

Pensive Lullabies: Re-Examining Children's Stories Through Visual Representation

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Fine Arts, emphasis in Printmaking



In my exploration of various themes and the diverse techniques within printmaking, I have developed an interest in the history of American childhood nursery rhymes, stories and songs. As in many cultures, myths and stories are often created to serve social interests. The imagery from children's stories and nursery rhymes have become so deeply embedded in our culture that they have almost become iconic—serving as signifiers for the stories. Although the nursery rhymes and their imagery are evocative for many Americans, their original connotations are often lost or shifted.

These elements present an intriguing avenue for my personal and artistic investigation. I am interested in the original context of these stories, the darkness to which they allude, and the whimsical way in which they have been told or recited. The fairytales seem outwardly harmless and playful, yet elements of violence and cultural disillusionment permeate the narrative. By playing with the evocative imagery, I explore the contemporary significance of these stories in connection with their overcast history, breaking down different aspects of the rhymes to question their contemporary meaning.

References

Garner, James Finn. Once Upon a More Enlightened Time. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1995.

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Opie, Iona and Peter. The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.

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Figure 1 *Kindred Exposed*
11x15" collagraph, relief



Figure 2 *Pensive Lullaby*
22x30" serigraph, drypoint, collage

Often, I situate readily identifiable characters from the stories in suggestive arrangements, frequently with contrasting design elements. In figures 1-5, all of the creatures rest in reticent gestures, yet there are more complex distinctions provoking the viewer's assumptions.



Figure 3 *Arbitrary Predicament*
x " monotype



Figure 4 *Itsy Bitsy Barriers*
15x22" drypoint, collagraph, collage

This next series investigates rhymes and stories involving sheep, which have potent connotations in our culture. Fig.'s 6-8 particularly plays with the song, "Mary had a little lamb," yet the Mary is missing, and the viewer is subjected to feelings of isolation and abandonment, as the lost lamb contemplates its guideless actions.



Figure 5 *We Blind Mice*
10x20" Waterless Lithography



Figure 6 *Where Has Mary Gone?*
15x25" Woodcut

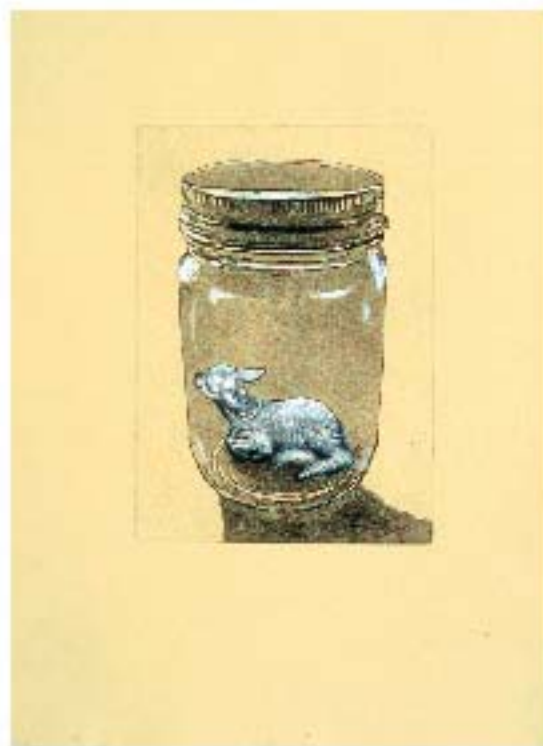


Figure 7 *Mary's Pantry*
11x15" Etching

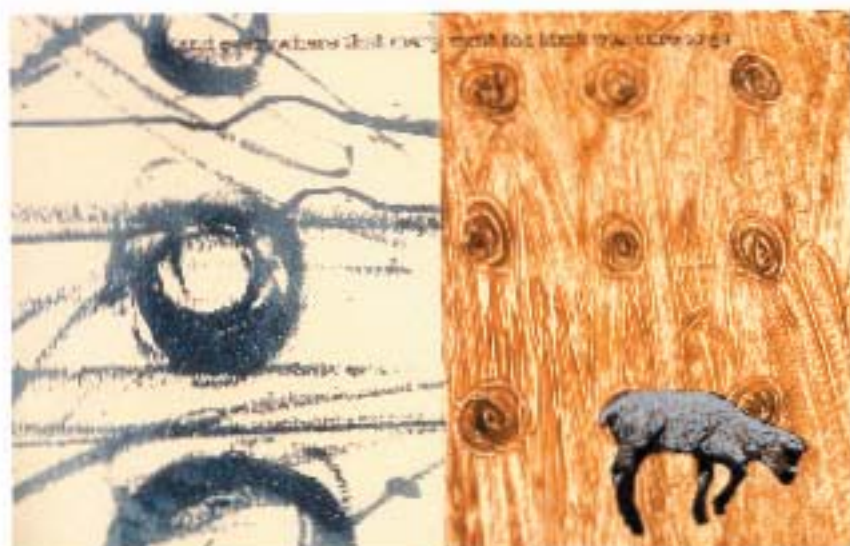


Figure 8 *Shepard Mc*
7.5x11" collagraph, serigraph, transfer

"Baa Baa Black Sheep" is the story referred to in Fig. 10, but the wool has been replaced by potatoes, giving a contemporary connotation referring to the exploitation of small American farmers being overrun by wealthy mass production farms, large corporations and urban expansion. The fragmented potato peeler framing text and a potato peel preserved in wax symbolizes the prideless position these independent farmers are forced into.



Figure 10 *Three Bags Fall...*
10.5x13.5" etching, serigraph, chine colle, wax, potato peel

Other pieces in the series address issues of exploitation, using the awkwardness of daily objects to question the readily accepted narrative of the stories. The stability of the Rapunzel story in Fig. 9 is questioned by the lack thereof in the tower, and the lumbering scissors operate to deconstruct assumptions and exploitations, inquiring about the rhetoric of the imagery and the misused rope of hair and its absent vendor.



Figure 9 *Let Your Hair Down*
11x15" drypoint monotype

In this particular series, I examined three different stories, each with a hierarchy of three similar characters and a contrasting antagonist. The contrasting dual positions of the literal, monochromatic, single-frame narratives next to simple blocks of color and suggestive objects dramatize the violence and begin deconstructing the saccharine surface of the stories.



Figure 11 *Three Billy Goats Gruff*
22x30" drypoint, serigraph, collagraph



Figure 12 *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*
22x30" drypoint, serigraph, collagraph

The objects and the suggestive placement of the repetition of each of the three animals implies their violent actions. Each of the chosen colors in the pieces is symbolic for key elements in the story: green for the grass that the Billy Goats kill the troll for; gold for the intruder Goldilocks' hair; and red for fire and the indestructible red brick house.

In each of the stories, it is interesting that there are three main characters, hierarchically staged by some type of class, strength or intelligence, and their foe meets a brutal ending due to someone's selfish consumption. Juxtaposed as a series, the color combinations resemble those of a traffic signal, reinforcing the hierarchies.



Figure 13 *Three Little Pigs*
22x30" drypoint, serigraph, collagraph