

Artist prowls the world of Puss in Boots

Carol Wainio's brilliant paintings challenge, please

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Wainio uses her paintings, like the acrylic-on-canvas Puss in Boots #10, to comment on global capitalism

Review

Carol Wainio: Puss in Boots and Other Works, paintings and a drawing, on view at TrepanierBaer Gallery, through June 5.

Puss in Boots, in case you have forgotten, is a con man extraordinaire who seems to be just an ordinary cat when he is inherited by the miller's third son. The boy's brothers get the loot, the mill and the mules.

Happily for the impoverished boy, the cat turns out to be more than he appears. He asks his new master for a good pair of boots, and thus attired, with a plumed hat and a sword to complete his disguise as a nobleman's right-hand man, the clever cat sets out to win the king's favour and a princess, castle and fortune for the third son.

It is an old and amoral tale, one of eight written in the late-17th century by a retired civil servant named Charles Perrault. When Perrault wrote them down, these folk tales were already centuries old. When Perrault's stories were translated into English, they became Tales of Mother Goose. Thus embedded in the culture, they are stories many of us still learn in childhood and, as alive now as ever, they have been the basis for countless children's book illustrations and many works of art. (For a current example, one need look no further than the new film *Shrek Forever After*.)

In her recent paintings, Carol Wainio brings the story of Puss in Boots into an imagined landscape that seems to speak simultaneously of the past and the future, even as she focuses it on the 21st century and global capitalism. It is an ironic play on Puss's fine leather boots -- seen in all the illustrations of the tale -- that she litters this landscape with cheap plastic shoes as a visual metaphor for mass production, consumerism, excess and waste.

Like the shoes, the mass-produced illustrations are also consumables. Two paintings, *Puss in Boots (In the Age of . . .)* and *Industrious Cat*, both painted this year, directly juxtapose copies of wood engravings, in the first, above rows of camouflage-print boots, and, in the second, plastic clogs. The illustrations show Puss playing his trickster role, charming the nobles in one and snaring rabbits to give the king in the other.

Children's books illustrations and the book itself have been subjects of Wainio's paintings since the mid 1990s. The *Baby Books* (1996) took the big cloth books for toddlers and children's book illustration as models for a series of paintings. And an illustration of Puss in Boots, as it is rendered in a colouring book, appears in her work, *As She Was Dressed in Green*, as early as 1995.

Today's parents might look askance at the moral of Puss in Boots -- clothes make the man, trickery pays -- but Perrault, a man who knew how to speak to power, evidently considered the tale as a mirror of right behaviour for the haute bourgeois of his time.

Doubtless to say, dressing for success, giving gifts (or graft), dissembling and deceit are still among the ways people (and certainly politicians) climb their way to the top.

Wainio's juxtaposition of Perrault's time with our own produces an allegory in the Puss in Boots paintings, a relationship between the pre-industrial, pre-modern era and the post-industrial, postmodern era, in which the consequences of historical actions can be seen to be playing out. Among the issues she raises are status, class, consumption, representation, the demise of the book and the ecology.

Puss in Boots #10 (2007) depicts a barren, littered landscape with the empty framework of an open book at the centre. The illustrations, a line engraving and a colour lithograph, have fallen out and are propped in front. Cheap shoes -- runners, flip-flops, sneakers, sandals, clogs -- litter the foreground. The distant hills are bare. Hovering over everything

is the dark cloud of a gathering storm. The ecology and the culture of the book are in ruins, and the complex painting has an apocalyptic air.

The illustrations have slipped their moorings on the pages. They lie on the ground, suggesting the effects of the digital age, in which images fly through the ether detached from their context. Everything in the painting points to instability and foreboding.

Puss in the Subcontinent #11, Andhra Pradesh (2009), was inspired by a news photo of a turbaned man with a scythe who farms the way it was done in the Middle Ages. He echoes the figures of farmers in the medieval illuminations Wainio has quoted in earlier works. Here, he signals the ill effects of globalization that lead farmers in countries like India to take their own lives.

Wainio is intensely interested in the lives of images and their power to convey ideas across centuries. A theme of the Puss in Boots paintings is the way our experience of images, and the ideas they mirror, changes with the way they are reproduced and disseminated. Puss in Boots began as a handmade image, was then translated into wood engraving, then colour lithography and every other reproduction technology that has come since. In the paintings, he is a unique handmade image again, with a new role to play.

Wainio is a brilliant painter. Her work is full of intellectual rigour, visual sense and poetry. Her beautiful surfaces are a mesh of strokes and paint handling that combines the representational and the abstract in a continuous visual and material fabric. She offers both the pleasures and the challenges of painting in full measure. Her's is that rare body of work that truly can be said to present painting to the mind and the heart as a form of knowledge.

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