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## How Can a Simple Drawing Become an Epic Fairy-Tale Ballet? Artist Natalie Frank Describes Her Process

Ballet Austin created its new production 'Grimms' Tales' with artist Natalie Frank, who developed the performance's visual elements.

Rachel Corbett (<https://news.artnet.com/about/rachel-corbett-668>), March 31, 2019



A scene from *Grimm Tales*. Courtesy of Ballet Austin. Photograph by Anne Marie Bloodgood.\*

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There's a longstanding tradition of artists collaborating with ballet companies, from Picasso's Cubist sets for the Ballets Russes to Chagall's costumes for the *Magic Flute* and *Firebird*. But rarely does an artist's work inspire an entirely new ballet, as it did this past weekend when the the Austin Ballet premiered *Grimm Tales*, [a production based on drawings](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/natalie-frank-grimm-tales-ballet-1358686) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/natalie-frank-grimm-tales-ballet-1358686>) by the New York-based artist Natalie Frank, who also created many of the resulting performance's visual elements.

Ballet Austin artistic director Stephen Mills first saw Frank's feminist reinterpretations of the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales at the Drawing Center in New York in 2015 and, later, at the Blanton Museum in Austin. "First you see the colors, then the textures, and then you start to look at what's going on narratively and—whoa—this is some strange stuff. It's sensual, it's sexual, and it's very dark," he said. In the past, he has staged such classics as the *Nutcracker* and *Giselle*, but it's "exceptionally rare" to have the opportunity to produce contemporary ballet, he said. This felt like just the material to do it.

So how do two-dimensional drawings infuse all of the choreography, animation, and set design that goes into a ballet? We asked Frank to break down the process of translating her drawings into the Grimms' fairy tale visuals, using the example of the title character of Act I, the Frog King. Here, Frank tells the story, step-by-step—in her own words.

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## The Character



Natalie Frank's costume drawing of the Frog King.

The Frog King is such a comedic figure. His daughter promised she would do anything the Frog requested in exchange for his retrieving her golden ball. His role is to force his daughter to obey her word.

## The Inspiration



Inspirational material for the Frog King.

For my drawing, I compiled all of the somewhat cliché ideas of what a king might wear. Constance Hoffman, the costume designer, and I both drew and also gathered historical imagery that we were interested in, such as the king and his ermine jacket. I loved this image because of the power clashing of the ermine, which I thought was so over the top and fabulous.

I also looked at many historical precedents for artists in collaboration with the ballet: the Ballets Russes, Chagall, [David Hockney](http://www.artnet.com/artists/david-hockney/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/david-hockney/>), Picasso, Florine Stettheimer, [Leonor Fini](http://www.artnet.com/artists/leonor-fini/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/leonor-fini/>), Matisse. After

each individual round of drawing, we would meet in Constance's studio to discuss and review and eventually spent

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a few days drawing and painting together and working on design and color. And we became great friends in the process.

### The Expert



Costume designer Constance Hoffman.

In the beginning, Constance Hoffman and I worked on drawing costumes individually in our studios. I did a complete run-through first of all the characters. After this, we met and Constance said, “You have such a complete vision for this performance, are you sure you want a costume designer, and don’t want to be the designer yourself?”

I insisted that no, I didn’t—and that’s the story of how she almost quit before we began! I knew how much I did not know about how costumes, colors, patterns, and fabrics would translate on stage; how simple or complex costumes needed to be to read on stage and not overwhelm all of the other elements of the dance: the movement, story, music, and the sets (which are new drawings I made for the production projected onto scrims). Of course, I also had no idea about how things were actually made, where the shops were in Austin, and who the designers and artists were with whom we would collaborate.

### The Material

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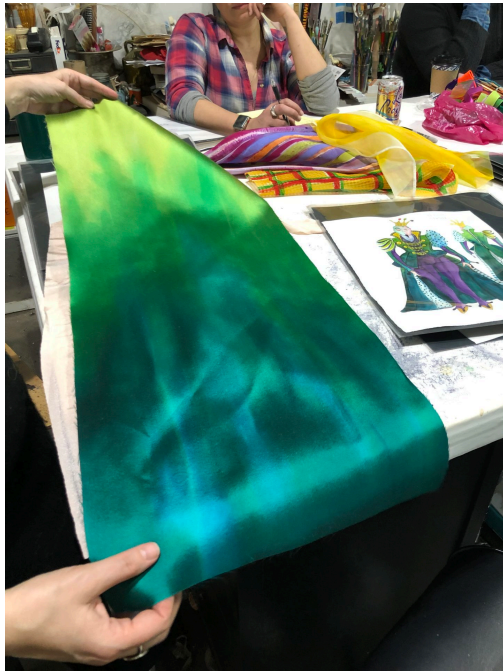
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Hand-painted silk for the Frog King's robe.

The green silk was hand-painted by Jeff Fender, who worked from our drawings and his imagination to integrate my hand into his fabric painting for most of the elements of the costumes, so they would all feel hand-painted. The gradations here are intended to mimic watercolor. My hope was that everything in the production would feel touched and shaped by hand.

### The Design



The king's robe.

The robe is for the king and is meant to show that there is a little frog in the king, who perhaps was once a frog himself. Colin Davis Jones built the Frog King and the Juniper Tree costumes and Eric Winterling, Inc., did the Snow White.

### The Process

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The hand-painted crown-mask worn by the Frog King.

The crown is connected to a mask, perhaps concealing the king's true frog nature. We wanted to convey the idea that these representations of who we are—frog, king, princess—are mere representations, and perhaps our animalistic selves are really our truest ones.

Mio Guberinic constructed the head pieces and some costume elements, such as the crowns, boars, the Golden Bird, and the Frog King's crown, which we painted together. I had never used acrylic before painting the props. It dried easily and quickly and I used an extender that made it behave like oil paint. Once it was used in the first dress rehearsal I realized that much of the subtlety wasn't visible from the orchestra so I went back in and added in more contrast of light and dark throughout.

I was also taken aback at first by how large props are for the stage!

## The Team



A dress rehearsal still of the *The Frog King*.

One of the best aspects of working on such a collaborative process has been how productive and inspiring working with such talented people has been. All of the people involved have been working at such a high level in their fields for a long time: for instance, Constance is a Tony-nominated designer who has done operas, ballets, and productions all over the world. She is such an established artist in her own right so the fact that she was open to bringing in another artist, integrating my viewpoint and ideas, and collaborating with someone who had no idea of the actual process of designing a costume, is so impressive, I would imagine rare, and meaningful. All of my collaborators: Stephen Mills, the artistic director who developed the dance; George Tsybin, the set designer; Edward Carey, who wrote our story; Graham Reynolds, who wrote the music; and Howard Werner, who animated my drawings, and I

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