

Scene from a 2015 film called *The Sausage*.

Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver

Creative Couple Uses Film to Put Queer Twist on Folk and Fairy Tales

LYNN TRIMBLE | APRIL 25, 2019 | 6:30AM

Artists and romantic partners Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver are turning the tables on traditional fairy tales, using short films to explore queer identity and gender nonconformity. It's part of an ongoing project called Fairy Fantastic!, which includes a video series rooted in their shared love for folk tales and non-narrative storytelling.

Harp is an associate professor for the School of Art at Arizona State University. Silver is a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. They've been working on the project since 2014, traveling back and forth as university calendars allow and connecting through technology as needed.

They're bringing the project to Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in early May, with a pair of film screenings and a drag queen story hour for audiences of all ages.

It's the second time they've shown work at SMOCA, which featured a mixed-media installation by Harp and Silver during its ["Push Comes to Shove" exhibit that opened in fall 2016](#). The installation comprised five felt banners and a zine-style publication, which adapted a Japanese folktale about a woman with powerful farts.

So far, the creative duo have collaborated on two films. Their first film, *The Sausage*, is based on the Swedish folk tale *Sausage Nose*. The original folk tale featured a husband and wife, but the artists changed the lead characters to gender-creative sisters. "Like many folks tales, it explores hunger, scarcity, and wish fulfillment, as well as the dangers associated with them," Harp says.

Tempe creative Tania Katan, whose work often explores gender inequality, is the storyteller in that film.



Tempe creative Tania Katan is the storyteller for a short film called *The Sausage*.

Courtesy of Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver

The professors' newest film, called *Stinkhorn*, is based on a Scottish folk tale. "We changed it quite a bit, resetting it in an Arizona territory mining town during the 1880s," Harp says. "We created the town from miniature bottles and hundreds of drawings, and used live action." Characters include a lady blacksmith named Dusty and a paramour named Blaze. The cast features several members of the metro Phoenix arts community.

"It's a tale of transformation, tricksters, and turning tables," Harp says. "It's a playful way of upsetting power dynamics, which is what fairy tales often do."

They conceived Fairy Fantastic! in 2013, while Silver was working on a queer variety video show called *Trans-Q Television*. "We started talking about our shared interest in fairy tales and folk culture," Silver recalls. "Then, we began looking for fairy tales with queer content, or content that could be tweaked in a gender nonconforming way."



Creative couple Hilary Harp (left) and Suzie Silver.

Courtesy of Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver

They found inspiration in several places, including Soviet-era fairy tales. “They were campy and sincere, and visually gorgeous with a lot of interesting effects,” Harp says.

Two films, in particular, provided artistic inspiration. One was Jean Cocteau's 1946 film adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*. The other was the 1970 film *Donkey Skin*, which was directed by Jacques Demy.

Silver also drew on her own experiences growing up with a mother who embraced the idea of enchantment.

“My mother was really good about letting me believe in things like the tooth fairy until I was 8 or 9 years old,” she recalls. “The other kids always made fun of me for believing in things.”

Turns out, television plays a key role as well. Silver was born in 1958, and Harp in 1964, so both were part of the first TV generation. Silver’s favorite shows included *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, which have lead female characters with magical powers. “Magic was everywhere in television,” Silver says. “My first girl crush was on the star from *Bewitched*.”

Other aspects of Silver’s childhood influenced her artistic pursuits as well. “I was always a tomboy when I was little,” she says. “I always wanted to be a boy, but somehow that didn’t seem to be an option the way it is for some young people today.”



Still image from the short film *Stinkhorn*, created by Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver.

Courtesy of Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver

In many ways, their work echoes common themes from their own early lives.

“I’m pretty sure I was always queer, but I didn’t begin to do anything about it until my late teens,” Silver says. “I came out before the internet, when you couldn’t find any TV shows or books that would help you help you figure out what you were feeling.”

Both artists hope the project will help gender-nonconforming kids feel more accepted, but they’re addressing broader themes as well. “The gender-creative content is important, but we’re also showing a world that’s inclusive, where there is a place for all different kinds of families,” Silver says.

They’re using traditional folk tales rather than contemporary stories for several reasons.

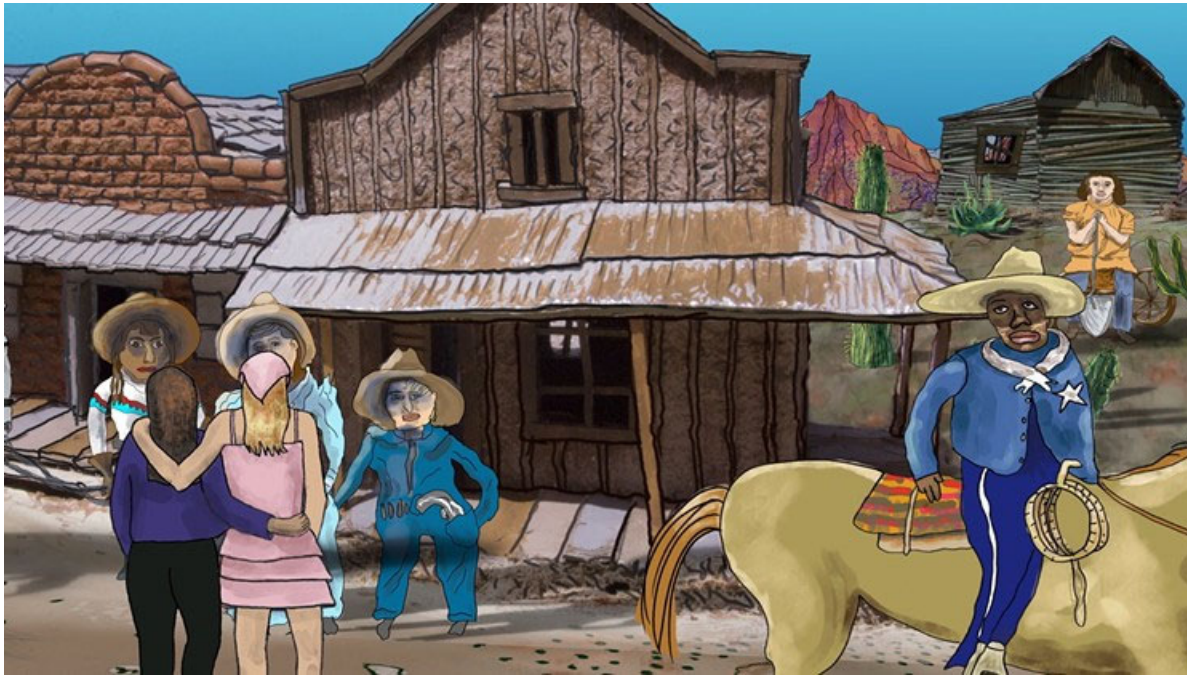
“Sometimes you have to look backward to move forward,” Silver says. “No matter how painful it is to look at queer history, you have to look back to find clues about how to be involved today in changing contemporary society.”

Fairy tales present other opportunities, as well. For Harp, they include fostering imagination, and sparking conversations about friendships and differences.

“Fairy tales involve transformation, peril, uncertainty, and found families,” Silver says. “These are all things we’ve experienced, and they can reveal something about our own lives.”

Still, they don’t take traditional tales at face value.

“We’re retelling the stories, and reclaiming what’s been erased by binary ways of thinking and being,” Silver explains. “The princess doesn’t always have to be a girl,” she says. “The princess could be a boy, or something in between.”



Still image from the short film *Stinkhorn*, created by Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver.

Courtesy of Hilary Harp and Suzie Silver

The artists are making another point with this project, as well.

“Queer and gender-creative people need to be able to tell our own stories,” Silver says. “We want to be heroes and romantic leads.”

It’s happening more and more in popular media these days, according to Silver, who cites the character Anne Lister in the series *Gentleman Jack*.

“Our work comes out of our experiences with film and video art, which allows for different gender representations in different ways,” Harp says. “We’re trying to pursue a language that’s transformative, by trying different things rather than adhering to the strict rules of narrative storytelling.”

Their approach is more exploratory and atmospheric, according to Harp. Their films mix artistic elements, ranging from drawing to live action. “We create different worlds that are embedded in one another, which is analogous to queer experience,” she says.

Although the artists are optimistic, they recognize that more work needs to be done. “We’re seeing a lot more authentic portrayals, and things are changing for the better,” Silver says. “We want to be part of making that change happen.”

Fairy Fantastic! Out in the Woods: Queer Fairy Tales. Friday, May 3, 7 p.m. at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, 7374 East Second Street, Scottsdale. Tickets are \$7. Also: Fairy Fantastic! Children's Drag Queen Story Hour and Film Screening. Saturday, May 4, noon, at SMOCA. Free. Visit smoca.org.

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