A *fairy* small *adventure*

Cordelia Cembrowicz used a small drill and a huge amount of concentration to turn her third molar into a fantastical tooth fairy.

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Once upon a time an article was published in the *British Dental Journal* called *Fairy tales*.¹ It told the story of Cordelia Cembrowicz, a fine art student who turned her extracted tooth into a work of art.

Cordelia, 21, had been having problems with her wisdom teeth for some time and decided to have her upper right third molar extracted.

‘I asked my dentist if I could keep the tooth,’ said Cordelia, not really knowing what she would do with it. ‘In the autumn term at college that year, I started producing work in a miniature format using copper plate etching to create scenes of people as small as I possibly could.’

‘I started to think about how the story of the “tooth fairy” has turned into an urban legend in Britain. She is commonly seen as a magical figure who rewards children for the ordeal of having their teeth out, a figure who brings comfort after a time of pain.’

‘As I was already accustomed to working on pieces on a small scale, I wondered whether it was possible to create something out of this tooth myself. The form of the tooth fairy is simply a literal interpretation of the folklore. She is normally thought of as the fairy that collects teeth and leaves money in return. Paradoxically, in my work, the painful tooth has now been transformed into the healing fairy. Something quite precious and beautiful is created from an object normally seen as redundant once it has been removed.’

Cordelia's work required intense concentration and working on such a small scale was both physically and mentally demanding.

After showing her design proposal to the sculpture technicians at her college, the Falmouth College of Art, Cordelia was given a small drill. However, she found that the drill pieces were not small enough to sculpt on that scale.

After several phone calls to dental surgeries in the Falmouth region, one very kindly donated several drill bits and polishers to Cordelia to start her project, as well as some old molar teeth to add to those that members of Cordelia's family had donated.

Magic at work

Before starting to carve a tooth, Cordelia makes sketches of it from several different angles, to help her get an idea of the form. She then draws guidelines of the general outline on the tooth, and begins to gently carve the material until the general shape is symmetrical. She carries on this process of drawing and carving throughout the creation of the piece. Due to the composition of the teeth, Cordelia has found that she needs to be careful when carving, as they become increasingly fragile the deeper she carves. 'The tooth is an interesting material to carve, as the enamelled top is very tough, whereas the inner area is relatively soft and you have to judge what pressure and speed to use the drill with.' One of the teeth Cordelia carved was a molar with an amalgam filling (see small image, p20).

When Cordelia returned to the dentist to have the rest of her wisdom teeth taken out, she told the dentist 'I've chipped my tooth'.

The dentist was surprised to see Cordelia take out her tiny sculpture, which had lost one of its wings, and helped her repair the damage.

When we last heard from Cordelia in 2005, she was planning to sculpt her other extracted teeth.

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Far-flying fairies

Cordelia graduated from Falmouth in 2006. 'The tooth fairies received a huge wave of

national and international press attention,' she tells *Vital*. 'They featured in the *Daily Mirror*, the *Telegraph*, the *Metro*, regional BBC news in the South West, on BBC Newsround, BBC World Service and in magazines in Peru, Hong Kong and Japan.'

Cordelia made a series of fairies out of children's teeth, even smaller than the original ones, and they were exhibited in shows in Switzerland, Liverpool and London.

She has since moved on to undertake a Master's degree in Fine Art Printmaking.

'I haven't made any tooth fairies for quite a while,' says Cordelia. 'Although they will be featured in an exhibition at the Courtauld Institute in London for seven months from December 2010.' For further information see www.courtauld.ac.uk.

Cordelia's fairy carvings can be seen throughout this article. Many thanks to Cordelia for lending us these stunning photos.

1. Bajaj A. Fairy tales. *Br Dent J* 2005; **198**: 581-583.