

Karen Melvin

"Works of art share, with mirrors, that elusive magic of transformation which is impossible to put into words."
EH Gombrich

Karen Melvin's ongoing series of work entitled 'Paper Dolls' employs the same means and mechanisms to engage our curiosity as Frances and Elsie Wright's photographs of the 'Cottingley Fairies', made 85 years earlier. Melvin's dolls – cut-out paper figures about 12" tall – are 'substitute' figures or avatars which enable her to give flight to fantastical wishes and to create a parallel universe through photography. Melvin works in what Jeff Wall describes as the 'cinematographic' approach to still photography: her scenarios are staged with a cast of fictional characters, props and locations. However, the artist's elaborate artifice is not merely theatrical; rather it is a means to query the nature of photography itself. Our initial impression is that Melvin's images might be described as 'painterly', in their play of tone and texture, spatial complexity and elaborate artifice. But this strategy is a means to address photography's relationship to time and memory rather than an indulgence of fantasy or caprice. Melvin uses photographs-within-photographs – the dolls are studio portraits of family and friends – for several inter-related purposes. Thematically, the dolls relate personal, autobiographical imagery to a shared symbolic register. Formally, the figures animate elaborately composed still lives and landscapes. And conceptually, they generate a play between indexical and self-reflexive elements of the photographs.

For Melvin, photography is a means to elide apparently irreconcilable elements: the fantastical and the prosaic, the mythological with the documentary, and personal memories with shared experience. The dolls, the artist notes, were "part of my own childhood play of fantasy and social exploration"; yet here, they are a device to "throw light on the domestic dynamic between male and female, parent and child, youth and age". For most of us, our memories are imaginative recreations of events, kept alive through the few visual (photographic) records we have of our own private past. Fairy tales, somewhat differently, are collective myths and stories, though each of us recreates them visually in our own private imagination. Having been absorbed in childhood, such stories and mental images can seem all but inseparable from our own earliest recollections. In the 'Paper Dolls' series Melvin invites us to yoke the two forms of imaginative activity. By transposing personal experiences into mythical settings, the dolls become a form of "social exploration, to connect the private domain of everyday incidents with the public space of fairy tale and folk lore; and to connect the shifting ground of memory with a physical process in the present."

In several works in the series, elements such as foodstuffs and flowers, and locations such as sunlit gardens and fields appear benign, even charming. In others, like 'Fairy Godmother' illustrated here, our response is more ambivalent. We're likely to have an initial sense of wonder and exhilaration at the luxuriant range of surfaces and textures, which resemble those of Dutch still life paintings. Fruit and feathers – the bounty of the natural world – are set against beautiful man-made possessions, including ornate decorative metalwork, fabrics, and furs. Yet a wave of ominous billowing smoke, whose source is unknown, is suggestive of black magic or malignant powers. The threateningly blank, velvet-black background also conjures a foreboding atmosphere. More double-edged narrative possibilities soon begin to intrude upon our interpretation. The protagonist here – who we assume to be the Fairy Godmother – holds a peacock-feather wand, emphasising her status as a magical figure. Making a journey which seems psychological as much as physical, the character is neither a sexual object nor a maternal figure, and her walk across a blade has unsettling or even malevolent connotations as much as protective ones. The tone of the work seems to imply a tightrope walk between apprehension and reassurance, between dangers and consolations.

Accordingly, viewing the Paper Dolls series in its entirety requires a kind of psychological bifurcation, especially as the 'real' slides seamlessly into an imaginary time and space. Photography's unique purchase on the world – its indexical recording of real events – unravels as Melvin's "juxtaposition of objects and changes of scale create a tactile 'playground' full of associations". And as each work is shot on a large-format camera, we are able to explore this imaginative "playground" in detail and depth. The depth of field captured means we are drawn effortlessly into the illusory space behind the picture plane; the clarity of each texture means our eye dwells with pleasure over each part of the composition. Slowing down our ordinary split-second response to photographs with textural depth enables us to lose ourselves in the image, and to undertake 'playful' imaginative activity at length.

However, such an overtly 'pictorialist' approach has a conceptual as well as an aesthetic purpose. Naturally, Melvin's use of paper figures recalls the Wrights' famous images. Her reworking of historical picture-making conventions allows her to illuminate the gap between social dynamics then and now. The use of historical dress establishes a set of expectations regarding the protagonists' gender roles, which are quietly subverted, for example. Navigating Melvin's seemingly dreamlike, opulent worlds necessitates unexpected modes of orientation – and some counter-intuitive re-readings of our shared symbols.

'Fairy Godmother', 2004, inkjet print