



Tessa Farmer's fairies are invited to the court of the Red Queen

PAUL ISBEL

TUESDAY 4 JUNE, 2013

The Red Queen asks why we make art. Sculptor Tessa Farmer's fairies may have one answer in their microworld of evolution in action.



***The Red Queen* asks why we make art. Sculptor Tessa Farmer's fairies may have one answer in their microworld of evolution in action.**

The Red Queen wants to know what drives us to make art and how it serves our survival as a species. English sculptor [Tessa Farmer](http://www.tessafarmer.com/) (<http://www.tessafarmer.com/>) has spent a month at MONA creating a commissioned work that adds to the answers 46 artists

have for the curious queen in the upcoming [exhibition](http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/exhibitions/) (<http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/exhibitions/>) that opens on June 18.

Her installations freeze evolution in action. In macabre mise-en-scènes, gangs of skeletal fairies contest real creatures for the right to rule a microworld that is a mirror of our own. Anatomy and entomology lend scientific credibility to the narratives to tip them from fantasy to a very-near reality. That blurred boundary can be a challenge to new viewers. 'If people haven't seen my work before, they see the insects and they see the fairies and they try to work out what kind of insect they are,' Farmer observes. 'I think that's a good response because that leads into this state of wonder fuelled by curiosity. Once they realize the fairies are kind of humanoid in terms of representation, they shrink themselves down to that scale because we can't help but do that and then engage with the narrative. My aim is to tell a story really. It's like an action-packed scene that has been frozen, so I want the viewer to reanimate it in their mind.'

In a sort of still movie preview, Farmer takes us through the narrative in the large hanging installation she has prepared for *The Red Queen*. 'I've been interested in the idea of invasive species for quite a while, in terms of the fairies' mission, which is world domination, so they haven't really invaded Australia yet.' That 'yet' has an ominous tone to it. 'In this piece, they're attacking a brush-tailed possum and they're using a recently developed weapon that includes a swarm of hundreds of honey bees. But I haven't really encountered a possum before, it's got pretty thick fur, so I'm not sure how many of the bees will be able to sting it effectively.'

That would be Plan Bee. Plan A is for ants. 'If they're not successful,' Farmer continues, almost like a news reporter, 'the fairies are also controlling ants to attack from the ground.' Survivors of many similar tableaux, these fairies are organised and resourceful. 'But also in the mix, because they are very ambitious, they are raiding a wasp's nest, which is a bit more complex because wasps are the fairies' main enemy. That's more of a battle scene, and it's not quite clear if the fairies want to use the wasps as weapons or just attack them and steal some of the wasps' nests, because they sometimes use wasp nests in their own architecture.'

Much of Farmer's art comes from found pieces. 'When I'm at home I pick up dead insects in the summer,' she explains. 'I walk around a lot listening for things and friends and family do the same, or when they travel. I have a flying skull ship in the piece

here made from a sheep skull that my mum brought back from Spain last summer.' Spain? She could have found one in England, surely? 'I know,' says Farmer matter-of-factly, 'but this was a particularly nice one.'

When you are at *The Red Queen* reanimating Farmer's installation, be assured of the Aussie actors in the scene. 'A lot of the insect materials are from Tasmania,' she says. 'MONA sourced them for me. I couldn't bring any honey bees with me from England because of the worldwide problem with bee colonies, so that was a good opportunity to find some here. They came from a honey producer in Tasmania. And some beetle wasps' nests came via the pest controller. They had the wasps inside them as well. The possums and other things people have given me. We went collecting materials from a couple of beaches. I was looking for crab claws and I found hundreds of small cockles at one beach at Dodges Ferry and some larger ones and an interesting sponge that I've used in some of the sculptures. I've basically built it all here. I was quite sad that I couldn't bring any bumblebees from England.' For the vicious fairies to attack and eat? 'No,' she seems slightly puzzled by the confusion. 'Fairies use bumblebees as motorbikes.'

Perhaps it's time to consider these fairies, the constants in Farmer's work. 'The fairies came into being because I studied anatomy and simultaneously I was working with natural materials and interventions in landscapes. Then I became interested in human skeletons.' So they are anatomically accurate? 'To an extent. The fairies don't have kneecaps. They have four fingers and four toes, because that's a trait of being a fairy.' Is it? 'I picked that up from somewhere,' she says, then laughs. 'No, I was being lazy. Five fingers and five toes? Really? I'll give myself a break and just do four. But,' serious again, 'they've got all the major bones.'

That's what they look like, but what are they like? 'They have the imaginative skills to build things, use tools, develop architecture, and they have this common aim of surviving and moving up the food chain. Initially they weren't that mean, they were more mischievous. The first four I made were just playful and a little threatening. Obviously they look quite sinister because they're skeletons.' Yes, there is that. Does it strip them of personality? 'I think they do have personalities,' Farmer sounds surprised. 'When I'm making them they have personalities, but once they become part of the gang they have their own role and work as team. Well, maybe not personality, but some of them are quite witty through their game playing as part of their social activities. That revolves around torturing and killing or hunting.'

Generally, the fairies are the only invented organisms in the scenarios, but not always. 'Sometimes I'll put pieces of different insects together to make hybrids that don't have a reason or a purpose I'm aware of. Sometimes I don't develop an understanding of them. For a while there I was making flies that had fairy skulls, but they haven't appeared for a while, they were just observers, they were never really part of the action.' So why were they there? 'Hanging out,' she says casually.

As the fairies gradually developed a darker side, so has Farmer's works. 'The more I found out about the natural world and insects in particular, and the brutality of nature and the way things survive and the things they do to each other in order to survive, which is at once ingenious and some of it quite horrifying, the darker it has become.' That, however, doesn't prevent a certain fascination. 'I'm particularly interested in parasitic wasps that lay their eggs in living insects.'

That interest has developed more since Farmer completed a residency early in 2008 working with entomologists at the Natural History Museum in London that became a solo exhibition called *Little Savages*. 'I'm learning more all the time,' she reflects. 'There's so much to discover. Before I met the entomologists I thought they must know everything, but they don't. They know a lot but they are always discovering more. What I do is a little far-fetched, so when I am around them I am little nervous because what I do is half science, half fantasy. I wish I had the confidence to say that [my work is scientific] but it's more that I am a wannabe scientist. The more knowledge I have the more confidence I have in explaining my work to science people as well and explaining the world of fairies in terms of that.'

One discovery that came late to Farmer concerned the writer [Arthur Machen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Machen) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Machen), her great-grandfather. 'I knew he was a writer but had never read any of his works,' she admits, but since she has the late Victorian originator of fantasy, horror and supernatural tales has become one of her influences. 'A rare kind of thing with him was this world that coexists with our world, just beyond the veil. He offers glimpses of this twisted, supernatural world and really nasty fairies often featured in his stories, which was affirming for me.'

For two artists of different kinds from the one family separated by three generations to take up uncannily similar themes is a subject the Red Queen might like to investigate if she ever fathoms the imponderable of the evolutionary advantage of making art. While she has been at MONA, Tessa Farmer has had her own thoughts on the topic. 'In terms of the practice it becomes a compulsion,'

she says, 'and on a personal level it helps me survive. Creating another world, not necessarily nice, is something I've always done since I was young, as a kind of escapism. I've always been shy, even as a child, I don't know why, I think I was born that way, so it has helped me become better at communicating with people. By creating a world in which I tell stories is a way of connecting to people and also, I think, impressing people. I want to get people to like me on a very basic level.'

A corollary to the Red Queen question is to ask could you be an artist without an audience? 'I think so,' she says, after a pause for thought, 'because ultimately I'm trying to impress myself and make sense of it all. For me, sharing with the audience brings great joy, but it goes back to what I did as a child. I was always making creatures, not the fairies then but small creatures, and playing with them. It was very imaginary.'

And that might just be an answer for the Red Queen. The capacity to imagine and play it out may be an evolutionary advantage we have over other creatures that is vital to our continued survival.

In the clip below, Tessa Farmer discusses her collaboration with scientists from the Natural History Museum.

The Red Queen (<http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/exhibitions/>)
opens at MONA on June 18. It runs to April 21, 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Isbel taught at primary and secondary level in government and private schools and has worked in teacher education at tertiary level. He has worked in online publishing since 1997.

Unlock **exclusive** news, jobs, gossip and events with industry-focused hubs:

- ✓ Access hundreds of industry job listings throughout Australia
- ✓ Gain a detailed understanding of


ArtsHub
(<http://www.artshub.com.au/>)

salaries within the Australian film and television industry, by accessing our 2014 Salary Survey

- ✓ Promote yourself and your career to the largest arts community in Australia by uploading your professional profile
- ✓ Access thousands of subscriber-only features, articles and guides
- ✓ Take advantage of exclusive ticket giveaways, offers and competitions
- ✓ Save hundreds of Dollars every year on cinema tickets, magazines, books, travel, shopping and more with the Member Rewards scheme

... and much, much more.

JOIN NOW

VISUAL
ArtsHub
(<http://visual.artshub.com.au/>)

PERFORMING
ArtsHub
(<http://performing.artshub.com.au/>)

SCREEN
ArtsHub
(<http://screen.artshub.com.au/>)

ARCHITECTURE
ArtsHub
(<http://architecture.artshub.com.au/>)

DESIGN
ArtsHub
(<http://design.artshub.com.au/>)

PUBLISHING
ArtsHub
(<http://publishing.artshub.com.au/>)