

The Singing Bones: Artist's Note

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Like many children, I knew the stories of the Brothers Grimm primarily as visual images: Disney movies, of course, as well as a number of elaborately illustrated books from my family's local library. Scenes of green forests, snow, mountains, and castles could not have been further from my childhood reality, growing up in Western Australia, but they were all wonderfully exotic and escapist.

It's only as an adult that I've really come to appreciate these tales for their complexity, ambiguity, and endurance. As a writer and artist, I often wonder if my own stories will have much staying power and frequently look to older examples for inspiration and instruction, "breaking bread with the dead," as Auden put it. In the case of successful fairy tales—those that we continue to remember and retell—there's a sense that the separation between waking and dreaming worlds is actually quite thin. Strung between the real and unreal, the literal and absurd, these tales of nameless princes, peasants, stepsisters, and witches remain constantly intriguing, not least because they are often disturbing and hard to explain.

The same is true of the best folk art, and in creating my own sculptures I was much inspired by Inuit stone carvings and pre-Columbian clay figurines (following trips to Canada and Mexico respectively). These exhibit a wonderful blend of whimsy and seriousness, and a well-considered marriage of earthy material infused with weightless and magical ideas. The result is a kind of fossilized narrative, worn by multiple "tellings" into a comfortable shape that often fits nicely in the hand. Faces and gestures are abbreviated, just like characters in the tales themselves. A child is a red hood, a sleeping woman requires no body, and a queen's face can be eroded away by the force of a single, elemental feeling: jealousy. What matters above all else are the bones of the story, and I wanted many of these objects to appear as if they've emerged from an imaginary archaeological dig, and then illuminated only briefly in the dark galleries of our collective subconscious. Like the tales themselves, they might brighten in our imagination without surrendering any of their original enigma.