

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, architects, writers and curators associated with the School of Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia, in a national and international context.

The Director, SASA Gallery, would like to acknowledge the contribution to the development of the 2012 exhibition program by the SASA Gallery Programming Committee; AAD Events and Exhibition Committee; Professor Kay Lawrence; Professor Mads Gaardboe, Head, AAD; and Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Pro-Vice Chancellor, DIVEASS, UniSA.

The SASA Gallery has received significant support for *Walking with Alice*. Special thanks to the curator and artists Linde Ivimey, Noel McKenna, Simone Kennedy, Jan Švankmajer, for their generous participation in this exhibition, catalogue and associated events. I would also like to thank Perrini Estate for their generous on-going support of the SASA Gallery exhibition program.

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Karna Building, City West Campus, UniSA
Cnr Fenn Place & Hindley Street, Adelaide

Published by the SASA Gallery
University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471, Adelaide SA 5001
May 2012

ISBN 978-0-9871008-8-7
Printed by Finsbury Green
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Images:
Front: Simone Kennedy, *A Meeting with the Queen* (detail), 2012,
Oil on linen, 200 x 200 cm
Middle: Noel McKenna, *Alice*, 2012,
Acrylic on canvas 150 x 150 cm



Walking with Alice
15 May - 20 July 2012
SASA GALLERY

Walking with Alice Elsbeth Pitt

I store books in my head with half-visualised mnemonics. The Alice books sit apart as a kind of cubic cat's-cradle of brightly coloured threads – red, white, black, grass-green. I now also think of the impossible buildings and worlds in the drawings of MC Escher.

A S Byatt¹

In an article written for *The Guardian*, A S Byatt referred to her childhood reading of *Alice in Wonderland* as among the first intellectual puzzles she encountered. The author's later appreciation of the story, however, became bound up with patterns, colours, buildings and artworks.

In essence, Byatt's awareness of the text began in one way but ended up in another. The first comprised invisible calculations carried out and held within the confines of her mind, games of logic and lateral thinking. The second encompassed things seen and physically encountered, with which she drew associations with the Alice first conceived in childhood. I imagine a tiny girl in the folds of Byatt's brain, picking out things of fancy with which to amplify her person. In this way, the lives of this literary character and this literary author became entwined over time.

My first memory of Alice was not as text or intellectual puzzle, but as a picture. John Tenniel's illustrations are how I first saw Alice, a sequence of images in which a child loomed large, then diminished, depending on the page. Years later, I came across the great, boxwood blocks from which those first illustrations had been made. As a curator of prints, this joining together of picture and printing block was significant. The episode also spoke of the way in which Alice intersected with my appreciation of art: first as a child, wide-eyed at images in a book, later as an adult pouring over printing blocks, an interest in art now realised, crystalline, consuming.

Maria Tatar, an American academic specialising in children's literature, writes that child-readers do not tend to identify with the imaginary children in stories. They stand a little aside, and study their counterparts intently.² Adults don't seem to approach Alice in the same way. Rather than keep her at length, they take her up in arms. They appropriate her tale, using it as metaphor for stories of their own.

Charles Blackman interpreted *Alice in Wonderland* in some forty oil and egg tempera panels conceived in 1956. He first encountered Alice not as text, intellectual puzzle or even print, but as a story, read aloud. Blackman's wife, Barbara, suffered from degenerative blindness. A writer and essayist, she acquired a talking book machine on which to play recordings of poems and stories, and it was through this medium that Charles heard *Alice* as intoned by the BBC announcer, Robin Holmes.

Blackman spoke evocatively of the way in which the story drew he and Barbara closer together.³ Holmes' sonorous voice built a space in which the couple could meet on equal sensorial footing. The experience facilitated a 'transference of Charles' sight into Barbara's poetic terminology', an aural tracery in which he could come to understand the way in which she perceived the world without being able to see it.⁴

In the paintings, Barbara assumes the shape of Alice, and Charles, that of the White Rabbit. The panels are littered with objects and acquaintances from their lives – teacups and plates from the restaurant in which Charles was cooking to supplement their income; friends Sidney Nolan and John and Sunday Reed also appear. A particularly beautiful work of birds and floating flowers comes to form the features of Alice – or Barbara (*Alice in Wonderland*, 1957). Her face dissolves as one tries to focus on the individual elements from which it is composed. This work is perhaps the fullest expression of Charles' understanding of his wife's blindness. It approximates the way in which the base colours and shadow forms of Barbara's partial vision might have

momentarily appeared, then dissolved; memories of things seen in youth summoned clearly in her prose but lost later to the slipperiness and imprecision of weakening memory.

Charles Blackman's retelling of *Alice*, personally inflected, is one of many. A search of the National Library of Australia unearths reams of literary commentary and interpretation, but also colouring books and paper toys, plays, films and photographs, jazz scores, sheet music, ballet and operetta. The appearance of Alice across these manifold art forms suggests she not only appeals to our personal histories, but to the spectrum of our sensory capabilities. She has found footing in our ears and eyes; she animates limbs and reclines in hands. As I leaf through small piles of Alice-ephemera, I also become aware of her scent. One of closed books suddenly opened. Of ink, paper, and the faintly caustic scent of photographs.

Jan Švankmajer understood the reach of Alice's sensory influence. In his filmic adaptation of the story we are kept on tenterhooks, our perceptions toyed with and harangued (*Alice*, 1988). Nerve endings prickle, sharp noises clang and clatter. As the White Rabbit spoons sawdust to his mouth, I squint my eyes and crinkle my lips as if refusing it myself.

For a stop-animation film with characters made from throwaway objects, Alice arouses surprisingly visceral effect. But it is not only a visceral film, it is a violent one. Alice is attacked, pushed, scratched, pricked, hit and repeatedly thrown to the ground. Her treatment contradicts common feeling that children should be cosseted and lavished with affection. Švankmajer's film sits at odds with the idea of being a child, and of what that experience should entail.

British Pop-artist, Peter Blake, treats Alice quite differently (*Through the Looking-glass* series, 1970-1971). He composed her carefully, from layers and layers of watercolour paint. Glistening with jewel-like intensity, she is a luminous figure

whose brown eyes flicker with unnerving realism. An avid collector of Victorian-era art, literature and illustration, Blake felt that *Alice's* author, Lewis Carroll, possessed an 'almost peculiar ... gift for entering into and understanding the emotional and imaginative world of a child.'⁵ Blake's hyper-real paintings pay homage to the observational powers of the Victorian artists he so admired. It was their 'obsession with detail' and want to tell stories 'entire and complete' that made the Victorians successful – as scientists detailing the origin of the species, and as artists recording the inner-life of the child.⁶

But Alice wriggles restlessly and Blake's paintings sit uncomfortably in my mind. Can Carroll's understanding of childhood be put down to scrutiny alone? After all, his was a deeply imaginative generation. They dreamt up ice cream and crystal palaces. Sped up time with the making of trains and stopped it, fixing images in light, and printing them on paper.

The Victorians were able to understand the child not only because they observed her, but because they invented her as they wished her to be. *Alice* is a neat summation of Victorian ideas to do with childhood. The tale embodies the liberal philosophies of John Locke, who considered the child as white paper or wax; a *tabula rasa* on which to impress the types of lessons in sense and nonsense for which Carroll is renown. The story also refers to the Romantic writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's regard for childhood as a sacred state is evinced in Carroll's introduction, which likens childhood to the holy passage of the pilgrim.⁷

Ideas about childhood have not changed considerably since Carroll's time. But an element of this thinking has gone astray. Even in adulthood, the Victorians believed, an 'inner-child' remained. This tiny, hidden personage was a 'repository of feelings', someone who looked out at the world and interpreted it from a singular point of view.⁸

83-year-old artist, Yayoi Kusama, recently declared: 'I, Kusama, am the modern *Alice in Wonderland*. A mental illness entails that Kusama sometimes sees the world through veils of coloured spots. In her 'polka-dot philosophy', however, she asserts the world consists of polka-dots.

Kusama's eccentric ideas find equivalence in *Alice*, in which 'Nonsense' writing is used to reveal universal truths. A mathematician by profession, the strange events that formed and flew from Carroll's pen are often cloaked expressions of mathematical theory. The changing of the Duchess' screaming baby into a squealing pig, for example, is a parody of the principle of continuity: the idea that 'one shape can bend and stretch into another, provided it retains the same basic properties.'¹⁰

So too, Kusama's philosophy is not simplistic, but a simple explanation of a complicated truth. In a way, the world is made up of dots. Trees, rocks, buildings – all consist of countless molecules, tiny increments of matter. The intricacies of this phenomenon are well beyond the understanding of most. Unless, like Kusama, we find a way to interpret this large idea through our own, small experience of the world.

I now turn back to my relationship with Alice. I think again of Tenniel's illustrations. I recall the printing blocks bearing his designs and remember the label that lay beside them. Lost for decades, the blocks had only recently been rediscovered, unearthed in deed boxes belonging to the original publishers, Macmillan. I think of everything that has happened to Alice during this second, subterranean adventure. Psychoanalysed by Surrealists, painted by Pop-artists, she has expounded mathematical and literary theory, told her tale to children, inner-children and adults. She has appealed to us personally and cerebrally. She is macrocosm and microcosm.

Endnotes:

1. A S Byatt, 'There's something about Alice', *The Guardian*, 27 February 2010, accessed online 25 February, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/27/as-byatt-alice-in-wonderland>.
2. Maria Tatar in Byatt, 'There's something about Alice'.
3. Charles Blackman in Felicity St John Moore, 'Conception to birth: The Alice in Wonderland series', *Charles Blackman: Alice in Wonderland*, by Geoffrey Smith and Felicity St John Moore (National Gallery of Victoria: Melbourne, 2006), p10.
4. Blackman in St John Moore, p13.
5. Nicholas Usherwood, 'Peter Blake and the Ruralists', in *Peter Blake*, by Michael Compton et al. (Tate: London, 1993), p32.
6. Usherwood, p33.
7. Lewis Carroll, introduction to *Alice in Wonderland* (first published 1865, this edition, Penguin: Camberwell, Victoria, 2010). See final stanza: 'Alice! A childish story take, / And, with a gentle hand, / Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined / In Memory's mystic band, / Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers / Pluck'd in a far-off land.'
8. Anthony Fletcher, *Growing up in England: the experience of Childhood 1600-1914* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2008), p10.
9. Lewis Carroll, frontispiece to *Alice in Wonderland with artwork by Yayoi Kusama* (Penguin: London, 2012).
10. Melanie Bayley, 'Algebra in Wonderland', *The New York Times*, 6 March, 2010, accessed online 9 April 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/opinion/07bayley.html?pagewanted=all>.