

Tessa Farmer

"As the chemist in his experiments is sometimes astonished to find unknown, unexpected elements in the crucible of the receiver, as the world of material things is considered by some a thin veil of the immaterial universe, so he who reads wonderful prose or verse is conscious of suggestions that cannot be put into words, which do not rise from the logical sense, which are rather parallel to than connected with sensuous delight. The world so disclosed is rather the world of dreams."
Arthur Machen, 'The Hill of Dreams', 1907

Tessa Farmer creates microscopically detailed sculptures – collectively named 'hell's angels' and 'fairies'. Their intricate skeletal forms are crafted from organic material including tree roots and insectile remains. Like the Wright sisters, she presents objects not as the result of exceptional ingenuity but as 'found objects'. The artist describes herself as an intermediary, like a Victorian naturalist bringing a newly discovered species to public attention. These fairies are presented as being simply parts of the natural world that have yet to be classified. As the artist remarks, "the first fairy emerged, foetal life, from deep inside a vibrant red tulip... the first swarm invaded Oxford during June 2000, and were to return three years later, having evolved and shrunk to the size of small insects..."

The artist's extraordinary creations appear as phantasms or apparitions in our immediate field of vision, inspiring both genuine wonder and amazement, as the Wright sisters' fairies did a century earlier. They're ordinarily too small to view properly without a magnifying glass, forcing us to inspect them at an extreme and unnervingly close range. Her battalions of warring angels are each some ten millimetres tall, and often seen in intense combat swarming around 'real', found insects. Presenting her own 'new' species alongside 'real' flies and wasps blurs the boundaries between the fantastical and the natural. Seen at an uncomfortable proximity, our eye accepts the continuity between the two, and reads the fairies as sensate, animate beings. The artist's ability to endow raw materials with a life-force brings to mind Emile Zola's dictum that "the artist's struggle with reality... is in trying to make something that 'lives'". It is almost impossible to distinguish between the organic 'raw materials' in front of our eyes and the fantasies that we want to believe in.

Farmer's work confuses the mythologies attached to both super-natural beings and those associated with 'natural selection' and narratives of evolution. Each work echoes the idea that fairies are so small and agile that they are beyond ordinary perception, whilst suggesting that these beings are entirely plausible hybrids of human and insect. In gallery installations, we are forced to view the 'swarms' of fairies by peering, uneasily and with one eye, into a magnifying glass. From being hazy specks viewed with the naked eye, when magnified they are transformed: rather than appearing delicate or ethereal, they are shockingly large, monstrous creatures. Our response when having to encounter other beings at such intimidatingly close range is one of intrepidation, even fear or horror. Adjusting to this new point of view, we oscillate between fascination and repulsion, or between exhilaration and alarm. The effect echoes the magical changes of scale and proportion which Alice undergoes.

Yet the artist's games with perception and scale serve serious purposes; in demanding our closest attention, Farmer inverts the terms on which the sublime is normally understood. When the microscopic is read as massively enlarged, we feel a combination of incompatible sensations – of intimacy and terror. Unexpectedly, our senses are overwhelmed by a still life, rather than by a landscape. Farmer reverses our power relationship to other species, as though inverting Gloucester's lines in King Lear: "Like flies to small boys we are to the Gods / They kill us for their sport". Here, the fairies are predators, god-like in form, agility and strength; and we are passive observers, in awe of their blood-sport pastimes.

Being invited to attend to the most infinitesimally small details of the 'natural' world evokes contrary sensations. At first, we feel like investigative scientists with magnifying equipment examining a new species. Quite soon, we become akin to Romantic visionaries exploring the outer reaches of our ordinary sensory thresholds. The fairies' can bring to mind William Blake's double-edged view of natural life. Individually they recall the protagonist of Blake's 'Ghost of a Flea', where animal life seems characterised by blood-thirsty aggression and malevolence. Yet as a totality, 'Swarm' brings to mind Blake's desire "to see the world in a grain of sand" by opening our imaginative flood-gates. Being half mammal and half skeleton, Tessa Farmer's fairies occupy what seems to be a visionary, transitory state between life and death. Unlike the Wrights' fairies, Farmer's are barbarous, violent creatures, waging war on each other and upon the animal kingdom that surrounds them. The artist herself notes: "the fairies' macabre appearance echoes their disconcerting behaviour. On peering closely into the 'Swarm', sinister scenes of abuse and bewildering chimeras emerge as we become absorbed into this almost apocalyptic vision." The animating force behind even these, the smallest of all creatures, would seem to be belligerence and brutality, Farmer suggests. Nevertheless, a bittersweet humour underwrites her practice. Though we might view them as the unintended fruits of malign laboratory experiments, we cannot fail to be aware of their riotous absurdity. Her alchemical transformations of ordinary matter into vivid, enthralling life give shape to things as yet unknown, inspiring empathy and apprehension, wonder and anxiety in equal measure.

'Swarm' (detail), 2004, mixed media