

Timber!

By Kelly Klassmeyer

Known for its cuckoo-clock industry, half-timber houses and dense landscape of dark pines, the Black Forest region of southwestern Germany is a strange collision of kitsch, beauty and unconscious fears. It has provided the setting for many fairy tales that, underneath their sugarcoated surfaces, explore some rather unsettling themes. Most know the story of Hansel and Gretel, a couple of spunky kids who triumph over an evil witch in her gingerbread house. Fewer, however, know about the tale's dark side: famine, poverty and infanticide -- themes that have been watered down since the original Grimm fairy tale was first published in early 19th century. Like the stories collected by the brothers Grimm, Celia Eberle's work juxtaposes the quaint and the disturbing. "Black Forest," her current exhibition at James Gallery, presents paintings and objects that explore the origins of popular images in contemporary culture.

A line of "gingerbread" houses stretches along the gallery's fireplace mantel. Their surfaces are white and sparkle with what looks like a dusting of sugar. The interiors are painted a bright red, more like macabre blood than cheery cherry. Tiny black bears are placed inside the rooms, standing upright with raised claws, inhabiting and/or invading the saccharine structures. In nature, bears are powerful and sometimes deadly; in pop culture, we have transformed them into cuddly objects or entertaining cartoon characters. Eberle is playing off this dichotomy. She causes us to examine our need to render impotent that which frightens us.

Larger bears stand on the floors of the gallery and provide two interpretations of the same iconic object. Ceremonial Figure (2000) has a dark brown earthy-looking surface of paint, hair and straw that feels very elemental and is derived directly from the natural world. The second bear, Nature Fetish (2000), is identical except it is upholstered with a patchwork of various found floral needlework scraps, giving it a wonderfully vibrant folkloric appearance and a sense of the decorative.

End of the World (2000) is a collection of crushed birdcages, not violently smashed but neatly and precisely flattened. If this is the end of the world, it is destroyed with a tidy exactitude. The fluorescent red birdcages are erratically hung against the white wall, their silhouettes graphically dramatic. They look as if they were extracted from some parallel cartoon universe, or a Twilight Zone episode you wouldn't want to be trapped within.

Black Forest (2000) is a collection of commonplace or kitschy objects dangling on wires from the ceiling like a curtain. There are little snowcapped houses and crocheted couples, animals and teacups alarmingly juxtaposed next to artfully painted toy guns. Six of Disney's seven dwarves are here. (The flea market didn't have the seventh, and you wouldn't believe what you have to shell out for plastic Disney characters these days.) Eberle has taken these highly collectible Disney figures and muted their Technicolor tones with a coating of whitish paint, so that they look like bleached artifacts. The cartoon dwarf figures still seem very removed from any characters in Grimm's Little Snow White. In that unexpurgated version, Snow White's mother wants to kill her and then eat her heart and lungs in an act of grotesque jealousy, a detail unthinkable in the Disney version. Eberle reminds us that these ancient archetypal tales of horror, regardless of how they have been processed for contemporary tastes and mores, are still with us. The phenomenon of mother/daughter rivalry, Eberle is telling us, still exists even if our culture rarely presents it in such a blunt and visceral way.

Eberle's Rustic Couple (2000) is a marvelous monument to kitsch and the idealized desires that feed it. The piece is a blown-up version of those little white-and-gold rococo ceramic figurines. It features an ideal youthful couple in a bucolic setting, a butterfly conveniently landing on the young woman's hand. Jeff Koons's commercially manufactured ceramic sculptures come to mind. Changing scale can create a wonderfully hyperbolic image, but in contrast to Koons's work, Eberle's object is lovingly and inexactly handcrafted. There is critique, but also affection.

The paintings are the only real problem of the show. Eberle is much more effective when she works in three dimensions. The paintings just aren't that satisfying individually, and they function only slightly better in the context of the show. *Dead Peter Pan* (2000) is more successful, a floating image of a contorted, eternally youthful Peter Pan on a warm yellow background. *The Dark* (2000) depicts dangling grapes that are virtually indistinguishable from hanging bats, an image that subverts some mythical Disneyesque cartoon still. But that's the problem: The image is almost Disneyesque. With the sculptures, Eberle appropriates or effectively mimics recognizable cultural images to convey her ideas. The paintings are neither individually well executed nor do they effectively approximate any style they refer to. They exist in a wishy-washy middle ground and feel out of place with the sculptures.

Your enjoyment of the sculptural pieces is muted when you read Eberle's artist statement and see the highly debatable concept of "collective unconscious" presented as unassailable truth. Eberle then goes on to specifically assign meaning to each piece. You start to get a whiff of overripe New Age multiculturalism, plus a big gooey bucket of Jung. You think, "Oh, I liked it better before I read all that," which is fairly ridiculous, because the objects are still the same ones you initially responded to. Eberle's work does not require concrete explanation; the images and objects already provide enough meat for you to chew on. Whether they tap into a collective unconscious or not, these works provocatively explore the dark truths and images that lie beneath our bland overprocessed stories.