

The Princess and the Frog

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You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your handsome prince, or so goes the American addition to the old Germanic tale of 'The Frog Prince'. But in British milliner Piers Atkinson's latest collection it's the princesses who are in abundance and the pond looks like it's going to be hopping.

Stories such as 'The Frog Prince' take on the cultural materials of the lands they move through. To use Joseph Campbell's words, they undergo 'kaleidoscopic mutations' as they migrate across the world and through the centuries. The phrase certainly fits Atkinson's princess, who is Barbie doll cum Dorothy of Kansas and Oz, by way of Hollywood. No simple embodiment of blond ambition, she is an unbridled, exuberant explosion of raw sexuality with many faces.

Her plastic pedigree references a long line of blond cultural icons of femininity – from Dolly Parton to Christine Aguilera, from Jerry Hall to Pamela Anderson. On one level she represents an ideal of feminine beauty and sexuality that still has its heel firmly planted in the cultural landscape. But she also takes on shades of the subversive and seedy, with references ranging from transvestism to the imperfections of amateur cyber-porn. It isn't always clear what Atkinson's princess parodies and what she celebrates, but if there's an inside joke here it's still likely to make you smile.

So what does it take to transform a clammy, croaking toad into a big hunk of man-meat? In the more familiar version of 'The Frog Prince', the young princess gets her prince by kissing the frog, but in the 'original' Brothers Grimm she does so by violently throwing it against the wall. In one English version, she even decapitates it. In folklore violence is a means of breaking shapeshifting magic, but child educator and psychoanalytic theorist Bruno Bettelheim postulated that it also symbolises the princess's need to confront her fear of her own sexuality, represented by the wet, sticky toad. Carl Jung wrote that the act was necessary to accept the masculine dimension of her unconscious Self in order to grow into womanhood. Others might say she's just into a bit of S&M or hates frogs.

Either way, the frog doesn't have it half as bad as Barbie. A 2005 study at the University of Bath demonstrated that a sizeable percentage of 7- to 11-year-old girls gleefully torture, maim, decapitate and even microwave their Barbie dolls, ostensibly as a rite of passage and a rejection of their childhood – not unlike the princess's frog-bashing episode. But what the pre-fab, out-of-the-box and picture-perfect Barbie has to say about female sexuality is far more unpleasant than amphibian membranes. If the grotesquely thin doll were proportionately enlarged to five foot nine she would, according to a University of Helsinki study, lack the required body fat to menstruate. Here again the dismemberment of what symbolises an immature, unrealistic sexuality is what enables a metamorphosis into womanhood.

Like any good schoolgirl Atkinson has dismembered his dolls, but he's also ripped off bits of Hollywood's glitz and iconic Americana to build an expressive vision of sexuality in the noughties. In some pieces he has reassembled these disparate fragments of femininity to create a fabulous Frankenstein's bride that would drive terror into little hearts. A witchdoctor's wig-piece made of shrunken heads, 'Dolly' is a blond explosion of biblical proportions – John's revenge on a blond Barbie Salome, Samson's on a diminutive Delilah. Its dozen heads make a collective nod to the Hindu goddess Kali and her fearsome garland of skulls (and perhaps also, bearing in mind the generous bosom of the piece's country-western namesake, to ancient statues of Artemis as fertility goddess, with her bumper crop of breasts). 'Judy' is a head-cage of dolls: Matisse's 'The Dance' rendered a too-close-for-comfort, 360-degree wrap-around sculpture for the face. There's even a wicked witch of the East, her ruby slippers on feet emerging from the ground in 'Margaret'. And vanity, wealth and plastic surgery conspire with age to produce the monstrous 'Betty'. Metamorphosis isn't always pretty.

But ultimately this collection is a playful celebration of effusive sexuality. We see those red shoes poking out of the earth, but we also see them kicked up at the end of long dancers' legs in 'Christina'. The florid effulgence of 'Patti', 'Kimberley' and 'Rose' are the blossom of a princess's sexuality in all its carnal colour. And the blond eruption of 'Marilyn' – as much a geyser of tits and hair as a girl bursting out of a birthday cake – is a memorable, light-hearted tribute to the joyful blond bombshell.

While there's plenty of bombast there's also elegance. The ostrich quills, pom-poms and flowers in pieces such as 'Lisa', 'Lu-Lu' and others are tools in the feminine arsenal, capable of stunning the other sex with their simplicity. They also call to mind elements of the Brothers Grimm tale. The princess and prince (nee frog) ride into the sunset behind eight white horses that bear ostrich feathers in their manes. And the princess only becomes indebted to the frog when he dives to the bottom of a well to fetch her beloved ball, echoed perhaps in the collection's many prominent pom-poms. Admittedly, the twin balls on 'Jayne' (as in County?) probably allude to something more biological.

And what of the frogs and princes in this collection? 'Rob' looks a bit bored (or possibly sulking, waiting for a kiss), while 'Frank' is positively dumbfounded – stupefied and enrapt with the parade of lascivious abandon that surrounds him, a simple frog. Or perhaps he's just terrified he'll be thrown against a wall. 'Charlie' is so frightened that all we see are his eyes poking above the waterline, mirrors of the testes he keeps safely submerged. They need only look to the lily pad at centre stage for the reward that is to come. 'Kiss! Kiss!' reveals that Barbie's a lover not a fighter; that she sees through the frog mask, recognises the man within and breaks the spell using the transformative power of the erotic. 'Bang! Bang!' isn't the sound of his head hitting a brick, but of the fireworks going off inside it as a frog's wildest dreams become the new man's night of his life.

It's the centrepiece for a collection that knows we've seen it all – from damsels in distress to femme fatales, from bimbos to brain surgeons, from the scalpel-sharp generic perfection of fashion advertising to the warts-and-all-reality of internet dating. Atkinson's ode to love and lust leaps off the lily

pad, ejecting our age's epidemic of cynicism and embracing the *joie de vivre* that accompanies the creative act – whether that be making hats or making love.

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