

Joan Jonas, "Mirror, mirror," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2018

The Guardian

Arts essay

Mirror, mirror

Joan Jonas

Frog princes and labyrinths, Freud and Helen of Troy ... as a major retrospective takes place at Tate Modern, the performance artist reflects on the myths and fairytales that have inspired her work

Sometimes a story sticks in my mind - I can't get rid of it, and then I begin to analyse what it's about, how it works and why it has taken such a hold on me. In the early 1960s, when the writings of Jorge Luis Borges were first published in English, reading his work was a transformative experience. For one of my earliest solo performance works in 1968, I made a costume that had mirrors of various sizes attached to the material. For the text, I took every reference to mirrors from Borges's *Labyrinths* and assembled the excerpts into a script, which I memorised and recited aloud.

Mirrors and poetry, as well as myth and fairytales, refract reality in unexpected ways. Mirrors can collapse or confuse the distance between performer and audience and disrupt visual frameworks. When I use a myth or a story or a literary text in my work, I often extract particular passages from a larger narrative that resonates with me. In performance, the audience hears the text, recorded in advance or recited in real time, in fragments, and sees components - such as movements, props, drawings and video - that may relate only indirectly to the text. I don't change the language, but rather I change the context, which opens up the text to different possibilities of meaning. I don't illustrate; I juxtapose.

At college I was drawn to the imagists, especially HD (Hilda Doolittle). I was excited by Ezra Pound's definition of an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". Many of the imagists' poems, including Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" and HD's "The Pool", were written as haiku. What fascinated me was the way the visual structure of the poem, its image on the page, was an essential unit of meaning, graspable at a glance by the reader.

In 1976, I was commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia to make a piece for children. The story I chose was a fairytale recorded by the Grimm brothers called "The Juniper Tree", partly because it was the favourite of the son of my friend, the poet Susan Howe. But I'd been interested in myth and fairytale for a long time; years earlier I'd read James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as well as Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess*. Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* played an important role in my thinking about *The Juniper Tree*.

As well as the stories themselves, I was interested in their origins - many fairytales were orally transmitted, mostly by women, and stories evolved with the nomadic movement of Europe's early cultures. "The Juniper Tree", for example, is rooted in, or at least shares many elements with, the Egyptian Osiris myth in which the god is murdered. Also of particular interest to me in the story were the different representations of women - the good mother, the wicked stepmother and the young daughter, all of whom

Stories to tell
Jonas in 1968;
above right,
Reading Dante (2007)



PETER CAMIUS



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I played in the final version of the piece. I made drawings of hearts, valentine and anatomical, representing the boy and the girl, in red paint on white silk and white paint on red silk for the set.

After *The Juniper Tree*, I made one more piece using fairytales, also from Grimm, in 1979, called *Upside Down and Backwards*, in which "The Frog Prince" is intercut with "The Boy Who Went Out to Learn Fear". As I was retelling stories that had been retold for centuries, I felt freer to adapt their language, and changed the setting by adding references to the American south-west and the mountains of the north-east. I was attracted by the way the sexual connotations of "The Frog Prince" - lines such as, "Let me in, let me in" - could be heard one way by children and another by adults, and I liked how the story unfolded backwards. What do we fear and why do we fear it? The princess's fear of the frog and the boy's need to learn fear in order to enter into life play off each other pleasingly in the entangled stories.

In 2001, I was invited to make a work for Documenta 11 based on an epic poem. I chose a book-length poem by HD, *Helen in Egypt*. From the beginning as an artist, my dominant focus has been on the roles that women play - in folklore, fiction and in the culture at large - and how they are seen in history. HD's *Helen in Egypt* is a poetic exploration of the story, told in Herodotus's *Histories*, of how Helen was defamed, in effect, by Homer's *Iliad*: she was never in Troy but was transported to Egypt by the gods, and a double, a phantom (or *eidolon* in Greek) was sent to Troy in her stead.

For the work, I chose sections of HD's poem and from her book *Tribute to Freud* in which she describes being analysed by Freud in Vienna in 1933-34. How

does war begin? And why? Helen was blamed, as women are often blamed, for the war, which Graves asserts was in all probability a trade war, fought over riches and access to the east. I called the work *Lines in the Sand*, a title suggested by an exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art that examined the excavation of archaeological sites in the Middle East in the 19th century - and the dissemination of vast numbers of artefacts, exhibited in museums across Europe. For me, it also evoked the almost arbitrary colonial division of Middle Eastern lands into parcels of European dominance.

For the work, I used photographs of the pyramids taken by my grandmother on a trip to Egypt in 1910 and used Las Vegas as a contemporary *eidolon* for ancient Egypt. I found a small painting of a modern-day Helen in a thrift shop there, and shot video - of the desert and city sights, derelict props from extinct shows, monuments such as the Luxor Casino - that was projected during the performance.

Over the past few years, I have increasingly explored the environment and the relationships between species - I've been thinking in particular about how we perceive the behaviour of animals. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book, *The Open*, Sy Montgomery's *The Soul of an Octopus*, Peter Godfrey-Smith's *Other Minds* and Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* all play a part in that process. In May, I'll be presenting a new project, *Moving Off the Land*, which has grown out of these readings and other stories ●

The Joan Jonas exhibition is at Tate Modern, London SE1, until 5 August. tate.org.uk.