Fantasy Art: A New Look at an Ancient Tradition

BY PETER TRIPPI

Something fresh is underway this summer at Pennsylvania’s Allentown Art Museum of the Lehigh Valley. On view through September 9, the exhibition *At the Edge: Art of the Fantastic* marks the first time that works of contemporary fantasy art have appeared in a U.S. museum exhibition that also includes their historical forerunners.

In the mix are more than 160 works, ranging in date from this year right back to 1797, when the English visionary William Blake used watercolors to adorn a volume of *Night Thoughts*, the broody Romantic poem by Edward Young (1681-1765). Another historic highlight dates from 1876, when Gustave Doré’s woodcut illustration of *The Death Ship* was published in a luxury edition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s long poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). Although Coleridge and Doré never met, the Englishman’s Romantic verse has sprung to life for generations of readers through the Frenchman’s visual imaginings. That’s just the kind of deep cultural impact fantasy artists have always made, yet hanging their works in a serious art museum is a woefully rare occurrence.

In 2010, J. Brooks Joyner was appointed CEO of the museum in Allentown, where he noticed that — just 200 miles away — the smaller city of Altoona has been hosting the enormously popular IlluXCon event every year since 2008. Offering exhibitions, workshops, lectures, and other activities, IlluXCon has become the world’s top gathering of artists, students, and collectors of fantasy art. The visionaries behind this mega-event are the co-founders of the Association of Fantastic Art, Patrick and Jeannie Wilshire,

Kinuko Y. Craft (b. 1940)
*The Bards of Bone Plain*
2010, Oil over watercolor on paper, 20 x 30 in.
Private collection, New York

Donato Giancola (b. 1967)
*The Hobbit: The Expulsion*
2001, Oil on paper mounted to masonite, 53 x 84 in.
Collection of the artist
who were pleased by Joyner’s interest in their work. Soon the museum invited the couple to guest-curate *At the Edge*, and indeed, roughly 15 percent of its checklist has been loaned by the Wilshires themselves, with the rest coming from artists, private collectors, and institutions.

The museum’s rationale for mounting the show is rooted in art-historical fact: Patrick Wilshire rightly notes, “Ancient art is rife with narrative depictions of gods, monsters, shining deeds, and things crawling from dark shadows.” Moreover, nearly every world culture since antiquity has also created art that illustrates its fairytales and myths, among other narratives. To fantasize, dream, and imagine — it seems — are essential aspects of the human condition. It should not be forgotten, however, that exactly a decade ago the Brooklyn Museum weathered harsh criticism in the New York art world for presenting the Smithsonian’s touring exhibition *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*. Though some commentators were ostensibly worried about the ethical implications of partnering with Lucasfilm, most ignored, or even derided, the fact that all of the large museums participating in this national tour had rich collections of historical art that supported the project’s premise: myths have always mattered to visual artists, the latest of whom happen to make films rather than, say, oil paintings on canvas.

In their new project, the Wilshires argue that the seed for the art celebrated at IlluXCon was planted in the late 18th century by the Romantics, including S.T. Coleridge. A separate article could be written about how this played out in literature alone (e.g. Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* of 1818), but if we confine ourselves to visual art, the thread is still easy to follow. It leads from William Blake’s intense, erotically charged drawings to the apocalyptic tableaux of John Martin, and onward to such Pre-Raphaelites as D.G. Rossetti and J.W. Waterhouse, with their haunted maidens. In London’s Royal Academy, successful painters such as Briton Rivière sustained it, while across the Channel in France and Belgium arose such Symbolists as Gustave Moreau and Fernand Khnopff. Watching all of this unfold were leaders of what is now called the Golden Age of Illustration (1880-1920): England’s Edmund Dulac and Arthur Rackham were matched in talent by such Americans as Dean Cornwell, J.C. Leyendecker, Howard Pyle, and N.C. Wyeth. As illustration’s prestige faded, Surrealists like Salvador Dalí and René Magritte picked up the flag, which vanished temporarily with the distracting horrors of World War II.

After the war, the “fine” art world turned toward abstraction and other art forms that did not tell stories, so imaginative artists increasingly found work in such fields as pulp fiction, comics, pin-ups, and paperback books. (Please see the article on Everett Raymond Kinstler on page XX.) The Wilshires explain, “In most of the 20th century, if you wanted to do this kind of painting and tell fantastic stories, and if you also wanted to be able to eat, then you had to be an illustrator. That was your only option. But from an artistic perspective, there is no such thing as an illustrator. Some painters have publishers for clients, while others have collectors or galleries or museums as clients.” This sensible account reminds us, then, that it was primarily snobbery that came to separate fine art from illustration; illustrators were perceived as working only for commissions, not

David Palumbo (b. 1982)
*Terrible Weakness*
2012, Oil on wood panel, 48 x 36 in.
Collection of the artist
for the love of art. Yet it must also be acknowledged that much illustration of the post-war period did little to ingratiate itself with the high-minded; pulp fiction books, to name just one example, were often extremely violent, sexist, racist, and simple-minded — traits the broader art world justly wanted no part of.

**BRIDGING THE GAP**

It is a sign of how complete that bifurcation was — and is — that a trained art historian like myself had never even heard of Frank Frazetta (1928-2010), a hugely gifted American illustrator cited by the Wilshires as a key figure in the renaissance of fantasy art from the 1960s.
William Andrew ("Willy") Pogany (1882–1955)
Tales of the Persian Genii — The Sultan Nisnar
1917, Watercolor on paper, 16 x 12 in.
Korshak Collection, Orlando
collector of paintings and sculpture, but a closer look confirms that these art forms share much common ground that can be crossed in the future, particularly in regard to storytelling and the significance of symbols.

The Wilshires note that fantasy art “is now very hip, very of the moment, but just 20 years ago it was nerd-land, not taken seriously.” As public forums for informal learning, museums have a duty to explore why this shift has occurred, and to put only the best examples on view for the uninitiated to consider. At the Edge is especially exciting for working artists because they seldom get to see fantasy art — historical or contemporary — in its original form. Most were made very carefully, but then reproduced comparatively small, or partially obliterated, by the clients who commissioned them. Six years ago, when my colleagues and I exhibited the Wyeth painting illustrated in this article at the Dahesh Museum of Art, we were astonished by its large size and impeccable technique, which thoroughly held their own against the 19th-century European paintings hanging nearby. Based in Florence and Toronto, the master realist-teacher Michael John Angel (b. 1946) is not normally the kind of person one would imagine as a judge at IlluXCon, but he has indeed performed that role. He observes, “In a time when the vast majority of representational art concentrates on everyday life, it is inspiring to see Baroque-like action paintings that conjure ideas of adventure and of spiritual journeying, visually replacing, to a large extent, the mythological art of past centuries.”

So what should this kind of art be called? It is human nature to divide and subdivide, and sure enough, insiders have already found ways to distinguish “fantasy art” from, say, “science fiction art” — to the extent now that no faction is satisfied with either sobriquet. As reported in the December 2009 issue of Fine Art Connoisseur, the painter James Gurney (b. 1958), better known as the author-illustrator of the successful Dinotopia series for young readers, has coined the term “imaginative realism,” defining it as “a convincing portrayal of something that cannot be observed directly.” This useful term is gaining traction within the field, and surely deserves to be used outside it as well.

Why not go to Allentown this summer and decide for yourself?

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Information: 31 N. Fifth Street, Allentown, PA 18101, 610.432.4333, allentownartmuseum.org. On July 8, artists Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell will discuss their work; on July 22, Peter Trippi will show why the Pre-Raphaelites and other British Romantics continue to inspire fantasy artists; on August 12, the illustrator Earle K. Bergey (1901–1952) will be remembered by his writer grandson, Joshua David Bergey; and on September 9, Delaware Art Museum curator Mary Holahan will highlight the legacy of Howard Pyle (1853–1911). The next IlluXCon will occur in Altoona (November 8–11, 2012), but the following edition (September 11–15, 2013) will be held at the Allentown Art Museum.

Editor’s Note: For those who want to see more artworks by Don Maitz (one is illustrated here), the Cornell Museum of Art and American Culture (Dehay Beach, FL) is presenting a solo show of his pirate pictures through October 28. Details are at oldschool.org/cornell.asp. And on view at Washington’s Smithsonian American Art Museum through September 30 is The Art of Video Games, one of the first exhibitions about them since they emerged 40 years ago. Its 80 games were selected by guest-curators Chris Melissinos, chief gaming officer at Sun Microsystems, with input from 119,000 online voters in 175 countries. His exhibition will move on to Boca Raton, Seattle, Phoenix, Yonkers, Toledo, Flint, Norfolk, Memphis, and Miami.