

ONCE UPON A TIME...

Narrative in art is alive and well. Contemporary artists tell their tales in Liverpool and Maidstone

Storytelling is part of being human. The act of narrating has been an integral element of our development throughout time, across the world and in all cultures. Tales are told for many reasons and they take on many different forms in today's culture: TV soaps, newspapers, novels and gossip to name but a few. Considering our timeless and intimate relationship with narratives, it is natural that this subject should provide rich material for artists. Traditional history tableaux, medieval altarpiece predellas, or the social commentaries of Hogarth may be what first spring to mind, but the use of an underlying story has a major role in contemporary art too, as a number of current exhibitions testify.

Sophie Calle's 'ritualistic' actions are a famous example of narrative in art. One feature of her work, the inspiration behind Paul Auster's book *Leviathan* (1992), has been to follow strangers, sometimes half the way around the world, recording their actions surreptitiously with camera and notepad. Another work began when she found a mysterious address book belonging to a certain 'Pierre D'. Calle contacted people from the book and asked them about the illusive owner, publishing the resulting interviews in a French daily paper. In this way Calle constructed a biography of 'Pierre D' - his personality, his past, habits and friends - all stitched together without ever meeting the man himself.

Calle's work makes up part of Tate Liverpool's exhibition "Telling Tales", which features "Narrative Impulses in Contemporary Art". Mat Collishaw and Paula Rego draw on childhood influences for their narrative pieces in the exhibition. Collishaw presents a new take on the nursery rhyme *Sugar and Spice and*



Fairy story. **Above:** Mat Collishaw, *Sugar And Spice, All Things Nice, This is What Little Girls are Made Of #7, 1998*. **Below:** Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #17*, reprinted 1998. Both photographs on paper

All Things Nice with a series of kitsch, computer-manipulated photographs of fairies lounging in unexpected settings. Rego's set of prints entitled *Pondle Witches*, examine a dark fairy tale, scene by scene.

Tracey Emin's CV condenses her entire life into a list of factual statements. Gillian Wearing's video of respondents to the *Time Out* advert she placed - "Confess all on Video. Don't worry you'll be in Disguise. Interested? Call Gillian" - is a surreal mixture of disclosures, as people unburden their anxieties about petty thefts and indulge their disturbing fantasies from behind the cover of comic and grotesque masks.

Petra Creffield's photographic work *Going Home* documents a personal story of her childhood. During a series of visits back to the house where she lived as a child, Creffield

recorded the present inhabitants and combined these images with archive photos from her own childhood. Creffield is one of three artists exhibiting at the Maidstone Library Gallery's "Domestic Stories" exhibition, all of whom explore the stories behind the places where we live. Rowan Drury exhibits photographs of different living spaces, which include a convent, a women's prison, a home for the elderly and a school for boys with emotional or behavioural problems. Leslie Hakem-Dowek uses the belongings from immigrant women's mantelpieces, shelves or dressers to create photographic images that reveal insights into these women's lives and loves. DL

"Telling Tales", 8 Dec-11 Aug, Tate Liverpool (0151 702 7400); "Domestic Stories", to 12 Jan, Maidstone Library Gallery (01622 757286)

