

# Charged with Different Power The Extraordinary Art of Helen Ivory

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What We See

“Working with ready-mades, as I so often do, is a little like working with words. A *telephone* as an *object*—and the *word telephone*—will each bring their own denotation and connotation with them . . . I actually get a buzz out of every assemblage I see—there is something magical (and fetishistic) about objects. And when they are taken out of their usual context and made strange, they are charged with different power.”

In the extraordinary art of Helen Ivory, images and objects and words and photographs can be swiftly transformed through the twin alchemies of Symbolism and Surrealism into the substance of (rather wonderful) alternative worlds in which birds are juxtaposed with telephones, an antique doll has the wings of a crow, and a cow grazes serenely on the mountains of the moon.



What Does a Bird Sing About?

She is that *rara avis*, an artist of equal stature in the worlds of both poetry and the visual arts, and although it is as a visual artist that she is being featured here, it would be an omission of the greatest disservice both to her and to yourselves, the readers, not to establish from the outset that she has published seven volumes of very highly regarded poetry, several of which have photographs of her assemblages as cover designs, and one of which, [Hear What the Moon Told Me](#), is a work of “found” poetry and collage, as well as a new version of the

major arcana of the Tarot deck, a collaboration with the British multi-media artist Tom de Freston, that breathes new life into a tradition at least six hundred years old. But for now let us concentrate on Helen Ivory the creator of figures and assemblages and open, however briefly, a door into the *wunderkammer* of her art and mind.

Ivory was born in Luton, a large town in the southeast of England, in 1969, and although coming from the kind of working class background that traditionally gives little or

## A Diversion on the Theme of Alice

Imagine if Helen Ivory, established poet and (potential) artist, had drunk from a bottle labeled **DRINK ME** and shrunk sufficiently to be able to live inside a doll’s house, and then eaten a cake with **EAT ME** written on it (in currants) and expanded back to human size, squeezed within the now absurdly small four walls. Might that at least begin to explain her extraordinary faculty of being *a part and apart*, the *observer and the observed*, the child who possesses the doll’s house and the doll who observes the enormous sunlike eye of the child?

no encouragement to those who aspire to a career in the creative arts, was fortunate to find progressive teachers in high school. “I originally did A-level art where I studied the work of Howard Hodgkin and then went on to make some shadow theater versions of his paintings because they already looked to me like they were stage sets.” In fact it was a career in theater design that at first seemed most likely, but “somehow I knew I wanted to do something with words.” She went on to read for a BA in cultural studies at Norwich University College of the Arts where she was mentored by the celebrated Anglo-Hungarian poet George Szirtes, and the books and the reputation and the prizes soon followed. “I graduated in 1997 and then concentrated mainly on poetry because I didn’t have any space to make art, and I thought I had nothing to say. Or perhaps I just didn’t find myself as a visual artist until I had worked out who I was in poetry.” Be that as it may, and even with the inevitable benefit of hindsight, there can be no doubt that the poems laid down the themes that would recur in Helen’s visual work, perhaps standing in relation to it as the architect’s drawing, however beautiful in itself, might stand in relation to the sheer actual *thereness* of the completed building.

Helen Ivory’s visual works can be divided into approximately four categories, and although these may be somewhat false or at best rather over-simplified distinctions, they do at least enable us to better focus on the several aspects of her art.

First, and perhaps most importantly, there is the doll motif. Dolls are a recurring feature not just of her assemblages but also of her poetry. In fact, it is this motif that most closely ties her



Birds of Other Lands

poetry and her visual art together, and it is impossible to read . . .

*There's always someone  
to do your dirty work,  
always someone  
with plucked-out eye,  
with snapped-off hands...  
in the junkshop window,  
they have all lost their names.*

from [The Breakfast Machine](#) (2010)

. . . without thinking of her strangely disturbing, strangely symbolic (but of what?) disembodied doll torsos and amputated doll limbs. This is not so much the erotic perversion of a Hans Bellmer; rather, it is some kind of parody of an anatomical textbook. And when we remember that traditionally doctors were men and that their female patients (indeed, their females) were passive objects in their hands, the image of a medical training manual makes psychological and political sense.

But the doll itself is only one aspect; even more important is the ever-recurring motif of the doll's house, one that goes back to the beginning of Helen's artistic ambitions: "I have always been interested in miniature stage sets—I originally wanted to be a theater designer—so I like the doll's house motif as a little set for big dreams."



The Waiting

If the doll is symbolic of a woman's body, then the doll's house is doubly symbolic—first, of a woman's place; second, that of which the frame or the box or the jar in which the art is displayed is itself symbolic. But in the meantime, however important the doll's house, there must've been the doll: "I think dolls were part of my inner childhood landscape rather than an adult-learned influence. All little girls of my

### A Diversion on the Theme of Arthur Mee

Arthur Mee (1875-1943) was an English journalist and educator, whose ten-volume *Children's Encyclopedia*, first published in 1922, the same year as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, is, regardless of all its limitations in respect of time and place, a sheer masterpiece of education. The superbly chosen illustrations, which, when I was a child, introduced me to some wonderful painters, including the pre-Raphaelites), are worth the admission fee alone.

generation were given dolls, so I've always been around these little semblances of humans. The life we give them stems from our imaginations; we can make them act in certain ways by how we pose them and how we ventriloquize. Culturally and historically, dolls have a lot of responsibility placed on their shoulders; people seem to adore them or be terrified by them in equal measure."

One category will inevitably segue into the next, and now we have what I might call box or frame assemblages, to which several of the doll artworks belong and also wonderfully (and

surrealistically!) represented by the artwork featuring a doll's torso topped with a bird's skull sitting next to a telephone on a plinth. "The bird person/telephone piece is all about waiting for news that will never come. The bird has no arms to answer the phone (do birds have arms anyway?) and the phone is clearly not connected to anything. So it's a kind of futile, empty-headed eternity!"

However, if I may be allowed a personal favorite among Ivory's works within this frame category, it must be [The Arthur Mee Series](#), a set of boxed/framed assemblages based on (ironic?) quotations from the celebrated children's encyclopedia.



Earth and Its Neighbours

Consider *Earth and Its Neighbours* (p. 59). We are here presented with content and composition, intelligence and wit. The spatial representation is millimeter-perfect; the texture is even more three-dimensional than the actual dimensions of the objects used to create it. This is not a *wunderkammer* (another of Helen's consistent motifs in both poetry and art); rather, it is, to coin a phrase, a *wunderfenster*, a window into the doll's house, the poet's house, but so beautifully presented as to be an end in itself.

Look again at the (real) shell, the (toy) cow. Neither could have been placed anywhere else and each rather mischievously echoes the shape of the other. Yes, there is symbolism at work here, but there is also the simple beauty of spatial perfection, of an aesthetic made true.

When is a box not a box? Well, maybe when it's a jar. The third aspect of Helen's art is the use of glass jars—jars that might once have held jam or marmalade—in order to preserve items of memorabilia or nostalgia, and present them differently to a modern audience. The

### A Diversion on the Theme of Jars

This time the door wasn't locked so she saw the room's plunder floating in the dark liquid of neatly labelled jars—fingernails, tangles of hair, an unborn child.

—from *Waiting for Bluebeard* (2013)

most significant example, ironically, is not as a gallery work of art, but the cover of her 2013 poetry collection [Waiting for Bluebeard](#).

Is there a more-than-obvious difference between a box, a two-dimensional frame, and a jar? The answer is hers: "I guess the glass jar suggests three-dimensional sculpture, whereas the box is more of an elevated two-dimensional relief. I have used glass jars for the cover image of *Waiting for Bluebeard* as puns. The jars themselves are on a shelf, so they are only seen from the front. I have called this series *Preserves* because they are photographs and objects in Kilner jars, the kind usually used for, well, preserves."

Often the jars contain old photographs, which give these jars a most curious double-aspect: firstly of a past preserved, but secondly (and to me much more vividly) of a past captured, in the sense of imprisoned. And with a little imagination one can almost hear the characters in these photographs crying out with tiny voices, begging to be set free. Which rather begs the question of who these characters are: "The pictures that I buy from flea markets are largely of women captured at the time of their wedding or posing in a photographer's booth on their own or with children, or sometimes children on their own. Roland Barthes talked about the punctum—the thing about an image which pierces you and speaks directly to you. Looking through some of the images I have now, I think it's probably to do with the subject's vulnerability and how they choose to present themselves to the camera."

[Watch and listen to Helen Ivory read from her work.](#)



And finally we come to our fourth category—collage, of all visual arts surely the one that comes closest to poetry itself and which, when created by an artist who is also a poet, necessarily takes on a special significance. Combining cut-out—usually vintage—images with poems created from “found” texts, these exquisite—and often exquisitely profound—works, of which *Lay the Heart* is a very good example, have the

added advantage of speaking so clearly for themselves that they obviate the necessity of critical interpretation. One point, however, should be made. The poems, themselves cut-outs, are so perfectly “placed” that they become part of the visual experience, transcending their literal meaning. In other words, someone with no knowledge of English could still gain a complete aesthetic satisfaction from the overall work.



Lay the Heart

The extraordinary world of Helen Ivory, whether entered by eating a cake marked **POETRY** or by drinking from a bottle labeled **VISUAL ART**, is truly Alice-like in its sense of wonder, its sense of logical construction, its sense of logical deconstruction, its sense of sheer logical madness reflected in the looking glass of the illogically sane. It also possesses a sense of – not just originality – but artistic freedom, the impression that Helen Ivory is one of those fortunate few who have the self-confidence and the skill to absolutely and fearlessly create the art they wish to create.

There have been influences, sure, not least among them Angela Carter, Jan Svankmajer, Alexander Calder, Joseph Cornell, Vasko Popa, Leonora Carrington, Tim Burton, and the Brothers Quay. (“Dark fairytale and surrealism!”). But the result is that which all artists, in whatever medium, aspire to—a look, a style, a sense of fresh perspective on a familiar theme that could only possibly have been the work of themselves.

What happens next is your choice  
 though the moon that I’ve painted  
 has calm seas,  
 warm enough to dive into.  
 If you come with me,  
 I will show you the earth wound up  
 in a neat little ball.  
 I will tell you my name.

—from [The Breakfast Machine](#)  
 (2010) ❖



The Elevation