

# Carol Wainio on Wentegate, Fairy Tales & Climate Change

Leah Sandals

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Carol Wainio, *Wing*, 2012

Ottawa painter Carol Wainio has been acclaimed for decades in the Canadian art world for her lush, complex, intelligent canvases. But last year, she received an unexpected surge of popular attention when her blog *Media Culpa* raised the issue of whether *Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wente was guilty of plagiarism—an episode whose aftermath is often referred to as *Wentegate*. Now, with a new show just opened at Paul Petro in Toronto, a touring exhibition up at the Kelowna Art Gallery, and a project set to open at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery this coming week, Wainio talks with Leah Sandals about her inspirations, frustrations and transformations.

**Leah Sandals:** When I look at your work, I am often reminded of a certain hollowness that may lie at the core of the stories we tell ourselves—whether in fairy tales or otherwise. What’s your take on that interpretation?

**Carol Wainio:** Certainly there’s an aspect of the kind of hollowness of contemporary life—although there’s a certain kind of richness in looking at the way that those [fairy tale] stories have played out historically. This is what I’ve been looking at in a lot of the research: how they’ve been told and retold, and how the illustrations have been copied and recopied. I’ve also looked at how some original fairy tales like “Puss in Boots” were used and transformed into things like early advertising. I’ve found, in a way, that that’s quite rich as well as being hollow—it’s really interesting to see how tales of transformation that originated in pre-modern societies of scarcity and hierarchy were reinvigorated and used to sell products for emerging consumers in early modern Europe. The tale of a peasant interested in being transformed into a prince through certain magical objects could get reiterated as a story for selling commodities to an emerging middle class, for instance.

To me, it’s really interesting to look at that history and see how those stories get reused in various ways. Or to look at that the way the illustrations were made, copied, remade and reused—how those things can talk about both the past and the present.

**LS:** I’m not clear on how fairy tales were repurposed to commercial ends early on. Can you explain?

**CW:** I’ve found sites and archives that document how you can trace specific illustrations through various iterations. You can trace how things like “Puss in Boots” were used to sell various things—not just related products like boot polish, but any kind of object, like beef extract or spoons. Or they were made into objects for consumption themselves. It’s really interesting to see how that tale gets reused and repurposed in a consumer-society way.

**LS:** This new show at Paul Petro has a very oily feel—there are lots of oil derricks and oil spills in the paintings alongside those fairy-tale-like characters. How did these canvases come together for you?

**CW:** I was looking at various illustrators and researching a number of archives, including the Walter Benjamin children’s book collection in Frankfurt when I was there for a residency at the Frankfurter Kunstverein.

I was interested in Benjamin’s collection partly because of his ideas about photography, narrative and storytelling, and also because of his interest in J.J. Grandville, an illustrator whose work had interested me previously.

Grandville was a really interesting illustrator because his works weren’t about fairy tales; they were more like social allegory, a 19th-century allegory commenting on current conditions with satirical elements.

He used animals [in his images and narratives] partly to skirt censorship laws. So they were not children’s stories, they were very much adult stories.

Another thing that was interesting about Grandville's illustrations was they marked this really pivotal point between the animal-helper figures of fairy tales and depicting these animals in an amazingly broad range of social classes. He did worker owls and flâneur finches and capitalist turkeys—and this range of characterization is also interesting because it has disappeared from our discourse, in a way.

I was also looking at the relationships between photography and illustration. Early photography is kind of framed in the same way that early illustration is framed, very much within a sort of structure, and the gestural potential of the poses is very much drawing on certain earlier genres.

I'm interested in the quality of those 19th-century poses—in that sense of confidence in progress that is inherent in those kinds of poses, and how that seems so odd at this point in time given issues around the economy and climate change and things like that. The 19th century was also an era of early exploration for oil, so in some cases in these paintings there are these derrick-like things, and the birds are kind of hybridized, sort of being in a process of transformation or change.

**LS:** Your mention of climate change and the oil-industry aspect in these paintings reminds me of something you recently posted on your Media Culpa blog about mass-media myth is that are holding back wind energy. How do you feel your blogging—which I sense brought you an uncomfortable level of attention last year—relates to the themes that come through in your painting?

**CW:** Frankly, I hadn't thought about much in the way of a relationship between them until Stéphane Baillargeon from *Le Devoir* asked me about that after [Wentegate] happened. There are some relationships in the sense that I'm looking at stories and how they get altered and changed and repeated. I also have a personal interest in peeling back the layers of an illustration and saying, "where did that come from?" The notion of a copy is something that interests me.

So there is a general intellectual interest in that, and in stories themselves and how we tell them to ourselves. There certainly is a parallel interest: where did that [illustration] come from, where did that quote come from, where did that whatever come from. For me, it's about being curious about things.

**LS:** To me, there must be a lot of passion behind such work, as well as curiosity. Would that be true?

**CW:** Well, it's not [artwork] that's ironic, stand-aside, academic, or only-concerned-with-issues-in-painting kind of work. It never has been for me. But neither is it stridently political in a particular vein. It's more about trying to understand stuff and think about it seriously and acknowledge that there is a kind of sad beauty in it. That's kind of what it is for me. As far as the blog goes: I think generally I'm not very happy with the quality of public discourse or political media discourse given what we're facing. So there's a certain level of frustration with that. I think the role of public intellectual is a really important role and it shouldn't be taken lightly. That's something I feel kind of passionately about.

**LS:** Is there anything else you'd like people to know about the work on view here in Toronto or that's currently on in Kelowna—or soon to open in Kitchener?

**CW:** I don't know if there's anything in particular. For me it's just a way of trying to engage with certain aspects of the world and trying to do it through a whole lot of different manifestations of previous visual culture and story culture, and trying to dig into all that stuff to see what it can say about now and about what my kids face and stuff like that. A few decades ago, I was pretty resistant to the expressive mode in painting. When I started painting, it was a real neo-expressionist moment and that was not something I was terribly comfortable with at the time. I remember sort of looking at a lot of that work that was very angry and expressive and thinking "If things suck in some way, I'd like to figure out why." But I must say that these days I'm more pessimistic; I'm not appreciating the expressive more, but I feel like I'm forced into that in a way, maybe because it doesn't seem like there is a really good space for really serious and interesting public discourse. Maybe that's a cop-out on my part. But I'm finding myself feeling more like wanting to express something about this as well as understand it.

And for me, there's a definite sadness in some of these works—and I doubt that it has any particularly great usefulness except that maybe it slows people down and makes them think. I don't make any great claims for artmaking; I don't think it has some huge impact on the world.

**LS:** I had been wondering about how you might deal with cynicism. This body of work and other recent ones have struck me as dark; and then add into that the sharp eye you've brought to the media, and the fact that, as a result, you must know quite intimately that things that are presented as progressive or factual are often not so. For me, this would add up to cynicism or disappointment about the way things are. As a result, I was wondering, How does that come up for Carol? And how does she deal with that?

**CW:** That's how I deal with it [gestures to a painting] to the extent that it comes up. I find myself feeling like I need to do this more—not necessarily to convince anyone else, just to sort of cope, you know?

I wouldn't say there's despair, because I really don't like that modality, and I never have liked it historically. And it's not ultra-expressive kind of work; it has some structure and it has some beauty. I don't just want to say, "Everything's horrible." Though it's certainly a little scary.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*