

GERT & UWE TOBIAS

by David Rhodes

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Collaborative woodcuts made on paper and mounted on canvas, sculptures, collages, and drawings from twins Gert & Uwe Tobias occupy the ground floor of the Whitechapel Gallery. It is an effective curatorial choice, given that the Tobiases use much organic imagery; upstairs there is also an exhibition of the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt and in an adjacent gallery, a Bloomberg commissioned tree sculpture by Giuseppe Penone.

Literature that analyzes or mythologizes twins is world-wide and reaches far back into history. That twins can communicate in an unusual way, sharing sensations and thoughts, can neither be explained nor denied. Fairy tales abound with stories of twins and their powers, “The Two Brothers,” by the Brothers Grimm, being one example. So it seems appropriate that these particular twins aestheticize myth and folklore, whether from Modernism or the Dark Ages, in conjuring their polymorphous images. The Romanian born Tobiases moved to Germany in 1985 and completed their studies in Braunschweig, before moving to live and work in Cologne.



Gert & Uwe Tobias, “Untitled,” 2012. Colored woodcut on canvas, 200 × 300 cm. © photo Alistair Overbruck, Cologne/Gert & Uwe Tobias/VG. Bildkunst, Bonn.

The walls of the Tobias’s exhibition are painted a moss green. This color was much favored by Victorian era museums in England when displaying anthropological specimens, or folk and tribal artifacts. The shade lends the space an air of faux seriousness that the objects presented playfully subvert (in the manner of children pinning butterflies to a classroom display wall). Several plinths support ceramic sculptures that double as vases and contain dead plants, indicative of the huge revival ceramics is undergoing amongst painters as artists both in Europe and the U.S. Tal R’s recent ceramic sculptures are a case in point; Tal R is another artist who, like the Tobiases, mixes medium and message.

“Untitled” (2012), is a 200 × 168 cm colored woodcut, printed and mounted on canvas. The configuration of elements is decorative: a spikey floral motif twists and turns evoking growth, while also included are stems and thorns, geometric shapes, and what could be animal or fish parts. The effect of the discreet, frontal, and jagged parts against a deep blue ground recalls Jackson Pollock as much as patterned fabric from 1970s Eastern Europe. Much more figurative in its reference to modernist art is “Untitled” (2012), a 200 × 300 cm horizontal colored woodcut. Populated by creatures—part bird, part human—against a ground of flat rectangular shapes, the rust orange horizontal rectangle reads as a floor, schematically forming an interior for the creatures to inhabit. The creature to the far right sits at a spinning wheel, an image that often recurs in folk and fairy tales. In Jacques Rancière’s *The Aesthetic Unconscious* he states that, “The new poet, the geological or archeological poet, performs the same sort of inquiry that Freud conducts in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He poses the principle that nothing is insignificant, that the prosaic details that positivistic thought disdains or attributes to a merely physiological rationality are in fact signs encrypted in history. But he also poses the paradoxical condition of this hermeneutics: in order for the banal to reveal its secret, it must first be mythologized.” Rancière goes on to add “insofar as they are first transformed into elements of a mythology or phantasmagoria.” This is exactly what the Tobiasases attempt in their inclusivity and images of enchantment.

Large-scale woodblock prints and wall paintings create a diverse range of narrative imagery. Patterns of folk art—including that of their native Transylvania—as well as shapes from the tradition of modernist geometric abstraction are combined with influences originating in Communist-era East Europe. These include animation, the constructivist poster designs of El Lissitzky, and post-war German painting. Transformation and enchantment are a constant theme, sometimes in uncanny and disturbingly humorous form. Body parts and animals, plants and flowers proliferate, as if in a dream. In every direction domestic objects, decorative motifs, embroidery, and typography—especially that of Jan Tschichold—fragment and unite in fantastical compositions. It’s a dystopic forest of fun to be enjoyed at the viewer’s own risk. As if to counter this playfulness, grotesque faces derived from traditional apotropaic amulets appear in some works, playfully warding off mischief whilst remaining animistic. Borders are crossed and the old hierarchies of artistic media and references are ignored as craft and fine art, modernity and folklore, intellectual constructs and unconscious desire dissolve, before coming into focus as hybrids.