

Cathie Pilkington

Cathie Pilkington RA (1968–) is a London-based sculptor. Her ambiguous figurative works are created through a wide range of processes, ranging from plaster casting, stone carving and clay modelling to the assemblage of found materials. Pilkington was elected Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy in 2015.



It is January 1769. Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the newly founded Royal Academy of Arts, is giving a lecture in which he refers to the discipline of working from the 'living model'. He speaks disparagingly of those artists who 'change the form according to their vague and uncertain ideas of beauty, and make a drawing rather of what they think the figure ought to be than of what it appears', and who, by 'curiously trifling endeavour... give the gloss of stuffs so as to appear real...'

Now picture an art installation in the Life Room of the Royal Academy Schools nearly 250 years later, in 2017, that flies in the face of this erudition. It's by Royal College of Art-trained artist and Royal Academician Cathie Pilkington. On Pilkington's appointment as RA Professor of Sculpture, Eileen Cooper RA, then Keeper of the Royal Academy – the artist responsible for the Schools – asked her what she would most like to do. The exhibition that ensued, 'Anatomy of a Doll', was remarkable for its wrong turns and beguiling impressions.

At the centre of the Life Room, Pilkington placed five Degas-inspired ballet-dancer girls, seemingly in the process of being sculpted by her. But the little dancers had busily taken on characteristics that they surely shouldn't have: one had preposterous arms, another was hugely pregnant; all were off-kilter, sexed-up and lushly coiffured.

Ranged all around the Life Room were human figures and figure-like objects in different sizes. Some were the classical plaster figures that RA students formerly drew for weeks and months, now on permanent display. But, as Pilkington explains: 'The RA plaster figures were so dominant in the space that I had to take ownership by covering them with fabric, transforming them from important men into stuffed dolls and soft, morphed, formal shapes – turning them into my own objects.' A great many other objects were Pilkington's direct creations. 'Installing my work felt like moving in, colonising the space, making the Life Room my own personal studio space.'

Dummies in a Landscape
2017
Painted resin, woolen blankets, tree roots, antique casts and mixed fabrics
Dimensions variable
Collection of the artist



Most of Pilkington's sculptures were of women and girls, and almost all were doll-like. In the case of *Dummies in a Landscape*, one figure had the stitched and stuffed legs of a soft doll, cover-girl hips, a Barbie-doll hand and a child-doll head. Her posture, with extended leg, pointed toe and the backs of her fingers about to rest against her mouth, could not have been more mannered. She was, precisely, 'the gloss of stuffs', to borrow Reynolds's phrase. So utterly out of place was this artifice in the sombre RA Life Room that it seemed positively exuberant.

Her figures also evoked shop-window dummies or even mantelpiece ornaments, as gloriously excessive expressions of (to quote Reynolds again) 'vague and uncertain ideas of beauty' and 'what they think the figure ought to be than of what it appears'. Pilkington seemed to point out that our responses to doll, mannequin, ornament and sculpture are essentially the same: we see a certain human presence in them all. 'I like riffing on connections,' she explains, 'especially if it's



Life Room: Anatomy of a Doll
2017
Wool blanket, steel, wood, paint, resin, paper, plaster, clay and mixed fabrics
Dimensions variable
Collection of the artist



Participants produce work as part of the course 'Exquisite Corpse: a Masterclass with Cathie Pilkington RA' in April 2017



a way of pricking bubbles and cutting things down to size.' For her, it's about 'the pull of the ordinary versus the elite, the democratising of forms'.

It is the wider, messy, complicated life *as lived*, and especially the condition of being female, that Pilkington brought to the Life Room. 'With the help of Surrealist thinking, it's possible to go beyond that feeling of being simply the "wrong sex"', she asserts. 'I am consciously joining in with the objectification of the female form, but on my own terms and with glee. As a sculptor I am more interested in making form than anything else, and I am always looking for a wooden awkwardness in combination with moments of utter believability.'

Remember, too, that the Degas-inspired dancers were works in progress: in Pilkington's words, the Life Room is a 'making space'. In keeping with this, during her exhibition she taught a number of lively classes within the space, in which participants worked from the plaster figures, Pilkington's sculptures and a living model. Moreover, Pilkington's sense of her artwork is as 'a playful combination of the figure and doll that can be a starting point for inventing unexpected forms and objects'. She saw her exhibition as 'a venue for participants to join in with this idea'. And so visitors, as they moved about the space and encountered her figures – and also what they thought about and their own imaginative leaps – were part and parcel of Pilkington's concept of enlivening the RA Life Room.

Although Pilkington is accomplished in working from life, her only formal training in the practice, on her foundation course at North Cheshire College in Northwich, ended in frustration. 'As a nineteen-year-old I was terrified by life drawing. I couldn't find a way in. I had a real block. I used to storm out of the life drawing room and play truant.' It was ten years later that she began to teach herself anatomical modelling skills in clay. 'I saw then that these skills would give me the



Title, date?
Medium on support?
Dimensions?
Collection?

freedom to make whatever I wanted in whatever way I chose. And I was excited about applying these traditional skills to a contemporary situation – being able to use them without getting hung up or tripped up by them.'

So Pilkington's takeover of the once-feared Life Room was on her own terms; it was perhaps even, as one RA student visitor expressed it, 'the revenge of her competence'. She is nowadays more likely to model from a doll than from a living being, and is curious about how she 'makes a lot of work from un-life' in her quest 'paradoxically to inject life into un-life'.

Pilkington's fierce way of looking at dolls, supercharged with adult insight, finds its way into her sculptures via the craft skills she has honed for decades. There is an extraordinary kickback from the doll-sculptures she makes: bloodless, oppressive, magnificent. In 'Anatomy of a Doll', Pilkington moved between the animate and inanimate, and between anger and rapture. It was an exhibition that brought life to the Life Room and the denied into the light.

Angela Kingston

Overleaf:
Degas Dolls 5
2017
Painted resin, steel
and wood
60 x 60 x 50cm
Collection of the artist

Degas Dolls 3
2017
Painted resin, steel
and wood
70 x 50 x 45cm
Collection of the artist

