

From the Looking-Glass World

What hides behind the mirror? Alice's hand moves over the sleek surface which slowly begins to "melt away, just like a bright silvery mist" as Lewis Carroll writes. For a brief moment the mirror is permeable, it is possible to pass into the space behind. That room beyond is – almost – identical to the room behind her; after passing through the mirror she stands on an identical mantelpiece, but the further she ventures the more the world turns peculiar.

Lewis Carroll was far from the first to be enthralled by the enigmatic world beyond the mirror. What laws of man or nature might rule behind the glass? Just like the underworld into which Alice fell in the first book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the mirror world of its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), is a place submitted to other laws and conditions than those that govern in front of the glass. The world beyond is a labyrinth where all movements follow the rules of chess; it is also a dream world from which the protagonist conveniently wakes up at the end of the story. Already the first editions of the books included the illustrations by John Tenniel, pictures that have become so integral to our visual culture that even people who never read the books know the images.

The labyrinth as well as the deep forest are places where the usual laws of existence cease to apply, where rationality have no more say and thus opens a door to horror, despair and insanity. This is the forest where Dante found himself lost in the beginning of *Divina Commedia* (1320), this is where the protagonist of the peculiar Renaissance work *Hypnoerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) was brought in a dream, and it is likewise this kind of labyrinthine wood where Orlando lost his mind in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516). Dream and reality shift places in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) where the dark mazelike forest allows for transgressions shattered by daylight and awakening.

Per Wizén's reinterpretations of Tenniel's illustrations don't allow for a return or an awakening; the dream is all, the looking-glass world is one without redemption or return. Here a labyrinth without walls, that in the book is determined by the movements of chess pieces, is replaced by Wizén with garden mazes of tall hedges, or the labyrinths formed by a dense forest or a set of playing cards. Trees and shrubs that Tenniel at the most implies at the edges of his images is by Wizén's collage technique – which is manual and extremely time-consuming – expanded into parks and forests. In other images walls and vaults only represented with a few lines in Tenniel's drawings are stretched out into entire rooms and corridors.

The labyrinth is a recurring motive in the smaller format pictures that Per Wizén presented a few years ago under the title *Subterranean* (2016). These images are totally "Tenniel" in style – each and every line is drawn by the British illustrator, before being broken into the tiny fragments of the collage works. But the motives of Per Wizén's re-workings break off into twisted and contemporary directions. The claustrophobic corridors of Stanley Kubrick's movie *The Shining* (1980) are obvious references beyond the 19th century horizon of Tenniel's; the outdoor maze from the same movie appears with similar self-assertation in several other works. Also the motive of twins, central to Kubrick's film, is recurring in Per Wizén's Alice series.

These and other film references becomes evident in *Trespassers 1-2* (2019), two large-scale silkscreen prints. A violent game with doubles plays out in *Trespassers 1* where one Alice, squatting on the mantelpiece with her arms stretched down, just a moment earlier has pushed her twin image off the ledge. While the pose of the first figure expresses force and determined aggression, the other falls to the floor like a rag doll. In the following image Alice has passed through the mirror and stands kneeling on the mantelpiece with her hair like a veil over her face. The mirror wall behind her is filled with an almost tangible darkness of a passage-like room. It is a darkness resembling of a black fog similar to the baleful visual noise in the Japanese horror movie *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) where – instead of a mirror – a TV screen becomes the passage between rational and irrational, through which a woman crawls with her hair hanging over her face. In Nalkata's film

as well as in Wizén's print, the mirror opens up to a parallel and threatening reality. Out of the safe and familiar world of Tenniel's illustrations, Wizén's collage-process evokes a deep unease – a familiar phrase from psychoanalysis speaks of 'the uncanny' – that balances the ethereal elegance of the picture against a precipice of horror.

Theatricality is apparent in Wizén's works. The characters interact as if they were on a stage, with the lights set at the middle of it, and backdrops creating a small scenic space with a sparse setup of props. What goes on here is a masque with continuous changes of roles. The masks change, change places, and are pulled over each other. The Knight, Alice, the Rabbit, they are all empty and interchangeable masks; that some of them have a past as chess pieces in Carroll's and Tenniel's book has little relevance anymore. Now they interact in a theatre of cruelty, where the thin line between play and abuse is constantly touched and transgressed. This is particularly apparent in one of Wizén's latest large format works, *Reenactor* (2019). As in a puppet theatre two arms with hands wrapped in tiny clothes are stretched down, fingers sprawling, against a backdrop of a stone wall. The scene reminds of a prison yard, or the ascetic courtyard of Pasolini's last film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975). On the floor of the stage lies the Rabbit's head torn off, bathing in a puddle of blood, and Alice's head (or maybe just a mask) with an open fan lying by. The flimsy word-play of the Alice books is far away. If this is a dream scenery, it is not one where the verbal flow of association runs free as in Carroll's and Tenniel's books, but one where the visual language is based on gestures and ritual, in line with what dramatist Antonin Artaud prescribed to his *Théâtre Cruel*.

Per Wizén enacts dark games in his works. The implied forest or labyrinth that is a backdrop to many of the black and white Alice images, is brought to the fore in *Blue Hunt* (2019). A desolate forest is constructed from elements picked out of a garish children's cartoon. The composition resembles the famous painting by Paolo Uccello usually called *The Hunt*, but without the myriad of hunters, horses, hounds and game found in the small panel painting. The forest stands waste and empty, the perspective is enhanced in the manner of Uccello by the decaying tree trunks in the foreground of the picture, spread out in a fan-shape on the forest floor. Grass and flowers on the ground are bathing in a soft light, while the tree-crowns and the sky are dark. The trunks writhe like arabesques – they are based on the drawings for Disney's animation film *Alice in Wonderland* (1951). Hundreds of copies of a cartoon version from the early 1970s have been pillaged for building elements to the collage. But as the forest stands empty, we are yet again on a stage, waiting for the actors to enter. Will they be Oberon, Titania, Puck and their parade of fairies and mythological creatures – as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – or is this the venue for a sexuality forced out into the shadows of the forests and the parks? The title certainly refers to one or another form of hunt.

This latter interpretation is closer at hand in an older work by Wizén, *The Hunt* (2003-2005), which is a collage reworking of Uccello's panel painting. The latter hangs in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the University city that was the hometown of Lewis Carroll (and of Alice Liddell, the child who inspired the books on Alice's adventures). While Uccello's work is a relatively small panel (originally placed on a cassone, a decorated bridal chest containing some of the bride's dowry), Wizén's reworking is in a large scale. *Blue Hunt* is not so much a paraphrase of Uccello's painting as of Wizén's own earlier work. Also *Blue Hunt* has what is required of a monumental work, with its arabesque lines and almost monochrome colour fields. It brings out the carnivalesque aspects of the forest and the labyrinth, both the Bucolic and the Bacchanalian, the peace of a *déjeuner sur l'herbe* as well as the merry passing of a company of satyres. This work opens up in a different way than other works of Per Wizén to the projections of the viewer. It is a sun-lit glade that, in the words of Shakespeare, also allows for dreamy reconciliation:

*If we shadows have offended,
Think but this – and all is mended
– That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream
(William Shakespeare, from the epilogue to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)*

Pontus Kyander
Writer and critic

A comment on Per Wizén's collage technique:

Per Wizén works since more than 20 years with a technique, where printed reproductions of art works, usually from books (but occasionally also other print media, as in the case of Blue Hunt, which uses cartoons), are cut into often fine fragments. From these, new images are built that appear to be in the style and technique of the actual artist (for instance Uccello, Caravaggio, Ingres or Disney Studios), but where the new motive and composition are entirely new. By iconography the images are contemporary, while at the same time they enhance tendencies already present and visible – at least in the eyes of posterity – in the original works.

The resulting collage works are scanned and digitally post-produced to remove visible seams and unavoidable unevenness. The final images are printed in an appropriate photographic or print technique (C-print, silkscreen, photo gravure, etc).

Sometimes people ask why not far simpler digital methods like Photoshop are applied to create these images. The answer is visible in the resulting works, compared to what is done with photo editing tools. The precise and elaborately worked out result could not have been achieved by digitally cutting and pasting. There are no shortcuts to Wizén's works. There are incredible challenges to resolve that actually demand a slow and careful approach. Every little fragment responds to its immediate context, but also to the overall composition. The painstaking process might take years, even – as in many of the Alice works – a decade.