

# Updating Mother Goose

*Carol Wainio explores technology and morality*

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Puss in Boots Copies, 2009, on display at Trépanier Baer.

Puss in Boots and Other Works by Carol Wainio

Trépanier Baer Gallery

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No doubt fairy tales need updating amidst changing social and moral climates, but while kids may experience Grimm and Mother Goose tales as MP3s, e-learning sites and movies, we still hang on to the trusted old fables and honour the simplicity of past centuries.

Painter Carol Wainio has been interested in the way new technologies change moral and social realities throughout her career. In her current exhibition at Trépanier Baer, *Puss in Boots and Other Works*, she focuses specifically on the moral story of posturing and social hierarchies in a pre-industrial world and how that translates into a globalized, late capitalist reality.

One of Canada's most accomplished painters, Wainio's metaphors have been described as intellectually and visually beautiful. Her paintings are rare in that social meaning can be "read" in the visual language without the aid of supporting text, but they are also large-scale, paint-heavy and expressionistic. A contemporary palette of mud, melted ice

cream and pollution is appropriately used to create wasteland landscapes studded with discarded shoes. Rubber boots, Crocs and sneakers are used as a visual metaphor throughout these paintings, alongside painted illustrations of Puss in Boots — a cat who tricks the king into elevating his status.

There is a historical narrative in the paintings — free markets and global politics replacing feudalism, social rigidity and pre-colonial times. The painting “Puss in the Subcontinent #11 (Andra Pradesh)” shows a large propped-up frame made of what could be tartan scarves, Band-Aids, bricks, sandbags and other debris in the centre of a desolate landscape with an Indian man, sickle in hand, walking in the foreground. Two panel illustrations within the painting show Puss in Boots approaching a farmer and the town’s people. Set against this reference to an older time of kings and subjects, the Indian man walking amongst garbage-strewn fields under a brown sky indicates a lack of progress beyond the agricultural, while the products of a free market surround him.

The painting raises the question of whether current global affairs such as the disparity between the East and the West should find a place in the stories used to educate the young, or else risk being irrelevant and outdated.

Other paintings in the show deal with different victims of the present-day economic climate. “Bagmen #4,” also from 2009, features the image of a hobo from children’s illustrations, as well as the Picaninny or Coon depiction of African Americans. Both images are historical and, as Wainio describes, “the illustrations attempt to evoke a context (whether historical or developmental) in which the unfamiliarity with images confers upon them a power or truth which is difficult to appreciate now.” However, when placed in the same field as plastic Zellers bags and within the context of contemporary painting, the hobo and Coon come to resemble modern outsiders.

If it appears that Wainio is trying to weave a historical tapestry out of various references and media in order to rationalize or narrate aspects of world history, she claims she is doing the opposite.

She finds bits of knowledge within an overwhelming surge of information, past and present, disjunctive and irreconcilable. It is searching without knowing that becomes evident in the dream-imagery, muddy smears of paint and multiple points of perspective in her visceral paintings. Don’t expect to find the answers to life’s dilemmas in this exhibition. Do expect to find what Wainio calls “a context for considering things — a structure for wondering.”