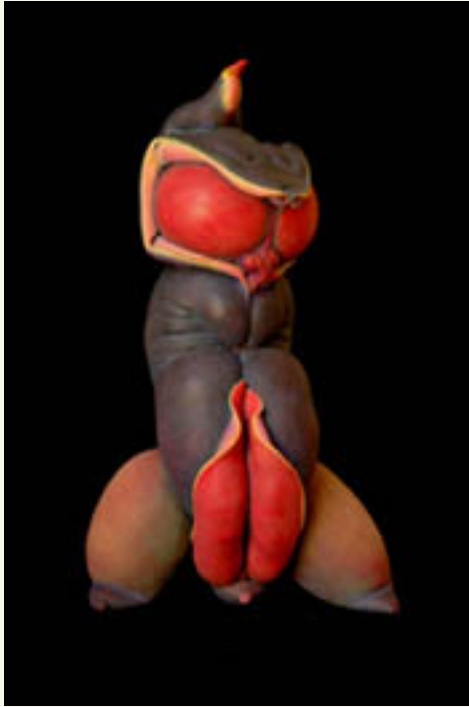
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of her unconscious urges -- at the least her wish to stop working so hard (granted by her involuntary death) and indulge herself, as she did when she was tempted by her disguised stepmother. They're the obscene emotional truth behind her picture-perfect body, its passivity symbolizing her emotional -- not to say sexual -- repression.

As Bettelheim points out, even her oral wishes are under control -- she takes only small portions from the dwarfs' dinner table when she first enters their house fleeing from her evil stepmother -- and her neatness and orderliness when she happily agrees to keep house for the dwarfs in exchange for her keep suggest anal control. But Fox's nightmarish dwarfs show that however much she may be a simple-minded, obedient girl on the surface -- but then she doesn't obey the dwarfs when they warn her to avoid anyone who approaches the house when they are at work in the mines -- underneath she's a hothouse of uncontrollable desire. Her psyche is swollen with wish-made grotesque and nightmarish by reason of their frustration. Outwardly she looks harmonious and composed, but inwardly she's a mess -- as messy as the "dwarfs'" bodies. She clearly needs the prince to straighten her out, which he does.

But it's not his story, nor is it exactly Snow White's story. It's the story of her stepmother: the dwarfs are haunting embodiments of the envious stepmother, more particularly, of her wish to cannibalize Snow White, thus incorporating her beauty.(6) Projecting her terror of her monstrous mother into the dwarfs, Snow White transforms them into terrifying monsters -- paranoid embodiments of evil in all its ugliness, including the evil and ugliness of sexuality for those, like Snow White, who believe themselves to be pure and self-sufficient spirit, and thus in no need of a sexual relationship to complete -- not to say contaminate -- their being. Sexuality reminds them that they are "corrupt" in body however uncorruptible their spirit may be. Snow White's body doesn't decay, even in death, a sure sign of spiritual purity, and proof that she has maintained her virginity, despite living in a house full of men. They are "diminutive men," as Bettelheim says, but men nonetheless -- indeed, embodiments of the erect penis, which may look small and ugly, but is powerful (the dwarfs can drill into the earth and mine and exploit its riches). In fact, fortunately for her, they are workaholic men who don't need any fun ("leisure or recreation," as Bettelheim says) in their lives.

Even more: the dwarfs symbolize Snow White's constant longing for a mother as benign, loving, and as radiant with joie de vivre as Snow White herself, even as the mirror of her unconscious repeatedly tell her the truth that she has an emotional dwarf for a mother -- a stunt creature possessed by the devilish death instinct. Snow White want:

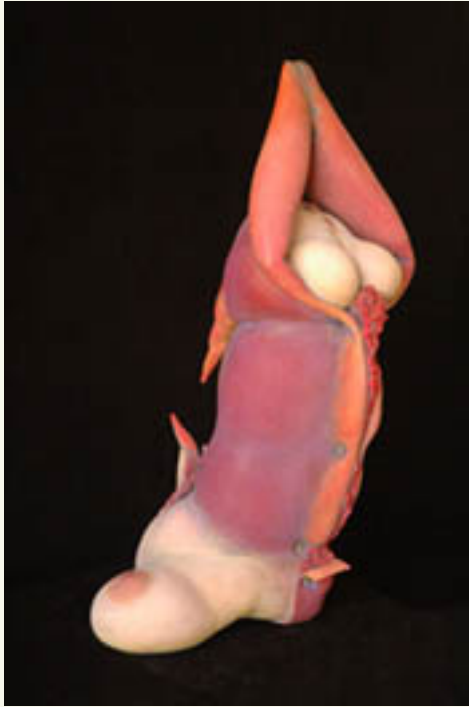


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to be the apple of her mother's eye, even if the apple is poisoned and her mother is opposed to her existence, let alone beauty. I am suggesting that Fox's uncannily feminized ugly dwarfs -- they are in effect phallic women (Snow White's twin braids suggest as much), all-powerful by reason of possessing both female and male genitals (grotesquely fused, suggesting they also symbolize the primal scene) -- represent Snow White's hateful/fearful feelings toward her stepmother, paradoxically suggesting her identification with her stepmother. Snow White unconsciously submits to her stepmother, becoming a dwarf in her dreams: she is not, after all, as beautiful and majestic as her stepmother, and thus not fit to be a queen -- that is, to replace her stepmother (thus becoming an Oedipal winner, that is, her father the King's bride).

I am suggesting that her stepmother's destructive fixation on her beauty causes Snow White to defensively dismiss her own beauty as a disguised ugliness -- a disguise stripped off in Fox's unsightly dream dwarfs. She clearly needs a mother -- she takes care of the dwarfs like a good mother -- and unconsciously decides that it's better to have a bad stepmother than no mother at all. Thus in her unhealthy dreams the dwarfs are as destructive and evil as her stepmother. (Bettelheim says she "is a person who cannot positively relate, nor can anyone identify with her," for she is "fixated to a primitive narcissism and arrested at the oral incorporative stage."(7)) In reality the dwarfs are positive, constructive, well-intentioned presences and Snow White is emotionally healthy and happy. The dream reversal of reality is not unlike that which occurs between her benign birth mother and malevolent death stepmother, who is like a bad dream, indeed, every child's nightmare mother.

I am saying that Snow White is profoundly attached to her stepmother however much she fears her. She may hide from her stepmother, but there is no inward escape from her, not even in the sanctuary of the dwarfs' home. They care for her, and give her enough to survive, but not enough warmth, care, and empathic understanding to grow into a woman and flourish as a human being. In short, the more Snow White fears her stepmother and is protected from her by the dwarfs, the more firmly Snow White remains attached to her. It is because of this unconscious attachment -- Snow White's hope that she will some day find her true mother, however much it turns out to be a false mother who has in effect abandoned her by threatening her life (echoing the trauma of abandonment, and perhaps the guilt, caused by her biological mother's death at her birth, which may have led Snow White to think that she killed her) that Snow White never sees through her stepmother's disguises to the stepmother's hatred of her. They're in fact good disguises, for



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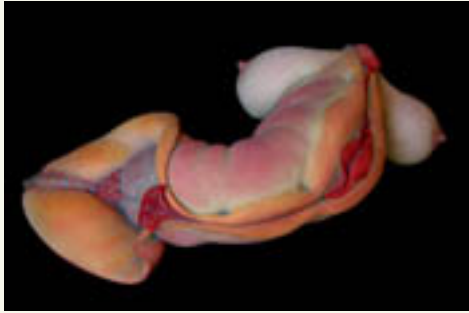
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Gluttony
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her stepmother takes on a kindly motherly role, offering good things to her stepdaughter -- which is why Snow White is taken in by her disguise -- however poisoned they are by her stepmother's wish that Snow White was dead.

Simply put, Snow White internalizes her stepmother's ugly feelings and destructive fixation on her, on the grounds that it's better to have a bad mother than no mother at all. By turning herself into a series of dwarfs, she in effect despises herself -- the more dwarfs, the deeper the self-hatred -- as her mother does. Becoming a humble if sinful dwarf in her dreams, she takes on her mother's sinfulness, in effect damning herself as her mother damns her to death -- to work in a mine, as the dwarfs do, is to work in a grave, and to violate Mother Nature, for which one must be punished -- thus implicitly submitting to her mother's power and authority: the dominance that every mother has over her child. Snow White didn't ask to be the fairest of them all -- she was just born that way -- nature made her fair. But the mother is supposed to be the fairest of them all, and Snow White makes her stepmother fair by internalizing her "unnatural" (unmotherly, unfair, hate-filled) feelings towards Snow White, who punishes herself for her fairness by becoming as unfair (visually hateful) as the dwarfs. (I am suggesting the double meaning of "fair" in the fairy tale.)

Is Fox's installation a feminist statement? It may be, since it seems to be shouting the old refrain "our body, our selves." But it's rather ambivalent about the female body: it's wonderful to behold, beautifully formed, a marvel of symmetry and grace, but it's also peculiarly cursed, a protean figure metamorphosing into perverse sexualized shapes, suggesting that it is incoherent and absurd as a whole, however comprehensible and memorable its parts. Snow White doesn't know if she's a sex object -- and so a stranger to herself (hence the "strangeness" of the dwarfs, signaling her self-estrangement) -- or just a pretty girl who would like to get married, which in fact finally saves her from her stepmother, who is killed at the end of the fairy tale: "At first she resolved not to go to the wedding, but she could not resist the wish for a sight of the young Queen, and as soon as she entered she recognized Snow-White, and was so terrified with rage and astonishment that she remained rooted to the ground. Just then a pair of red-hot iron shoes were brought in with a pair of tongs and set before her, and these she was forced to put on and to dance in them till she fell down dead."(8)

The sinful dwarfs are small and sinister, the virtuous Snow White is pure and noble. They're opposite sides of the same psychic coin, and the tension between them is unresolved: Fox presents this tension, this split in the psyche between woman's ideal self-image or body



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ego ideal and her perverse sexual and destructive desires, as well as envy of other women who seem more physically ideal and thus sexually attractive and exciting than she does -- this peculiar stand-off between passive, naïve goodness and sophisticated, active evil. The conflict is universal and often unresolved, but it seems Fox's Snow White -- the emblematic Eternal Feminine in all her sacred glory -- is unable to reconcile the opposites and end the tension: integrate the sexually inexperienced, socially conformist immature girl, with her profane feelings, and the sexually experienced, social superior woman latent in her, in one mature person. The stark difference between the sleeping Snow White, a picture of decorum for all her nakedness (it's unself-conscious and refined rather than fleshy and flashy), and the outrageously surreal dwarfs, with their flashy, devil-may-care, peculiarly glamorous impropriety and perversity, suggests a precarious balance between equally relentless and unyielding, incommensurate forces. Snow White and the Seven Sins are clearly at odds, even though they are her sins, in fantastic, wishful form (suggestive of her paradoxical bisexuality).

It is a peculiarly creative stand-off and tension, for the beautiful, serene, meticulously exhibited Snow White stands to the ugly, misshapen, tumultuous Seven Sins as the final well-shaped artistic product stands to the crude, dirty, messy, tormented process that brought it into being. Clearly a great deal of hard, careful work has gone into Fox's figures, suggesting that she is her own dwarf diligently mining her unconscious depths, in the hope of finding the Snow White -- that is, the fairest artist of all -- she feels she must be. She is certainly one of the fairest working today. I am arguing that Fox's "Snow White and the Seven Sins" is an ingenious allegory of the vicissitudes of creativity, more pointedly of the role of narcissistic and sexual fantasy in creative achievement, and also the oral incorporative character of representation. Not since Fuseli have we seen such a brilliant rendering of the contradictions of female narcissism, torn between self-idealization and self-deprecation, beauty and perversion, as well as the creative difficulties of representing Woman, who remains unrepresentable in her entirety, for she is perpetually at odds with herself. This last is true even for female artist who knows her from the inside and is able to see all the odds against her.

Judy Fox "Snow White and the Seven Sins," Oct. 25-Nov. 24, 2007 at P.P.O.W., 555 West 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

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Notes

(1) Elizabeth Dalton, ed., *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Barnes Noble, 2003), 185

(2) Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 213.

Bettelheim notes that the story of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" "has been told for centuries in various forms in all European countries and languages." It is pagan in origin, and was never successfully repressed by Christianity, nor could it ever be, for like all fairy tales, it brings to preconsciousness irrepressible unconscious truths in fantasy form -- the only form in which they can be made manifest, cognitively as well as emotionally. Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (and other fairy tales) is the benchmark for all subsequent interpretations.

(3) Dalton, 182

(4) Bettelheim, 209

(5) *Ibid.*, 213

(6) In her first attempt to kill Snow White, her stepmother "orders [the] hunter not only to kill Snow White, but to return with her lungs and liver as evidence. When the hunter brings the queen the lungs and liver of an animal to prove that he has executed her, 'The cook had to cook them in salt, and the bad woman ate them and thought she had eaten Snow White's lungs and liver.' In primitive thought and custom, one acquires the powers or characteristics of what one eats. The queen, jealous of Snow White's beauty, wanted to incorporate Snow White's attractiveness, as symbolized by her external organs. Bettelheim, 207.

(7) *Ibid.*, 206-207

(8) Dalton, 186