

# Van Sowerwine: Through a Child's Eyes

23 May - 28 June 2009  
Childrens Gallery  
Western Plains Cultural Centre

## *Introduction*

Childhood is a dangerous place. It's populated with forests, beasts, darkness, shadows, witches, lies, temptation, jealousy, and ultimately parents. Cities and empires are created and destroyed over the course of the school holidays. Armies are decimated, rulers toppled, innocents saved, tea parties trashed and everyone dies at least three times a day. The breadth of experience contained within childhood play and exploration is propagated and nourished by everyday experience with television, books, anecdotes, movies etc. The context for play is the immediate environment coupled with the primordial impulse to interact with it. The real world is a mess of rules and restrictions, with glimpses of fun and adventure. Why are these darker elements such a feature of children's stories, nursery rhymes and fables? Why do we not prepare positive lessons with happy characters? The short answer is that these stories are reflections of the real world – the hardships and challenges faced in real life are transformed into adventures and exploration in children's stories. Dark and light exists in the real world, not just in fairytales. Stories and fables provide a context for exploring the complexity and extremes of life. They are ultimately revelatory stories told against the dramatic landscape of the familiar good vs. evil battlefield.

The world of a child's mind is evoked and described in the work of Van Sowerwine. Sowerwine explores these issues in complex and enticing multimedia works. These world(s) are filled with signs and symbols that confuse and disorient us. Her characters are resolutely innocent with their doll-like appearances and domestic environments, yet there seems to lurk a malevolent and dangerous undercurrent. Is it real danger or imagined? Do our minds play tricks on us? The issue of our perception vs. reality is important in exploring these issues.

Sowerwine's sculptural works are 21st century parlour toys - penny arcade interactives cross-bred with a gaming console. The interfaces for her works are computer screen, mouse, mechanical toy, and plinth-based sculptures, yet within each there lies a hidden or briefly glimpsed Lilliputian world. It is here that Sowerwine plays with perceived notions of innocence and goodness.

Intrinsic to these works is the inquisitive desire to touch and collaborate with them. The works exist as objects, but it is not until we intervene that the artwork truly comes into being. Sowerwine works within the filmic tradition of stop-motion animation. This laborious process renders inanimate objects with movement and character. This is most commonly seen in television shorts such as the incessant plasticine feud of *The Red & The Blue* through to more elaborate adventure series' such as *Bill & Ben: The Flowerpot Men* or the *Koala Brothers*. Sowerwine is more closely aligned with international proponents of the form such as Czech artists Jiří Trnka and Jan Švankmajer, Canadian Norman McLaren, UK collective Aardman and from the US, *Brothers Quay* and *Tim Burton*, yet it is the delivery of her works that sets her apart. The artists mentioned above are screen-based practitioners. Their works are created to be projected, transmitted or downloaded. Sowerwine creates vehicles for her animations – booth, box, or beast – that are crucial to the meanings in her work. Sowerwine retains the spirit of the fantastic in her narratives and use of media. There lies an excitement and experimentation with photographic processes and image making. The magic that is so much a part of photography and cinema is sustained within Sowerwine's interactives, as if complexity and wonder rose out of the simple materials. The inanimate becomes animate in her intricate tapestries of time - the dead can now dance.

## *What to do*

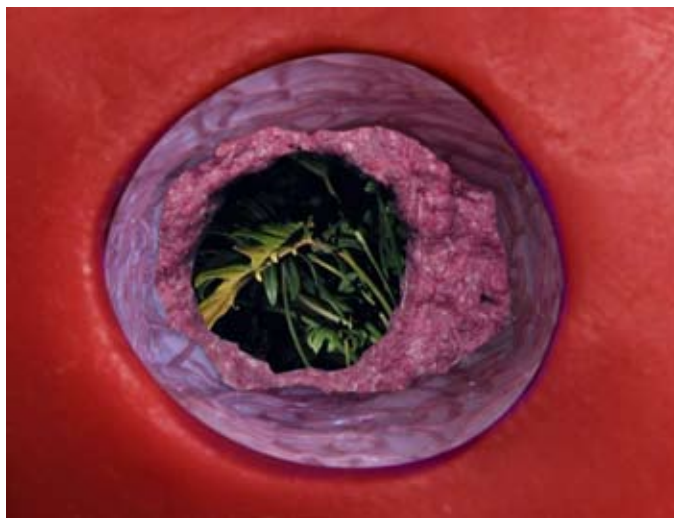
Read some fairy tales in class - talk about the dark themes many carry.  
Write a narrative based on images from the exhibition.  
Talk about make-believe. When is it important to be able to pretend?  
Watch *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, or *Edgar and Ellen*.  
Paint a landscape of the school in black ink - make it Gothic!  
Do a role-play where the students are toys. How does a strong man move?  
Draw the insides of a friend's head. What are their real thoughts?

# SOWERWINE

# SELECTED WORKS



Sophie #8  
Digital Print



Beast (interior detail)  
Mixed Media



Sophie #7  
Digital Print



Beast #2  
Mixed media



Expecting  
Video animation (still)



Beast #1  
Mixed Media