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CATHIE PILKINGTON

Cathie Pilkington: Peaceable Kingdom, Marlborough Galleries: 3rd December 2010 – 21st January 2011.

Pilkington's small figurines in striking tableaux belong to a broad trend in sculpture that adopts stock characters drawn from cartoons and fairy tales and applies them to unlikely situations, unusual materials. The trend arises along two paths, firstly, emphatic fabrication or commission on the part of the artist, and secondly, ready-made figures, casually adjusted or arranged, often featuring severe wear, damage or distress. The fabrication route commences with Jeff Koon's Rabbit (1986) and continues through the Manga and Anime-inspired merchandising of Takashi Murakami, easily crossing into painting, and shared there with artists such as Yoshitomo Nara and Liu Ye. The ready-made route commences with the installations of dolls and teddy bears by Mike Kelley, from around 1986; is later followed by the elaborate tableaux of Jake and Dinos Chapman, using a variety of toy figurines, and continued, to some extent, with the clay-animations of Nathalie Djürberg, and the large, cloth figures of Californian artist Elizabeth Higgins O'Connor, amongst many others. While neither of the latter adopts ready-made figures, Djürberg's loosely modelled clay or Plasticine figures offer similar worn or battered contours to familiar stereotypes, while Higgins O'Connor's towering doll-like figures are assembled from rag or discarded fabrics, often broadly painted or stained.

Both routes favour anthropomorphised and mythic animals as remote tokens or metaphors for a person – usually set quotidian tasks. These are a staple of cartoons and fairytales and allow key traits to be abstracted or stylised, personified in a distant but engaging manner, for the young or innocent. Sculpture turns to these, in the closing decades of the 20th century and continues to re-direct such basic roles, invest their ideals with new and unexpected attributes. And the effect is frequently comic. Figures may exhibit surprising formal or abstract qualities of material (as in a Koons or Murakami, for example) point to underlying affinities with other objects and construction. While ready-made figures may display pathos of degradation, often taken as 'object' remains to some faded pretence. And adjustments to materials and setting may, of course, be variously combined within the trend.

Pilkington's approach adopts ready-made elements, freely assembled along with modelling and carving (mostly in Jesmonite), painting and other finishes. There is less a

sense of re-positioning familiar figures than of carefree bricolage, roughshod compliance or a proximal proxy. Her figures are make-do or ad hoc, rather than abject or slickly industrial and while they occasionally run to predictable reversals of innocence in sexual tableaux, such as *Threesome* (2009) and *Flopsy* (2009), they usually share uneasy relations with other figures, often contrast role and material, scale and posture. In a work such as *Snow White* (2010) the sleeping figure is actually dwarfed by the supposed dwarfs, offers delicate finish to limbs, gown and hair for the girl while surrounding figures remain crude cartoons or strange beasts, coarse, yet stooped with concern. The implied split between male and female, the brute terms of one against the exquisite helplessness of the other, becomes an audit of sculptural and artistic resources.

A recurring theme is infant dependence or maternity, as in *Motherlode* (2007), *Surrogate* (2007), *Punch* (2009) *Charity* (2009) and *The Foundling* (2010). Again, a distinct split in sympathies is often accompanied by stark contrasts in materials and handling. In *Surrogate* (2007) the monkey clings to a mother figure, despite a change of species, and possibly mother being no more than a crude effigy. While in *The Foundling* (2010) it is the parent that clings to a resisting infant, although parent is a bear and infant human. The bear is treated in a heavy, black gloss, almost disguising its fur coat, the naked infant picked out in naturalistic shading. Degree of stylisation is not just an opportunity for comic simplification or detachment, but also underlines a derivation in materials, points to source as a parallel to family ties. In *Mother* (2010) a lamb prods its presumed mother, rendered as no more than a blanket, partly stitched and stuffed, lying prone and indifferent. Yet, whether the lamb has ‘made’ its mother, if only in play, or conversely, the mother, an enormous lamb, or whether mother or lamb is simply a coarser cut from the same fabric, remains moot, where figures share diverse means, fictive ends. All the same, a poignant gulf separates mother and off-spring. Other works such as *Fallen Greatness* (2010) and *Blank* (2010) take up the theme of derivation with a single figure, its surroundings and literal support.

Contrasts between style and materials are central in related themes of instruction or co-operation, as in *The Value of The Paw* (2010), *Epiphany* (2010), *The Snowball* (2010), *Horsey, Horsey* (2010) and *Help is on its way* (2010). Here style and roles are again layered, figures put together as if wearing masks, or as if heads or limbs, not quite fitting for roles, not quite candid. The works have an insouciant charm, but a subtle, troubling core. Finally, the artist’s role as ardent maker is also mocked, in *Potter Pig* (2010) and *Babs* (2010). Both assign childish farmyard persona to the industrious maker. To judge from the array of biomorphic forms at the feet of *Babs*, the allusion would seem to be to Barbara Hepworth, at her most prolific. The show also includes a pastiche of Degas’ *Little Dancer of Fourteen*, but these nods remain incidental to her

project; the easy asides of an artist finding herself with so much to do, reconciling all her creatures in a small but deft 'Peaceable Kingdom'.