

# Extracting Clues from Fairy Tales – Our allies by CHANG En-Tzu

By CHEN Wen-Yao



小女孩-6 彩色繡線、羊毛、麂皮布 Little Girls-6 Embroidery and Wool on Suede Cloth 136 x 136 cm 2020

"There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later."

(Walter Benjamin. "The Storyteller: Reflections on Nikolai Leskóv." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p. 91)

CHANG En-Tzu mentioned during a television interview that although she occasionally dabbles with the antique sewing machine at home, to really get to the bottom of it, her connection with sewing may well have been because of a serious accident she was in at the age of four. "There was a stitched scar on my body, and I would touch it everyday. After it disappeared, the smell of surgical tape and its trace kept me company. But I hardly put up a fight, because it stitched me together and helped me recover."

What does it feel like to have a wound sutured? According to my experience, in the moment suturing, the material of the sutured spot no longer seems to be flesh and blood, but something else, followed by an eerie sensation of alienation (perhaps some form of protection mechanism to resist the pain). When CHANG En-Tzu stitches and embroiders, could her past corporeal memory (despite the recovery of the wound) be awakened unexpectedly?

Voluntarily or passively and involuntarily recalled, the artist said, "the memory of stitches is very powerful." That in itself is the candid nature of her artworks.

The first time I noticed CHANG En-Tzu's artwork was her *Survivor* series in 2018. The images were all based on the childhood photographs of herself and two sisters. The artist stitched faithfully and turned them around, producing an authentic "story behind the photos". However, what may have originally been garments, shoes, socks, and beautiful headdresses, or pretty profiles such as the eyes or nose, once turned around, became masses of bloody red, and frighteningly astonishing. But then again, take a look at ourselves! You will immediately understand the metaphor in reverse, are we not intimately in contact on a daily basis with the knotted threads or stitched traces hiding behind the glamorous images, and the imperfection and crooked chaos obviously not intended to be shown to people?

Yes, we are intimately in contact with the side of us that we want to conceal, without noticing what is wrong with this intention. Fabric, thread, cotton and wool, media used by CHANG En-Tzu all sound very soft, with a sense of warmth. However, if you think about the stitches poking through, the force of this action and the determination to penetrate something making you shudder - the fact that this artist is actually rather violent. Such violence is not ostentatious, just to the point, like the above-mentioned *Survivor*. Such violence is also expressed in the choices and processing of the images. Snow White, little girls, flowers, stars, Bambi, and Teddy bear, they all look tame in the works of CHANG En-Tzu, but also questioning indistinctly the existing impression. Yes, CHANG says she believes in fairy tales, but clearly she does

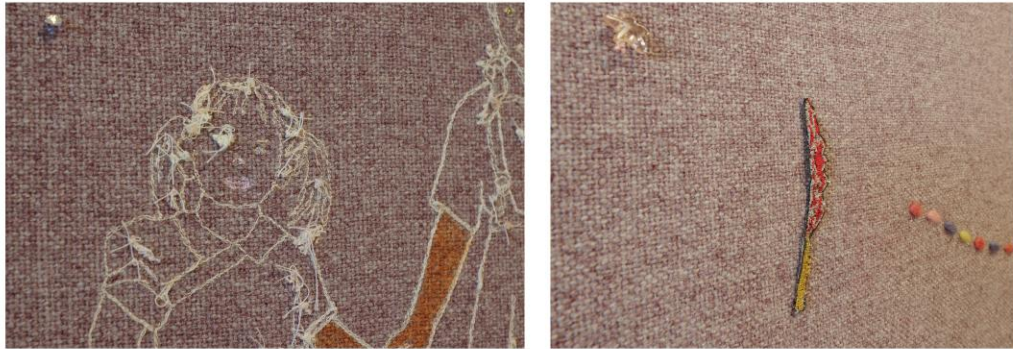


not indulge in the beautiful pictures presented by fairy tales. Instead, she wants to explore the distance between fairy tale and reality.

"Are they... feathers?" I pointed to the various fine objects surrounding the little girls.

"Oh! well, feather..." The artist smiles sweetly.

"Um, or are they... knives?"



隱藏的力量-6 (作品局部) The Hidden Power-6 (Detailed)

Knives, they are knives! Unlike the 17th century still life, the hafts are midair with a clear intention of magnifying the blade via the depth of field. The artist first finished the knives with embroidering and hemming before stitching them on, blades upward, the hafts not really inserted into the ground but slightly floating like feathers. Coupled with colored wool, they form some kind of precaution zone, with three little girls standing inside the circle hand in hand. The three little girls are processed the way CHANG En-Tzu did in 2018 for the Survivor series, only this time instead of red embroidery floss, she chooses beige, recreating the eyes, noses and mouths of the three figures (except for the right eye of the youngest sister), and uses orange to express the volume of the held arms. The mellow temperament disturbs the audience from grasping the intention of this artwork, is it trying to protect or confine the sisters? Whatever the intention, it seems to be lacking a little strength, doesn't it? But in reality, ambiguous dilemmas like this are far from few. It is so easy to walk into or out of such dilemma, so easy that it makes you wonder.

Furthermore, although mainly created with hand-sewn embroidery, the scale of CHANG En-Tzu's artworks are like machine-woven carpets. Elements of various stories scattered here and there across the enormous artwork, like playing games on a horizontal scroll where viewers must wait until the plot develops to a certain extent to see the scene of the next level unveil. There is no seeing the big picture first, you deal with whatever it is as you go along. Moreover, different methods of expression are included in the artworks on



我們的同盟-2 彩色繡線、毛線、羊毛、布料 Our Allies-2 Embroidery and Wool on Textil 88x97cm 2020

exhibition this time. The wolf paws slightly powdered with glitter, revealing the intended pun of the form and content. The pre-finished elements stitched onto the artwork, much like a shallow-relief. The wool slowly poked from the back through to the front, adding texture to the misty and blurry bushy leaves. The addition of mixed materials take the artwork to a level of further contemplation.



The method CHANG En-Tzu uses to tell the CHANG-style fairy tale with her artworks reminds me of Marie-Louise von Franz, a psychologist who studied fairy tales. Speaking of the origin of fairy tales, the story of a mill owner shooting a fox was used by Franz as example to explain how people keep the core elements and basic structure of the original story, but adapt to spatial and temporal differences when telling the story in other places, and do away with the elements that are less appealing to the local people, add or exaggerate on other materials that are more relevant to the surroundings of the audience, thus the various versions of a story are born to be passed on in different areas.

Snow White and little girls are essentially the core characters of the CHANG-style fairy tale, at the same time, CHANG never fails to incorporate various accessorizing elements including objects such as apple tree, soldier, skeleton, wolf, bullet hole, rabbit, diamond and carousel. Unlike the imagination inspired by colored threads hanging loosely and randomly, these characters are extremely meaningful. They are real, and their reality is what liberates their meaning, which differs according to the experience of individual audience. Without a permanent form to her fairy tale, CHANG invites the audience to be both the person listening to the story and telling the story. The prototype of the story may be similar, the psychological shadings are different respectively.

Narrating the story but not necessarily giving answers, in CHANG's artwork, the audience sees that there are no absolute friends or foes, but that we need allies at all times.

The definition of *ally* provided in the concise dictionary by the Ministry of Education is as follows:

Individuals or nations of more than two concluding a treaty to form an alliance for a common purpose and action.

I'm thinking, forming an alliance is in fact similar to the movement of stitching. When this word is used as a verb, it means using needle and thread to patch a hole, therefore the movement of stitching must mean that more than two surfaces are involved (imagine how a shirt is composed of the collar, sleeves, and two pieces of fabric for the front and back respectively, and you get the picture). But interestingly, when used as a noun, the word "stitching" implies two meanings, one is the spot sewed together, and the other the crack. Sounds bizarre, doesn't it? A spot sewed together should be closely-fitted, yet with the needle poking and the thread pulling through, there are bound to be holes. CHANG's fairy tale continues to pull at the threads and extract clues from these sutured spots and holes.

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