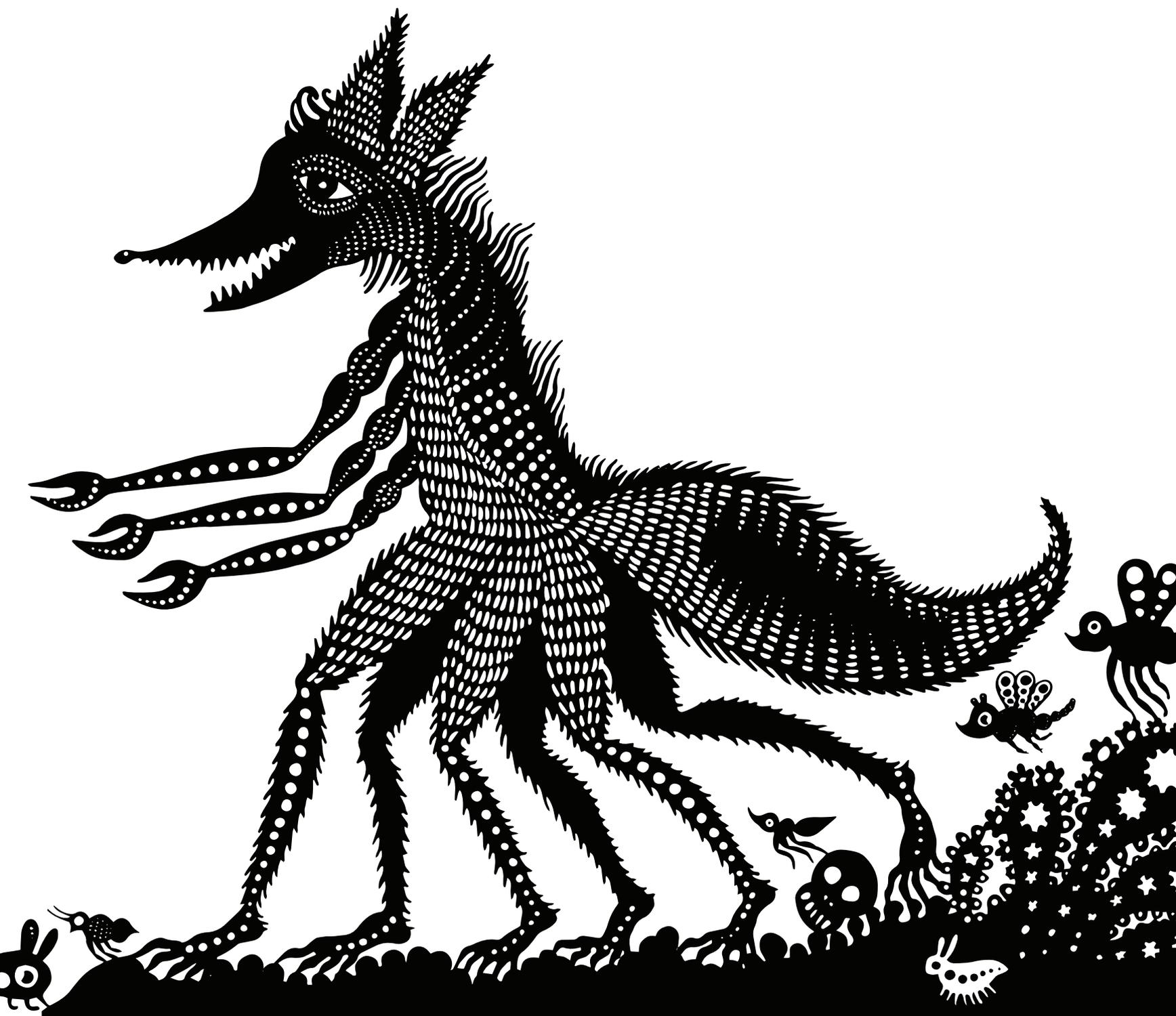


# Andrea Dezsö Enchanted Fictions

MARION

ART

GALLERY



This catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Andrea Dezsö: Enchanted Fictions*, organized by the Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery.

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Cover: Andrea Dezsö, *Six-Hearted She-Wolf Protectress Poses with Human Being*, 2015, vinyl mural installation

Andrea Dezsö, *Grimm Illustration: The Wild Man*, 2014, ink on paper, 11 x 8 inches



During the installation of her mosaic at the American Embassy in Bucharest, Andrea Dezsö expressed her hope that visitors “will have a very positive and uplifting first impression of their interaction with the United States, one that will be colorful and rich and diverse and beautiful.” We are honored to present a solo exhibition of her work at the Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery at the State University of New York at Fredonia. With her dexterity in a wide range of mediums, Dezsö presents wishful flights to charmed lands, fairy tale characters, and startling comments on our contemporary lives. An artist equally adept at book illustrations, large public mosaics, or high-tech animation, Dezsö’s work will captivate you with its blend of autobiography, folklore, and a contemporary sensibility. She is herself a vibrant piece of the American mosaic.

Many people have made this exhibition and catalog possible. We are most grateful to Andrea Dezsö for entrusting us with this fragile artwork and assisting us with the exhibition coordination. Thank you to Liz Burgess at Boston’s Pucker Gallery for her generosity of time and attention to detail throughout the loan process.

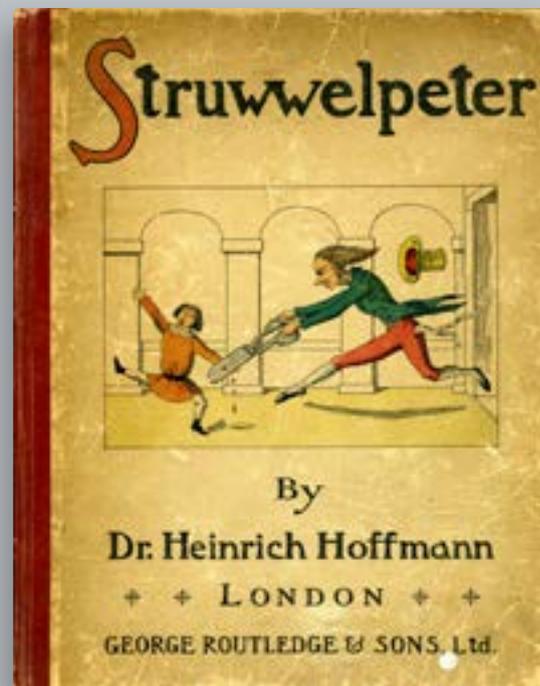
Special thanks are due to the Department of Visual Arts and New Media faculty who participated in the project. Associate Professor of Art History Dr. Leesa Rittelmann and Associate Professor of Animation and Illustration Jill Johnston curated the exhibition and wrote essays for the catalog. Associate Professor of Graphic Design Jason Dilworth designed the catalog.

We are extremely grateful to Cathy and Jesse Marion and Friends of Rockefeller Arts Center for their support of this and all gallery programs. As always, we wish to thank President Virginia Horvath, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Terry Brown, and Department of Visual Arts and New Media Chair Michele Bernatz for their continued support of the Marion Art Gallery.

Ralph Blasting, Dean, College of Visual and Performing Arts  
Barbara Racker, Director, Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery



*The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, 2014, translated and edited by Jack Zipes, illustrated by Andrea Dezsö



Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann (author and illustrator), *Struwwelpeter (Shock-headed Peter)*, first published in 1845 by Rütten & Loening, Frankfurt, Germany

MARIA POPOVA'S philosophical blog *Brain Pickings*, which covers culture and diverse topics, introduced me to the magical work of Andrea Dezsö in November of 2014. The blog presented several black and white illustrations by Dezsö from *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition* translated by Grimm scholar Jack Zipes.

The original Grimm tales are unsterilized and dire cautionary myths that Maria Tartar's 2002 book *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* celebrates and reveals their historical and cultural origins. In 2005, while researching the origins of "Sleeping Beauty" for an animation project, Tartar's publication and Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann's 1845 *Struwelpeter* fascinated me. *Struwelpeter* yielded unnerving tales involving children, also illustrated by Hoffmann, a psychiatrist. Hoffmann searched for a book that would help guide his young son, but was unconvinced by publications available at that time. Instead, he produced his own book, *Struwelpeter*, which refers to the first story's main character, Shockheaded Peter, a male who fails to groom or cut his fingers and hair. The legends in the Grimm's and Hoffmann's books evoked stories narrated by my Irish great grandmother as a young child that have motivated my aesthetic. This prompted me to explore Andrea Dezsö's work.

Dezsö's ink illustrations resemble woodcuts, three-dimensional cut-paper structures and the silhouette animations of the innovative German animator, Lotte Reiniger, who directed the first feature length animated film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, in 1926. Each year I introduce Reiniger's work to a new group of animators, many of whom are motivated to attempt a similar process under an animation stand with a light box. Dezsö's exquisite tunnel books, several installations and illustrations, along with the 2008 animation, *Anna's Song*, also employ silhouettes that rely on the cryptic interplay of light and shadow. The high-contrast imagery and the attention to depth of field provide an elusive experience.

Dezsö's work often employs "folk-based" techniques, such as paper cutting and embroidery, to examine Romanian folk narratives, superstitions and personal dreams. She lists folk and visionary art among the assortment of art forms that she admires, "art that points to the mysterious." Several of my favorite pieces of Dezsö's art echo that of Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, and Emil Ferris, artists who mined their dreams, memories and childhood experiences



Lotte Reiniger, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, 1926, still from animation



Andrea Dezsö, *Anna's Song*, 2008, still from animation



Andrea Dezső, *Lidérc*, 2012, original story, written and illustrated by Andrea Dezső



Andrea Dezső, *Mamushka*, 2004, written and illustrated by Andrea Dezső

as motivation. The graphic tale *Lidérc*, 2012, relates the story of how a woman hatches a male lover from an egg provided by a psychic, only to become consumed and desperate for an alternative solution. Another graphic tale *Mamushka*, 2004, is full of wonderfully stylized illustrations of childhood memories about her grandmother's death. *Insectmen*, 2005, is a handmade book with vibrant hybrid insect/humans, equally ethereal, eerie and alluring. Dezsö has stated that images depicting space travel she viewed as a child have inspired her work. She grew up in communist Romania and the concept of travel was exotic because it was not permitted. The figures in *Insectmen* inhabit an alien dream landscape with insect suits and helmets. Many of her characters' heads are encased in some type of mystical helmet as they valiantly roam mythical environments.

The tunnel book *Living Inside* is a self portrait revealing an imaginary inner world in the bowels of the sculpture. The viewer is forced to lean in closer to decipher the intimate narrative as if peering through a pinhole. In a video interview with the Museum of Arts and Design Dezsö remembers viewing ancient Japanese wooden dolls used for medical instruction that influenced the theme for this piece. Although the dolls were probably used as an aid for doctors, the dolls' interiors were merely an imagined rendering of the internal, not an actual dissection of a figure. The intangible is a recurring theme. Her work is lush and complex in execution and subject matter.

As Dezsö states in the *Brain Pickings* interview, "I like the tension that arises from using a medium in a way that it's not typically used" (Popova 2014, par. 16). Her experimentation with diverse media, the poetry of her stylized imagery, her devotion to detail, and the significance of imagination determine her unique vision. Parallel to the original Grimm Brothers' tales, Andrea Dezsö's work is not all saccharine and bright but enchanted contrasts of beauty and the monstrous, revealing tales that interpret her personal mythos.

Jill Johnston

Associate Professor of Animation and Illustration  
State University of New York at Fredonia



Andrea Dezsö, *Insectmen*, 2005, coptic binding, egg tempera, acrylics, shellac, 4 x 6 inches



Andrea Dezsö, *Living Inside*, 2009, thirty collapsible, multi-layered tunnel books, hand-cut and painted; paper, acrylic paint, waxed linen thread, 6 x 8 x 6 inches

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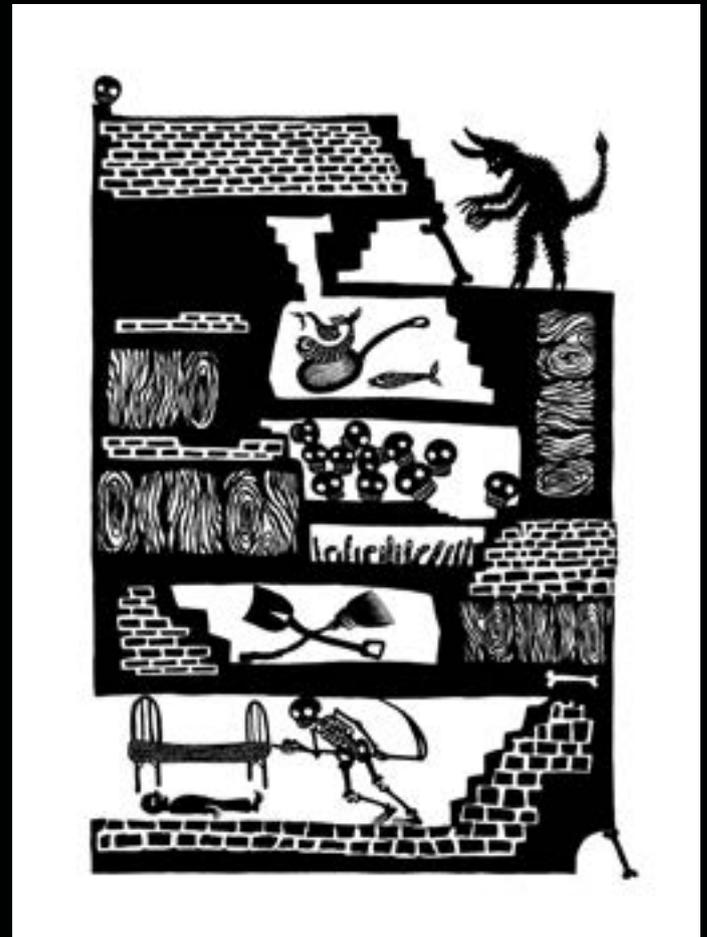
Andrea Dezső, *Grimm Illustration: The Elves*, 2014, ink on paper, 11 x 8 inches



Andrea Dezső, *Grimm Illustration: The Frog Prince*, 2014, ink on paper, 11 x 8 inches



Andrea Dezső, *Grimm Illustration: The Golden Key*, 2014, ink on paper, 11 x 8 inches



Andrea Dezső, *Grimm Illustration: The Godfather*, 2014, ink on paper, 11 x 8 inches

*I find it deeply inspiring that images and objects created hundreds or even thousands of years ago often in cultures entirely unfamiliar to us have maintained their ability to touch us and speak to us, transcending time, space, language, social structures and culture.*

– Andrea Dezsö, 2013

TO ENGAGE with artist Andrea Dezsö's imagined visual worlds is to succumb to a kind of diaphanous, enchanted journey through time. In the Grimm's Fairytales illustrations, viewers are thrust backward into distant kingdoms where frog princes retrieve golden orbs and trickster elves swap stolen babies with goggle-eyed changelings. In the tunnel books, both the narratives and format effect distinct temporal shifts. Here, we might be jettisoned into a Cold War era-inspired lunar landscape even as the dramatically-lit and layered cut-paper silhouettes propel us backward into the realm of 18<sup>th</sup> century book construction and Victorian toy theaters. In the large-scale vinyl *Six-Hearted She-Wolf Protectress Poses with Human Being* wall installation, contemporary fabrication techniques are employed to reimagine an ancient Tibetan myth. Rather than imposing specific historical moments and locales, Dezsö's evocative compositions compel viewers to engage their own imaginations where dreams and reality merge in an ambiguous, timeless space.

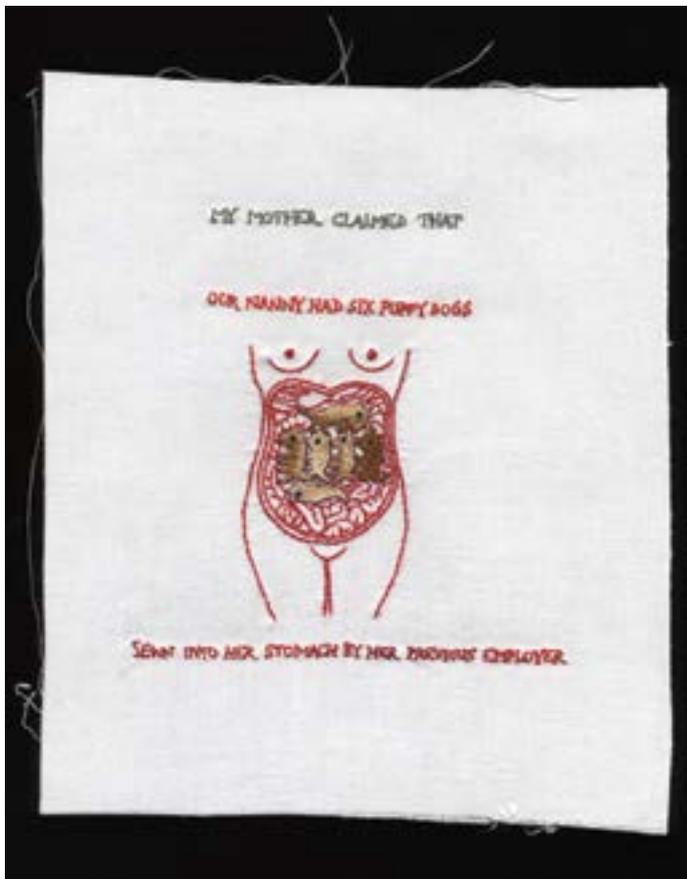
An ethnic Hungarian, Dezsö was born in the Transylvanian region of communist Romania when international travel was prohibited. As a result, she indulged in "imagined travel" inspired by folklore and fairytales. Like the best of those tales, she creates darkly mysterious "once upon a time" images depicting lands "far, far away" that viewers want to visit and inhabit. Rather than focusing on the deprivations and restrictions of communist rule, Dezsö chooses to celebrate the fact that "not being able to go somewhere physically opens the possibility of epic mental Odysseys," and "rich imaginary worlds" (Rice Gallery 2017, par. 1). Despite the lush details offered in her cut, inked, animated, and stitched vignettes, narrative and historical specificity tend to dissolve into more generalized sensations of awe and wonder articulated in forms whose power stems as much from the visual information they concretely supply as that which is absent or merely implied. "It's like seeing indirectly," she explains, or "seeing a projection



Andrea Dezsö, *My Mother Claimed That Our Destinies are Written in Our Palms*, 2006, cotton and metallic floss embroidery on cotton fabric, 9 ¼ x 8 ¼ inches

of reality and filling in the gaps of that projection with our imagination" (Fischer 2016, 3).

To be sure, a kind of gauzy archetypal presence and a sense of ongoing timelessness pervades all of Dezsö's work regardless of medium. The series of embroidered samplers *Lessons From My Mother*, resurrects a feminine handicraft that became a quiet, unwitting symbol of resistance during the forced migration of rural populations to urban centers under Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's reign. "They couldn't abandon everything," Dezsö explains, and "one thing they brought with them was quaint embroidered kitchen wall hangings" (Recker 2010). At first glance, these hand-stitched maternal aphorisms seem like innocuous relics of an era



Andrea Dezsö, *My Mother Claimed That Our Nanny Had Six Puppy Dogs Sewn into Her Stomach by a Previous Employer*, 2006, cotton and metallic floss embroidery on cotton fabric, 9 ¼ x 8 ¼ inches



Vera Mukhina (Russian, 1889-1953), *Worker and Kulhoz Woman*, 1937, stainless steel, 78 feet high

when both needlework and “old wives’ tales” were regarded as essential components of a young woman’s education but their darker undertones quickly emerge. Neutral observations (*My Mother Claimed Our Destinies are Written in Our Palms*) are juxtaposed with dire, if somewhat humorous, hygienic warnings (*My Mother Claimed That You Can Get Hepatitis from a Handshake*) and surreal superstitions (*My Mother Claimed Our Nanny Had Six Puppy Dogs Sewn into Her Stomach by a Previous Employer*). As a girl, Dezsö railed against state-enforced, gendered education in needlework by farming out her embroidery assignments to her mother and grandmother. As an adult artist, she returned to embroidery in order to re-examine the puerile innocence and potential menace such samplers embodied. Of her grandmother’s kitchen sampler cautioning “There are no roses without thorns and no love without tears” Dezsö offers, “There was often a threat under the pretty flowers. What could be truer than that?” (Recker 2010).

A talent for turning lack in to abundance is likewise evident in the artist’s fascination with historical pop-up and “tunnel” book formats. Rather than lamenting their lack of access to television, international news and contemporary fiction, Dezsö’s family and friends immersed themselves in classic literature. “We lived in books,” she recalled, “travelled through them,” and reveled in the freedom to “imagine things you have never encountered and to experience things beyond what words can express” (Rice Gallery 2017, par. 3). As it happens, a paucity of entertaining children’s books also inspired the late 18<sup>th</sup> century invention of the pop-up book format. As literary historian F.J. Harvey Darton has noted, prior to 1770 there were virtually no books produced to “give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach them, not solely to make them good, nor to keep them profitably quiet” (Sarland 1999, 32). Dezsö’s pop-up books deliver on their promise to delight and surprise even as they thwart the saccharine narratives that typify the genre.

In the mixed-media book *We Were Pioneers*, two armed, over-sized, uniformed school girls take aim at unseen enemies from the roof of an apartment complex bifurcated by a construction crane lifting coffin-shaped slabs. The duo’s scale, positioning, and forward-leaning stance strongly recall Russian sculptor Vera Mukhina’s monumental figures topping the Soviet Pavilion in Paris’ 1937 World Exposition. Positioned directly across the promenade from the over-sized eagle on Hitler’s German pavilion, Mukhina’s *Worker and Kulholz Woman* wielded their sickle and hammer against the Third Reich’s mounting threat on the eve of World War II. The gravity of this stand-off is at once reinforced by Dezsö’s



Andrea Dezsö, *We Were Pioneers*, 2009, pop-up book, mixed media construction, 7 x 14 x 9 inches

angular, fragmented aesthetic (which echoes the Cubist style of Picasso's epic *Guernica* canvas featured in the Spanish Pavilion) and simultaneously mitigated by the pop-up format and pony-tailed protagonists. While American viewers might find loosely equivalent heroines in Willa Cather's 1913 *O, Pioneers!* or Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series, eastern European viewers would no doubt recognize Dezsö's titular reference to the "Young Pioneers," a compulsory organization formed to indoctrinate youth in communist ideology and provide preparatory training for the real and imagined crises of modern warfare. The presence of two smaller children peering from behind the buildings' facades at the base of *We Were Pioneers* lends an innocent air of hide-and-seek to a narrative in which such enforced play-acting did not guarantee a happy ending.

In the tunnel books, Dezsö's adolescent cast of characters, "who never had a chance to live a leisurely childhood—free of struggles and danger," are joined by insects, aliens, and hybrid-humans who wander freely amidst forests, fields, and organic lava flows (Ramirez-Montagut 2016, 3). Here, recurrent themes of strength versus fragility, darkness versus light,

and absence versus presence play out in shadowy lunar and subterranean landscapes drenched with narrative potential. Like the pop-up books, these three-dimensional accordion-fold dioramas also originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but require a more focused, intimate engagement. Narrative time is compressed as viewers are invited to lean in and travel through miniature illuminated worlds layer by layer. Some, like *Mantis Resting in Utopian City*, offer vibrantly illustrated glimpses into a fictionalized future while others, like *The Day We Changed Our Lives Forever*, feature a more subdued monochromatic palette. In the latter, the sensation of "pass[ing] by a house and look[ing] into a window" onto a different world is conjured more from the intricate cuts, layers and theatrical lighting than from the employment of dramatic scale or color (Mingalone 2013, 30). Still others effect narrative condensation through single-plane registers reminiscent of the work of artists like the Netherlandish Baroque artist Hieronymus Bosch. In *Bat Cave*, a hirsute, devilish flute-playing character surrounded by perforated coral forms charms a two-headed snail in the top register above an adolescent girl charming bats in a cave below. Both scenes are afforded equal narrative and temporal



Andrea Dezsö, *Mantis Resting in Utopian City*, 2008, tunnel book with cotton rag paper, linen thread and acrylic paint, 7.25 x 5.5 x 7 inches



Andrea Dezsö, *The Day We Changed Our Lives Forever: Devil's Den 1, Devil's Den 2, Mushroom Forest 1, Mushroom Forest 2, Rabbit Airplane 1, Rabbit Airplane 2*, 2005, tunnel book with rag paper, 7 x 5 x 6 inches

importance in that they are framed and foregrounded by a proscenium of darkly lit fauna. In *Forest Stroll with Goat*, this framing device is maintained but the characters and their narrative roles are upended. Here, the girl cavorts with a kid goat in the top register while the devil dances amongst lava flows in the space below.

Dezsö's talent for highlighting and condensing multiple narrative moments within a single frame is perhaps most effective in her illustrations for the 2014 redesign of the 1812 first edition of *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* in ink drawings that so closely mimic

cut-paper silhouettes that viewers are hard-pressed to tell the difference. In this new edition, the artist's affinity for darkly surreal stories set in magical landscapes proves a natural fit for these equally dark yet enduring children's fables. Of her fondness for the woodland scenes in which so many of the Grimm's tales are set, she notes:

The woods are another world. A forest is something magical, growing organically, without need for human intervention, a sentient being and a complex live system that is potentially dangerous and mysterious since you never know what you'll find and you can easily get lost. (Ramirez-Montagut 2016, 10)

Likewise, a fascination for the sublime qualities of repulsion mingled with attraction or curiosity laced with fear is a driving force behind much of Dezsö's work and many of the Grimm brothers' tales. In *The Singing Bone*, for example, three brothers set out to kill a wild boar that has devastated their kingdom. Although the younger brother slays the boar, the two older brothers kill him and bury his corpse in a creek-bed. Claiming the victory over the boar as his own, the eldest brother wins the king's favor and the hand of his daughter in marriage. Years later, a shepherd unearths one of the bones to use as a mouthpiece for a horn but when he does, it offers its own accusatory song:

Dear shepherd, blowing on my bone,  
Hear my song, for I want you to know  
My brothers killed me years ago!  
They buried me by the brook that flows  
and carried off the dead wild boar,  
and won the king's lone daughter.  
(Grimm et al. 2014, 91)

In *The Singing Bone*, the elder brothers carry the slain boar in the top register while their reflected silhouettes reveal their murderous betrayal. A bridge shelters the younger brother's skeletal remains in the middle register while the bottom of the composition shows a shepherd blowing on the enchanted horn while surrounded by his flock. These episodes are further unified by a pictorial device whereby the music that flows from shepherd's horn expands to form the ominous landscape from which the scene of the betrayal and skeleton emerge.

Dezsö's references to cut silhouettes are particularly well-suited to the Grimm's fairytales in so far as the craft of paper-cutting can be traced to the "Scherenschnitte" popular with Nordic artists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Named for Louis XV's former French Minister of Finance Étienne d'Silhouette,



Andrea Dezsó, *Grimm Illustration: The Singing Bone*, 2014, ink on paper, 11 x 8 inches



Andrea Dezső, *Bat Cave*, 2015, tunnel book with Japanese handmade Shojoshi paper, 14.25 x 11 x 7 inches



Andrea Dezsö, *Forest Stroll with Goat*, 2015, tunnel book made of Japanese handmade Shojoshi paper, 14.25 x 11 x 7 inches

these black paper cut outs originated in France but their widespread popularity in the United States can be directly attributed to itinerant Swiss and German immigrants who traveled the countryside cutting profile portraits of working class customers who could not afford painted likenesses. They were also frequently employed to illustrate fairytales and in shadow puppetry. For example, Danish fairytale author Hans Christian Anderson was a well-known Scherenschnitte practitioner who often cut designs while performing stories and delighted audiences by unfolding the finished pieces at the end of each tale.

While many of Dezső's works resurrect and reimagine the visual and narrative potency of antiquated media, others adapt more contemporary materials and techniques like laser-cut steel and vinyl. Her facility for creating just "the beginnings of stories" that invite the viewer "to dive freely in to [their own] imaginations" takes a different form in her 2013 *Night Drawings* rendered with graphite on mylar (Ramirez-Montagut 2016, 7). Of her attraction to the transparent polyester film more commonly used in photography, insulation, and the production of plastic bags, Dezső explains:

...it felt like a very luxurious surface even though it's plastic and quite affordable. It's luxurious in the way it holds up as a drawing surface. It's also very fragile: if anything touches it, the drawing, which might have taken months to build up from small, layered pencil marks, comes right off. ...this material has a delicate weirdness to it. It's almost like a wing of a moth or a butterfly: just lightly brushing against it would destroy it. Like in nature where a delicate balance can collapse at any moment, I like that fragility.

(Ramirez-Montagut 2016, 8)

Given the references to folklore, fairytales and forgotten media like embroidery and cut-paper, it is tempting to analyze Dezső's work through a broad, if limiting historical lens. Indeed, there is no shortage of links to be made with Jacobian tapestries, American toleware, Bosch's monstrous human-animal hybrids, the lush autobiographical portraits of Frida Kahlo, the silhouetted stop motion animations of German modernist Lotte Reiniger or the dark, Edwardian themes of American illustrator Edward Gorey. But Dezső's work engages equally with issues recurrent in contemporary fine art discourse. Her silhouettes confront the historical confluence of good and evil in a manner not dissimilar to that of Kara Walker, while her embroidered samplers echo the vaguely familiar didactic *Truisms* illuminated in Jenny Holzer's L.E.D. displays. And as much as her devotion to labor-intensive media

triggers a nostalgia for a pre-modern time, it has garnered praise from contemporary curators and like-minded artists who regard a renewed attention to hand-craftsmanship as a talisman against, or respite from, the relentless assault of images and information that characterize our digital age.

Dezső's investment in historical traditions and techniques, unique experiences as a child in communist Romania, and career as a contemporary artist working in the United States have resulted in a body of work that is as mysterious and timeless as it is timely and relevant. In a world governed by sound bites and social media, her devotion to careful observation, slow labor and unfettered imagination is quietly critical and strangely restorative. In addition to the importance of travel, which she continues to enjoy via an impressive series of international residencies, Dezső stresses the importance of time in her life and work:

Time is perhaps the one thing that never increases in a person's life; it only decreases until it runs out. There are a finite number of meals one can eat in a lifetime, a finite number of books one can read, a finite number of days one can spend caring for a loved one, so what you chose to spend your time doing becomes significant. Drawing can be a devotional act. I'm drawn to art that renders time visible. (Ramirez-Montagut 2016, 9)

Dr. Leesa Rittelmann  
Associate Professor of Art History  
State University of New York at Fredonia



Andrea Dezső, *Girls in the Night Garden*, 2013, graphite on mylar, 18 x 18 inches

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Andrea Dezsö works across a broad range of mediums including: drawing, painting, artist's books, embroidery, cut paper, animation, sculpture, site-specific installation and public art. Dezsö's permanent public art has been installed in two New York City subway stations; at the United States Embassy in Bucharest, Romania; and at City University of New York's Borough of Manhattan Community College. Community Garden, Dezsö's mosaic in the New York City subway, was recognized as Best American Public Art in 2007 by Americans for the Arts.

Dezsö exhibits in museums and galleries around the world; recent exhibition venues include: in Korea, the Korea Foundation Cultural Center and Cheongjou Craft Biennial; in Hungary, the Black Gallery and Balassi Cultural Institute; and in the United States, the Hungarian Cultural Institute, Rice Gallery in Houston, and Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania. Among other public collections in which her work can be found are: the Museum of Art & Design, New York City; John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Green Valley NPO, Kamiyama, Tokushima, Japan; Tamarind Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; Regenstein Library, University of Chicago; Paley Library, Temple University, Philadelphia; Nagoya University, Nagoya, Japan; and Moholy-Nagy Hungarian University of Design, Budapest. She is represented by the Nancy Margolis Gallery in New York and Pucker Gallery in Boston.

Andrea Dezsö is Associate Professor of Art at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts and maintains studios in New York City and western Massachusetts. She received a Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Communication from the Hungarian University of Design in Budapest and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Graphic Design and Typography from the Hungarian University of Design in Budapest.



