



1SSS Conference 2026

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*'A Luminous Supernatural
Appearance':*

*Rendering the Crisis of Light in Charles Perrault's Living
Pictures*

18th August 2026

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“A luminous, supernatural appearance”

Rendering the “Crisis of Light” in Charles Perrault’s Living Pictures

conference paper presented for

“Light”

International Society for the Study of Surrealism (ISSS) 8th Annual Conference (18th – 20th August 2026)

Day 1: Tuesday 18th August

Session 1:

Pannel 1B “With Sudden Joy: A Surrealist Tableau Vivant in Scottish Painting”

Chair: Catriona McAra

When the Prince arrives at the enchanted castle, in ‘La Belle au Bois Dormant’, the famous story by Charles Perrault (first published in 1697), he finds the court arrested in time; the scene is like a *tableau vivant*; petrified, he sees ‘death’ everywhere, in figures that should be moving, frozen in their daily tasks. Centuries later, (to quote André Breton) the Surrealists became enamoured of the ‘reciprocal relationship that joins an object in movement to the same object in repose’ (Breton, 1978: 39).

The body of work presented in this paper constitutes an imposition of one image of dialectical stillness on the other, the surrealist ‘convulsive beauty’ on the ‘patient’ *La Belle au Bois Dormant*. It consists of a series of painted ‘illuminations’ of Perrault’s tale, derived from magazine pages, cut up and reassembled to make fractured ‘living pictures.’

This hybrid method evolved in response to a technique of Surrealist collage; the use of mass-printed media to generate disturbing compositions; combined with translucent paint to evoke an atmosphere of luminosity and delicate precision (hallmarks of *fin de siècle* depictions of fairy tales, that shaped the culture industry’s perception of this form).

In this paper I locate these formal tropes (the sharp cut and the glowing stain) as aspects of the crisis of enlightenment, foreshadowed in Perrault’s murderous fairy tale, and recurring in Surrealist art. By extrapolating these methods, I seek to materialise the formal and ideological conditions under which fairy tales are both amenable to and resistant of Surrealism.

My name is Laurence Figgis. I’m an artist and writer who lives and works in Glasgow. Today I’m going to talk about an ‘artistic project’—for want of a better term. I’m going to talk about a series of paintings I made in response to ‘La Belle au Bois Dormant’ a story by Charles Perrault. I made 26 of these paintings between 2024 and 2025, intending to publish them as an illustrated book. In addition to presenting the paintings themselves, I’m going to provide a context for my pictorial methods, focusing on how these methods were informed by Surrealism (notably Max Ernst’s collage novels).

First, I want to say something about the story that lies at the centre of this body of work. ‘La Belle au Bois Dormant’ (The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods) is one of number of fairy tales

written by Charles Perrault and published in his famous collection *Histoires ou contes du Temps Passé* (Stories or Tales of Past times) in 1697. The story is well known (perhaps because of later variants) but also contains some unfamiliar material. Notably, Perrault extends the story beyond the familiar ‘happy ending’ to recount the heroine’s persecution by a cannibal mother-in-law—an ogress—who wants to eat her young children. (Later versions such as those of the Brothers Grimm or Disney exclude this rather disturbing conclusion.)

So how did I arrive at this story—and what role does Surrealism play in my interpretation?

Of course, I’m not the first person to suggest that fairy tales may have inspired Surrealist art. In his book *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood*, David Hopkins makes the convincing argument that ‘Sleeping Beauty’ inspired Max Ernst—especially his painting *The Nymph Echo* (1936) (with its spectacle of overgrown vegetation) (see Hopkins, 2021: 68). But ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ (as told by Perrault) also chimes with Surrealist terminology (of the sort mentioned in André Breton’s manifesto). Dreams, unconsciousness—by semantic echo “*the unconscious*”—all

resonate with ‘La Bell au Bois Dormant’, as they do with Surrealism (though to very different ends).

Before I go on to talk about my specific adaptation of Surrealist methods, I want to mention two distinct interpretations of Perrault’s tale, both of which emphasise modernity as a key aspect of the story. The first interpretation comes from Jack Zipes’ Marxist study of children’s literature, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, the second from Angela Carter’s review of Perrault’s tales.

Zipes derives his critical approach from the Frankfurt School. He argues that, by writing fairy tales, Perrault helped to establish the values and interests of a new ruling class—the bourgeois class—in Europe. Perrault, a successful member of the wealthy upper-middle class, worked at the court of Louis XIV – he was employed by one of the King’s ministers as a cultural commissioner. While benefiting from that position, Perrault was conscious of the relative precarity of his own class in relation to the court (see Zipes, 2008: xiii). According to Zipes, this internecine class conflict will motivate Perrault to write and publish fairy tales as rhetorical literary texts. By writing stories adapted from the lively and subversive folk tales of the non-literate peasant class (what he understood as ‘modern’ culture), Perrault created pedagogical

narratives through which the values of his own class could be disseminated and entrenched (see Zipes, 2012: 31).

Angela Carter offers a more surprising view of Perrault's tales in her essay 'The Better to Eat you With,' published in *New Society* in 1976. Carter is, of course, famous for her own subversive fairytales, which emerged at the height of the second-wave feminist movement. Before writing her own versions, Carter translated Perrault's fairy tales from the French, and —according to her own statements— she loved his “worldly” treatment of the fairytale form. She finds his brisk, efficient, sceptical language preferable to the indulgent romanticism of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen. As she writes:

Here all the stories are —sprightly and fresh, and so very worldly. It is the succinct brutality of the folktale modified by the first stirrings of the Age of Reason [...] The story of *The Sleeping Beauty* is a perfect parable of sexual trauma and awakening. But Perrault resolutely eschews making any such connections; and quite right too. Never a hint that a girl's first encounter with a phallic object might shock her into a death like trance. She's the victim of a power struggle among the heavy female fairy mafia. We're dealing with the real world, not the phantasia of the unconscious. (Carter, 1997: 453)

In distinct ways, both Zipes and Carter establish that Perrault's tales are modern. I kept this critical perspective in mind when approaching the task of illustrating Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty' using Surrealist methods.

I looked for examples of Surrealist art in which (capitalist) modernity is treated as raw material (if not the subject) of dream like compositions. This led me to Max Ernst's collage novel, *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934), a bookwork composed of lithographs derived from cut up fragments of mass-printed illustrations. While Ernst's collage novel is a famous example of Surrealist “dream imagery”, its technique is very worldly and modern— comparable to Hannah Höch's Dada collage and even to 1960s Pop Art and Linder Stirling's Punk Feminism (see Banash, 2013: 137-142).

I identified two aspects of Ernst's methodology that I felt would be productive to emulate in the context of illustrating Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty': the time lapse (or use of outmoded material) and the layered or mediating surface.

Ernst's source-material is deliberately old fashioned; working in the mid-1930s he used wood engraved illustrations dating from the late-nineteenth century—in other words, an obsolete

form of bourgeois modernity, that would appear strange to his contemporary audience (see Taylor, 2004: 68-69). Applying a similar time-lapse (of around 40-50 years), I sought images produced in the 1980s. I took pages from *Vogue* and *Simplicity*, male nudes from *Playgirl*, and stills from the soap opera *Dynasty*.

Finally, I applied a mediating process through which the collage becomes veiled or disguised. This is a vital aspect of Ernst's methodology. He did not intend his collages to be viewed first hand but printed them as multiples using a lithographic process—obscuring the cuts and joins and producing 'homogenised' images. Following Ernst's approach, I used a two-part method to make my paintings. First, I made a series of collages, cutting up the magazine pages and films stills and using them as raw material. Then I reproduced each collage (by hand) using watercolour on paper, aiming to replicate each collage as faithfully as possible.

In the final paintings, the fluid medium softens the cut edges of the collage producing a 'veiled' surface equivalent to Ernst's printing process. I chose watercolour because of these material qualities. But I also chose it for its cultural associations. Watercolour was the preferred method of the 'Golden-Age'

illustrators of fairy tales—for example Edmund Dulac, who depicted 'The Sleeping Beauty' for an edition published in 1910.

Watercolour as a medium lends itself to a discussion of light because of its translucent surface. Indeed, following the theme of this year's I-treble-S conference, there is much to be said about the light that shimmers through Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty' (the glamour of fairies), and the relation of these glowing images to the modernity of fairy tales and the philosophy and practice of Surrealism. But I'm not going to cover these topics today. Instead, I'm going to allow you to experience light directly as it functions in the paintings themselves—accompanied by a (somewhat redacted) reading of Jack Zipes' translation of the text.

Laurence Figgis, August 2026

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PRESENTATION OF ARTWORK

(SELECTION OF IMAGES SHOWN WITH THIS PAPER)

The following text excerpts are taken from Perrault, C. (1991) 'The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods.' in *Beauties Beasts and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales*, ed., trans. Jack Zipes, (London; New York: Meridian), (pp.44-51).

Once upon a time there were a king and queen who were quite disturbed at not having any children. At last, however, the queen became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. At the christening all the fairies who could be found in the realm were asked to be godmothers.



As they were about to sit down at the table, an old fairy entered the palace. She had not been invited. The king ordered a place to be set for her, but the old fairy thought that she was being slighted and muttered some threats between her teeth. Meanwhile, the fairies began to bestow their gifts upon the princess.



After fifteen or sixteen years had passed, the royal couple and their court travelled to one of their country residences, and one day the princess happened to be exploring it. After arriving at the top of a tower, she entered a little garret, where an honest old woman was sitting by herself with her distaff and spindle.



No sooner had she grasped the spindle than she pricked her hand with the point and fainted, for she had been hasty, a little thoughtless, and moreover, the sentence of the fairies had ordained it to be that way.



Greatly embarrassed, the good old woman called for help. Nothing could revive her. The king, who had run upstairs at the noise, remembered the prediction of the fairies. Therefore, he had the princess carried to the finest apartment in the palace.



One would have said she was an angel, so lovely did she appear. The king commanded that she be left to sleep in peace until the hour arrived for her waking.



With the exception of the king and queen, she touched everyone in castle with her wand.

As soon as she touched them, they all fell asleep. All this was done in a moment, for the fairies never lose much time when they work. Then the king and queen kissed their dear daughter and left the castle.



At the end of the hundred years, the son of the king went hunting in that neighbourhood and inquired about the towers that he saw above the trees of a large and dense wood. An old peasant spoke in his turn and said, "it is more than fifty years since I heard my father say that the most beautiful princess ever seen is in that castle."



They did not sleep a good deal, however. The princess did not have much need of sleep. And the prince left her at sunrise to return to the city, where his father had been greatly worried about him. His mother was convinced that he had some mistress. Indeed, the prince lived with the princess for more than two years and had two children by her, a girl named Aurora, and a son, called Day.



One evening she said to her steward, "I want to eat little Aurora for dinner tomorrow."
"Ah, madam!" exclaimed the steward. "That is my will," said the queen (and she said it in the tone of an *ogress* longing to eat fresh meat).



Image Specifications

1. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'Once upon a time there were a king and queen who were quite disturbed at not having any children'*, 2025, watercolour on paper, 290 x 207 mm (no. 1 of 26 illustrations).
2. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'The old fairy thought that she was being slighted and muttered some threats between her teeth'*, 2025, watercolour on paper, 291 x 208 mm (no. 2 of 26 illustrations).
3. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'She entered a little garret, where an honest old woman was sitting by herself with her distaff and spindle'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 293 x 210 mm (no. 4 of 26 illustrations).
4. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'She pricked her hand with the point and fainted'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 291 x 207 mm (no. 5 of 26 illustrations).
5. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'Nothing could revive her'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 291 x 207 mm (no. 6 of 26 illustrations).
6. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'One would have said she was an angel, so lovely did she appear'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 293 x 207 mm (no. 7 of 26 illustrations).
7. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'As soon as she touched them, they all fell asleep'*, 2025, watercolour on paper, 293 x 206 mm (no. 9 of 26 illustrations).
8. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'One day the son of the king went hunting in that neighbourhood'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 292 x 207 mm (no. 11 of 26 illustrations).
9. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'They did not sleep a good deal however'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 292 x 207 mm (no. 17 of 26 illustrations).
10. Laurence Figgis, *Illustration to 'La Belle au Bois Dormant'*: *'"That is my will," said the queen'*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 295 x 209 mm (no. 19 of 26 illustrations).

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