

Exhibit looks at U.S. foreign policy and 'Tales of the Arabian Nights'

Stories and survival

By Julie Powell

Correspondent



Seldom is storytelling a matter of life and death. But for Shahrazad, the wife of the dreadful Sultan Schahriar and heroine of 'The Arabian Nights,' the ability to spin a cliffhanger kept her alive.

And for artists Susanne Slavick and Andrew Johnson, Shahrazad serves as an inspiration for their provocative art installation, 'One Night or a Thousand Others,' currently on display at the Lamar Dodd School of Art's Main Gallery. The work uses Shahrazad and her survival of the Sultan as a critique of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

According to the tales of the Arabian Nights, the Sultan

Schahriar, embittered by the betrayal of his first wife, began a savage campaign of revenge on women. After executing his adulterous wife, he married a new woman each night and promptly put her to death the next morning to ensure he would never again be betrayed. Shahrazad, the daughter

of the Sultan's vizier, devised a plan to end the bloodbath. She married the Sultan and, as part of a prearranged scheme, on her wedding night began telling a tale of adventure that lasted through the night. When morning came and the story was not over, the Sultan decided to let his wife live to finish the story the next night. A thousand and one nights and three children later, the Sultan decided his wife was faithful and revoked her death sentence.

Slavick says Shahrazad's story of survival is symbolic.

'For me, she represents those who must go through contortions, creative or otherwise, to stay alive,' says Slavick, head of the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University. Johnson is an assistant professor of painting at the University at Buffalo.

'(Shahrazad's) existence depends on maintaining the pleasure of the sultan. I think this is an apt metaphor for the developing countries' relation to the world's superpowers,' Slavick continues, of the way the work also reflects U.S. foreign policy.

The installation in part features Johnson's row of severed plaster-cast heads of young women of Middle Eastern descent, peering from pillows of black sand, paired with Slavick's series of paintings, titled ''Heads Will Roll.'' The two artists explore the psyche of the victims - the wives of the Sultan.

''The beheaded in my paintings may be dead, but there is a suggestion of persistence as well in the blossoming masses emanating from the headdresses, whether it's a cellular proliferation or something else,'' Slavick says of the rendering of the work.

But, she adds, in the end, violence breeds more violence - ''the monsters of our own creation.''

''... Injustice only perpetrates greater violence,'' she notes, ''gives birth to more enemies. Are we really diminishing terrorism with our policies or are we stoking the fire for an even more fervent and widespread retaliation?'' she asks of tactics used by the U.S.

Slavick points to many historical precedents as well as the current situation in Iraq as instances where storytelling has been used as means of survival - whether of self-image or of the lives of others.

''I think of this storytelling as both a defense and an aggression. ... The American public succumbs ... to the seduction of superficial and outright deceptive rationales for our foreign policy - usually coated in a false sentimentality about freedom and the spread of democracy,'' Slavick notes, adding the truth is, ''we are often motivated by economic interests that sustain our disproportionate wealth and consumption of world resources.''

''We tell these stories to ourselves to justify our selfishness,'' Slavick says. ''The oppressed are coerced to tell us what we want to hear or behave the way we desire as their survival depends on it.''



Published in the Athens Banner-Herald on Thursday, November 13, 2003.
http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/111303/ent_20031113010.shtml

Images: Andrew Johnson, *Lamp from One Night or a Thousand Others*, plaster and Black Beauty Sand, 2003.
Susanne Slavick, *Heads Will Roll*, oil and acrylic on two panels, 80" x 72", 2003.