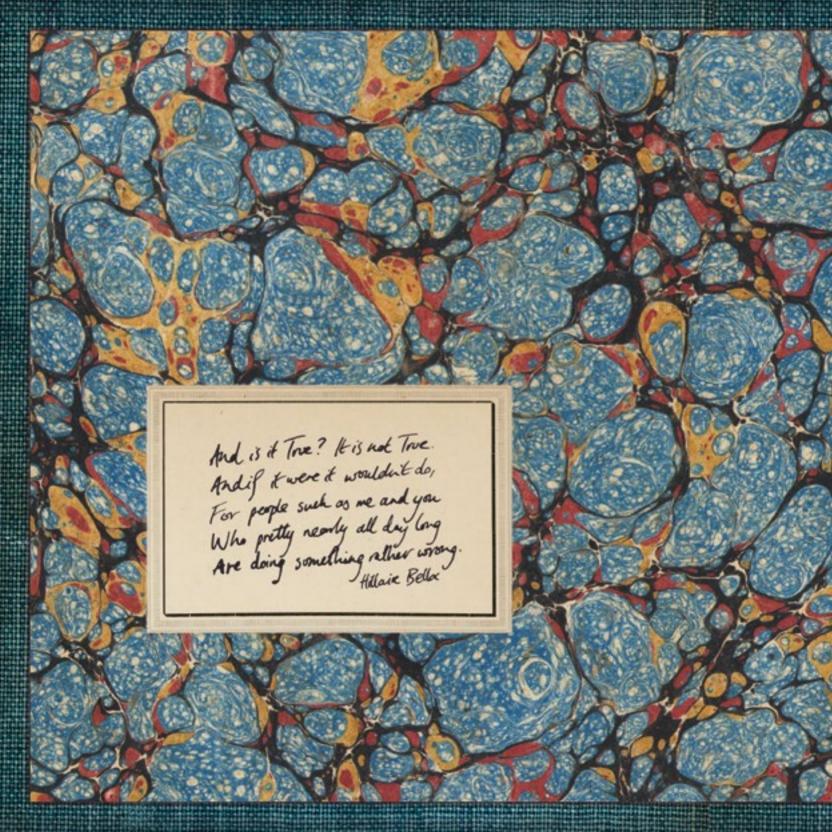
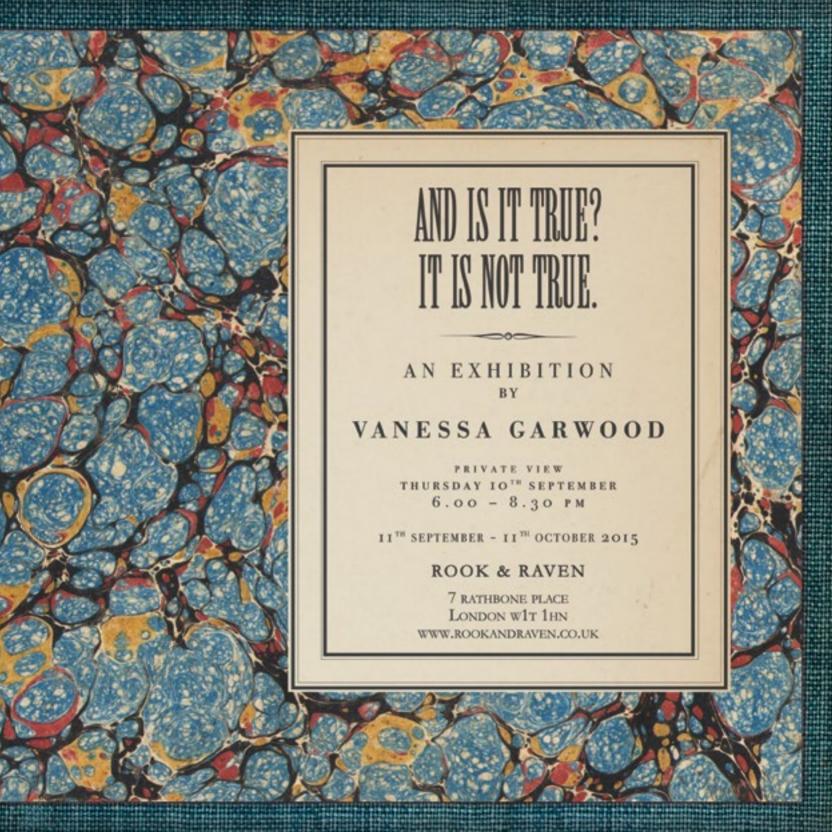
VANIESSA GARWOOD)





#### **BIOGRAPHY**

Tanessa Garwood's second solo exhibition 'Is it true? It is not True' is a series that reveals a new direction in her work. Primarily a portrait painter Vanessa Garwood (b.1982) has worked for over two years towards this collection of narrative paintings.

Having always focused on figurative subject matter her approach builds on formal techniques of oil painting, learnt in Italy, giving way over time to a much more flexible style and application. She is an exemplar of the traditional painting process in the hands of a fresh, emerging artist. Drawing on a range of inspiration from Paula Rego to Goya these large scale oil compositions are a result of much reworking. Each image, taking many months to finish and often ending in a place wholly unforeseen at the outset, uses a mixture of observation from life and painting from imagination. The physicality and struggle behind making these images give the paintings an intensity in keeping with their conflicting messages.

#### INTRODUCTION

hese storytelling paintings reflect on the moral ambiguity and conflict found in children's literature and how their narratives express timeless truths of human nature.

The characters are painted with realism, and set within a contemporary context, helping the viewer to empathise and identify with their dilemmas.

Story telling, as a method of learning from the past whilst entertaining with fantasy, has long been used as a tool to teach wisdom to children. Children respond to visual narratives which activate the imagination, enhance learning and act as a catalyst for communication.

The exhibition itself, as a result of Vanessa's own childhood love of illustrated storybooks, demonstrates and celebrates their power. Through painting Vanessa becomes a storyteller herself, retelling and questioning, adding to the cumulative and ever evolving body of stories that have been retold through different languages, cultures and ages. The series expresses a concern for the future of books: in a time where their impact is being diminished by an ever increasingly virtual world. Books - and also paintings - as lasting physical objects are passed down from generation to generation, transcending many more modern media formats that quickly become obsolete.

There is a juxtaposition between the harsh and bleak view of human nature, seen in some of the paintings, and the hope and humour found in others. Written to teach practical wisdom to both children and adults the morals praise and reward both virtue and deception as tools for survival. Garwood's paintings show universal and sometimes uncomfortable truths about the human condition and how people treat each other.

# THE LION IN LOVE

2013

WIDTH 115CM
HEIGHT 115CM
OIL ON WOODEN PANEL

esop was said to be a slave and lived between 620 and 560BC in Ancient Greece. He wrote this fable about a Lion who falls in love with a girl. Her father consents to their marriage, on one condition: to ensure the girl's safety, the lion must pull out his teeth, and file down his claws. This the lion does, whereupon the father and men in the village attack him, and drive him away into the forest.

In the fable the girl's actions and opinions go unmentioned. We don't know whether she loved or hated the lion, or how much her father told her of his plans. In the painting, she becomes the main focus. Hiding her face preserves the ambiguity of her role in tricking the lion. Depicted naked and at the edge of a bed this story is about the power and manipulation of her sexuality. Her father uses her sexual influence as a weapon against the lion, without our knowing the extent of her involvement or consent. Depending on our reading of her involvement she is either a victim or a victor.

'Love can blind the wildest,' is the acknowledged final moral of this story; but at the same time as discussing the destabilising and potentially dangerous forces of attraction, it also reveals the benefits of cunning over strength. Many of Aesop's fables favour the underdog or trickster character who outwits a greater power. They were written in antiquity to teach political wisdom to adults, using cynicism and satire to reveal an amoral world that does not reward abstract virtue. Often the tales celebrate values and actions that are disapproved of by society. They were told primarily by slaves and hinted at ways to overturn social order. The animal characters symbolise the anonymous and driving forces of nature, as they cannot be anything but themselves, representing the timeless 'truths' of humanity.



# HARRIET & THE MATCHES

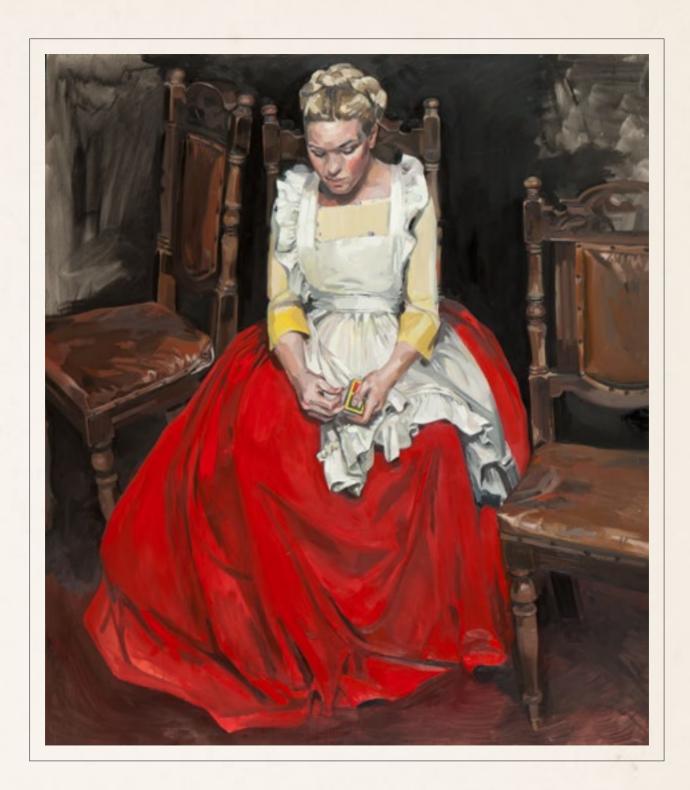
2013

WIDTH 115CM
HEIGHT 13OCM
OIL ON WOODEN PANEL

he Dreadful story of Harriet and the Matches' was written and illustrated in Germany 1845 by Heinrich Hoffman for his son. It is part of the children's book collection called "Strewwelpeter" which uses gore and black humour to scare children into behaving well. When Harriet is left alone by her mother and nurse her 'foolish' disobedience in lighting a match leads to her death.

The painting shows Harriet's rebellion as she lights the match just like her mother 'who so often does the same.' Through mimicking her mother's domestic actions (lighting a match to cook over a stove) Harriet shows an unconscious desire to grow up and copy a traditionally female household role. Poignantly, the desire kills her - she is distracted by the 'pretty' flames, which then catch light to her apron strings. The red folds of her skirt remind us of fire and the empty chairs the absence of her mother and nurse. We question their responsibility and also the lack of a male presence, which is striking considering how the Strewwelpeter stories were written by a father for his son. The way that Harriet literally copies her mother illustrates children's susceptibility to imagery, and to the actions of adults around them.

The colours and outfit she wears recall a Paula Rego painting 'Looking Out', which questions similar female issues. It also reminds us of Hoffman's own illustrations, which were one of the earliest examples of a successful collaboration between illustration and text, both contributing equally to the story to express something that cannot be expressed by words or pictures alone.



# TAILOR OF GLOUCESTER

2013

WIDTH 124CM HEIGHT 115CM OIL ON WOODEN PANEL

Beatrix Potter wrote this as a gift to a sick child and it was first published privately in London 1902. It is about a tailor who rescues some trapped mice from his cat Simpkin. The mice then repay his kindness by completing the work he cannot finish because he falls ill.

The colourful and crowded clothing all around the sleeping tailor hide the mice who are painted on his lap trying to help him. As a viewer we can only understand the hope in the story by taking notice ourselves of the small things - just as the tailor does by saving the mice. It is an example of children's literature written to instruct and improve its audience with the promise of reward for good behaviour. The traditional happy ending, as shown in Simpkin the cat being 'ashamed of his badness,' gives us faith as good triumphs over evil.

Dedicated to her former governess's daughter 'because you are fond of fairy tales, and have been ill,' this story itself was created as an act of kindness. The maternal compassion Beatrix Potter shows for others people's children reminds us that she did not have her own. She shows an affinity with children in her ability to capture their imagination in her detailed observational drawings, which give her books such popularity. She draws from life and adds to it - this tale is inspired by a real life incident of a young local tailor who encouraged the myth that his clothes were finished by fairies. Her version depicts him as an old man but the painting recasts him back to his youth so that the viewer can further empathise with his vulnerability and hopes for the future.



### ANANSE THE TRICKSTER SPIDER

2014

WIDTH 115CM HEIGHT 13OCM OIL ON WOODEN PANEL

riginating from the Ashanti people of Ghana the Ananse stories are part of the African oral culture of story telling. This story is based mostly on a version called 'The Parade,' which is about how Ananse the spider tricks a local chief into letting him marry his daughter. He does this by completing the chief's impossible task of making all the animals in the jungle parade past his house. It also references another story where Ananse traps a swarm of hornets inside a calabash to buy his stories from the Sky God Nyame.

As the painting has a narrative based on more than one tale it responds to the dynamic, organic storytelling of the oral tradition.

Ananse the spider represents the trickster spirit of rebellion and is often seen as a symbol of slave resistance and survival. He shares many similarities to Br'er Rabbit, found in the African American Uncle Remus folktales; both are examples of how to behave and overturn the social order if you are in a position of weakness.

As the Ashanti are one of Africa's matrilineal societies the painting's composition revolves around the female character and suggests more of an active role than she has in the stories. Pregnant and seated amongst ripe fruit and animals, her positioning emphasises fertility and strength. She is holding the calabash of hornets and also harbouring a rabbit, who is the spider's rival, which indicates that she is also involved with manipulating the stories, her father and the spider.



#### GRISELDA

2014

WIDTH 143CM HEIGHT 117CM OIL ON WOODEN PANEL

he story of 'Griselda' was written by Perrault as a part of a series of moralistic fairy tales first published in 1697. It tells of a prince who punished his wife, not for fault but to test her virtue. He does everything to upset and antagonise; taking away her child, faking the child's death, and lying that he wants to remarry. She is a paragon of obedience and refuses to complain until eventually her husband decides to trust her again.

He retells the story of Griselda (previously told by Petrarch, La Fontaine, Chaucer and Boccaccio) as an example of 'Heroic patience: not, I ought to say, for you to imitate in every way'. With this subtle qualifier to his moral, Perrault's version rejects the dutiful feminine ideal frequently shown in other texts before him. The painting further explores this by suggesting that Griselda may have qualities even stronger and more complex than patience, however 'heroic'. The questioning sadness in the portrait hints at an inner life behind her resigned compliance. She is set in a contemporary household and surrounded by shopping bags and uncooked food reminding the viewer of her housework; also the knives and other weapons she has for possible revenge. The uneasy way she sits on the edge of her chair, holding her daughter's toy, suggests movement and a question over what her next action will be and whether vengeance could be justified.

In his sixties Charles Perrault, a successful civil servant under the reign of Louis XIV, abandoned his career to write fairy tales. The little we know of his personal life might explain this dramatic change. He married late to a girl much younger than himself. She was deemed unsuitable by his social circle, suggesting a love match. She died soon after having the last of their three children. Perrault never re-married and the testimonies of his contemporaries say he took a great interest in his children's upbringing. Perhaps it was his increased involvement in their education and the combination of roles required of a single parent that brought him to story telling, commonly at that time a woman's occupation.

These fairy tales were given private readings in the fashionable literary salons of the French 17th century, which prompted intellectual discussion. This suggests Perrault wrote them not just for children but for adults too - and possibly to encourage debate at a time when a belief in male dominance by right was an assumption made by virtually everyone. The painting of Griselda in a current context evokes the same question today, in a world where sexual inequality is still unresolved.



### FITCHER'S BIRD

2014

WIDTH 152CM HEIGHT 122CM OIL ON CANVAS

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he Grimms brothers collected material from many storytellers to compile their first book of folktales, published in what is now Germany, in 1812. In 'Fitcher's Bird' an evil Wizard abducts young pretty girls who he brutally murders as soon as they disobey him by entering a forbidden room in his castle. He is eventually outwitted by the youngest of three sisters who disguises herself as a bird, brings her sisters back to life and burns the wizard, his castle and all of his wedding guests to the ground.

Featuring a spirited heroine as the agent of her own salvation the story encapsulates collective truths about romance and love. The youngest sister's merciless revenge against the evil male protagonist encourages women to elude unwanted lovers and speaks out against the culture of arranged marriages. It was more common for fairy tales to tell the opposite message. 'Beauty and the Beast' by Jeanne Marie LePrince de Beaumont 1757 (first published in a girls magazine) is a classic example; celebrated as the quintessential story of romantic love, demonstrating its power to transcend physical appearances, the story also subtly prepares young girls for an alliance with a much older man.

The predatory Wizard in 'Fitcher's Bird' shows many similarities to Perrault's Bluebeard, both murderous bridegrooms in stories that are entangled with references to female sexual curiosity and desire. Much of the frankness about sex has been censored over time from Grimms' tales but the violence remains. The Wizard's horrific murders are counterbalanced when the youngest sister mercilessly burns the castle down. In the painting she is the only character engaging the viewer with eye contact and we see the strength, determination and responsibility in her expression as she plans revenge. The theme of a younger sibling triumphing where the elder two have failed, seen in many fairy tales, challenges the accepted order of older as wiser.

The colours in the sisters' skin tone changes from cold to warm visualising the magic which brings them back to life. There is a similar colour shift between the black and white clothing and the reds of the fire.



## MOLLY WHUPPIE

2015

WIDTH 152CM HEIGHT 122CM OIL ON CANVAS

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olly Whuppie" is a Scottish story published in two volumes of English folklore collected in the 1890s by Joseph Jacobs. Three sisters are abandoned by their impoverished parents in a forest. They take refuge in a giant's house who then tries to kill them. Molly Whuppie, the youngest and cleverest, saves their lives by putting the giant's daughters' gold chains around her sisters' necks. This means he mistakenly kills his own children in their beds, instead of the sisters as he intended. After this she repeatedly outsmarts the giant and is rewarded by the king and made a princess.

As a strong female protagonist Molly takes the central focus of the painting as she does in the story. The story praises resourcefulness, no matter how amoral, and the extreme brutality of her plan is juxtaposed with the calm innocence in the image of the sleeping sisters. We can imagine the giant's daughters sleeping in a mirror image of the painting, which helps us to empathise with both sides in a way that the written story does not.

Molly is a character who is neither good nor evil; her actions, based on survival, blur the conventional lines of right and wrong. As a 'consolatory fable' it offers hope of release from poverty. The sisters' survival in the face of destitution conveys a message of resistance, and a hope of escape, in a world of social injustice. Molly endures what children fear most: abandonment by their parents and exposure to predators. As Jung suggests the forest symbolises a forbidding unknown, set apart from human society, where inhabitants of fairyland and enemies lie.

Molly uses a magical 'Bridge of Hair' to run away from the giant, which contradicts natural physical laws and gives both her and the reader a fantasy reality. This sense of wonder promises all kinds of riches and a romantic hope of another land where wonders are commonplace and desires are fulfilled.



# GOOD LITTLE GIRLS

2015

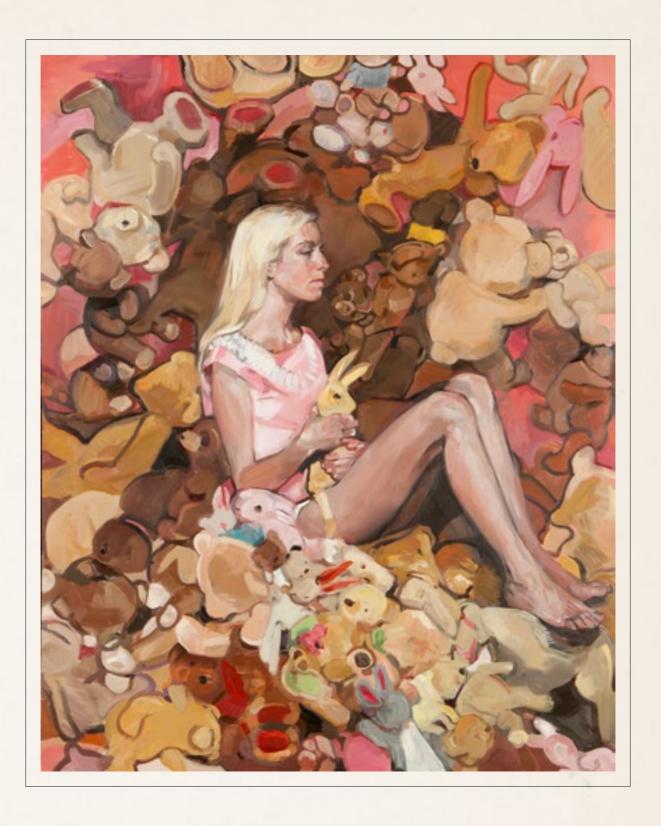
WIDTH 122CM HEIGHT 152CM OIL ON CANVAS

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ark Twain's short story 'Advice To Good Little Girls' was written in 1865 and offers suggestions on how to get what you want from life. This includes how to steal toys from other children, avoid doing what your parents and teachers tell you, harm others and go un-noticed etc.

Written in an unpatronising, ironic way, Mark Twain's work stands out against the commonly didactic children's literature of his time by recommending manipulation to a young reader. His wife was a known reformist and liberal, their first son died very young, and they went on to have three daughters, which could explain this short story's particular preoccupation with the problems of educating little girls. In this book he acknowledges that they are far from passive, learning almost machiavellian methods to creatively rationalise wrongdoings. His humorous tone does not condone or condemn such antics but makes fun of 'good advice,' therefore undermining the piety of society, school and family.

The painting imagines the problems that his female reader, having lived out his advice, might face in the future. It is a portrait of a woman who has abused her feminine wiles for material gain and is imprisoned by her own greed. The toys that surround her are relics of the childhood behaviour she cannot abandon and surround her in an almost nightmarish last judgement. Despite being circled with worldly goods she clutches her rabbit and appears lonely. The connotations in her positioning and bare legs suggest how she might also use her sexuality to get what she wants and the emptiness that comes from exploiting others and herself.



### REBECCA

2015

WIDTH 122CM HEIGHT 152CM OIL ON CANVAS

illaire Belloc's cautionary verses, published in 1867, features Rebecca who is squashed to death by a marble bust; it falls on her head because she won't stop slamming doors.

These humorous and often nonsensical rhymes make fun of the cautionary Victorian books which preach and warn of the nasty ends children will come to if they disregard their parents' wishes. The hypocrisy and pettiness of the adult world is highlighted by the ridiculousness of her fate. Belloc uses this humour as a mechanism to mock the vices and follies of the world.

As Rebecca is depicted holding onto one of the busts that eventually falls on her the painting is a 'memento mori': reflecting on mortality, the vanity of earthly life, and the transient nature of worldly goods and pursuits. She is described as a wealthy, 'wild' girl who 'was not really bad at heart,' so we see her surrounded by classical sculptures that are evidence of this affluent background: the weight of which literally and metaphorically crushes her.



#### KING ROBIN

2015

WIDTH 114.5CM HEIGHT 123CM OIL ON WOODEN PANEL

rom the Land of Nuts and Grapes' is a collection of folktales from Spain and Portugal, published in 1888. 'King Robin' is about a boy called 'Sigli' who enjoys cruelly killing and hurting animals. Led by King Robin, the animals join together and carry out their revenge against him.

At first glance the animals uniting to overcome a powerful and exploitative force give this story a universal message of revolution and democracy. It appeals to adults who are dissatisfied with the establishment or oppressed in any way, also speaking to children as smaller and weaker than those who surround them.

However this story has a more complex moral ambiguity. The wartime setting and double standards of various human protagonists militate against simple conceptions of right and wrong. We learn that Sigli is brought up without a mother, by a father who is a thief, who aids a corrupt king in warding off barbaric religious invaders: all of whom are murderers. It is meaningful that in the animals retribution they choose to kill the boy by using the very same cruel traps of bird lime that he uses on them, becoming vicious murderers themselves. This 'eye for an eye' philosophy of justice brings all the characters in the story to the same base level.

As there is an excuse or explanation behind every character's vice the story discusses the subjective nature of right and wrong. It suggests that perhaps we should should live by good examples to break ever-repeating cycles of violence.

The painting depicts Sigli kneeling down in the yellow sand of a bull fighting ring as a further reminder of man's complicated relationship with death - another example of how killing can be rationalised through cultural perspectives and situations. The monkeys, who gather the berries needed to make bird lime, and the wolves, who dig his grave, are painted around him in an uneasy crowd with small flashes of red to hint at their menace.





