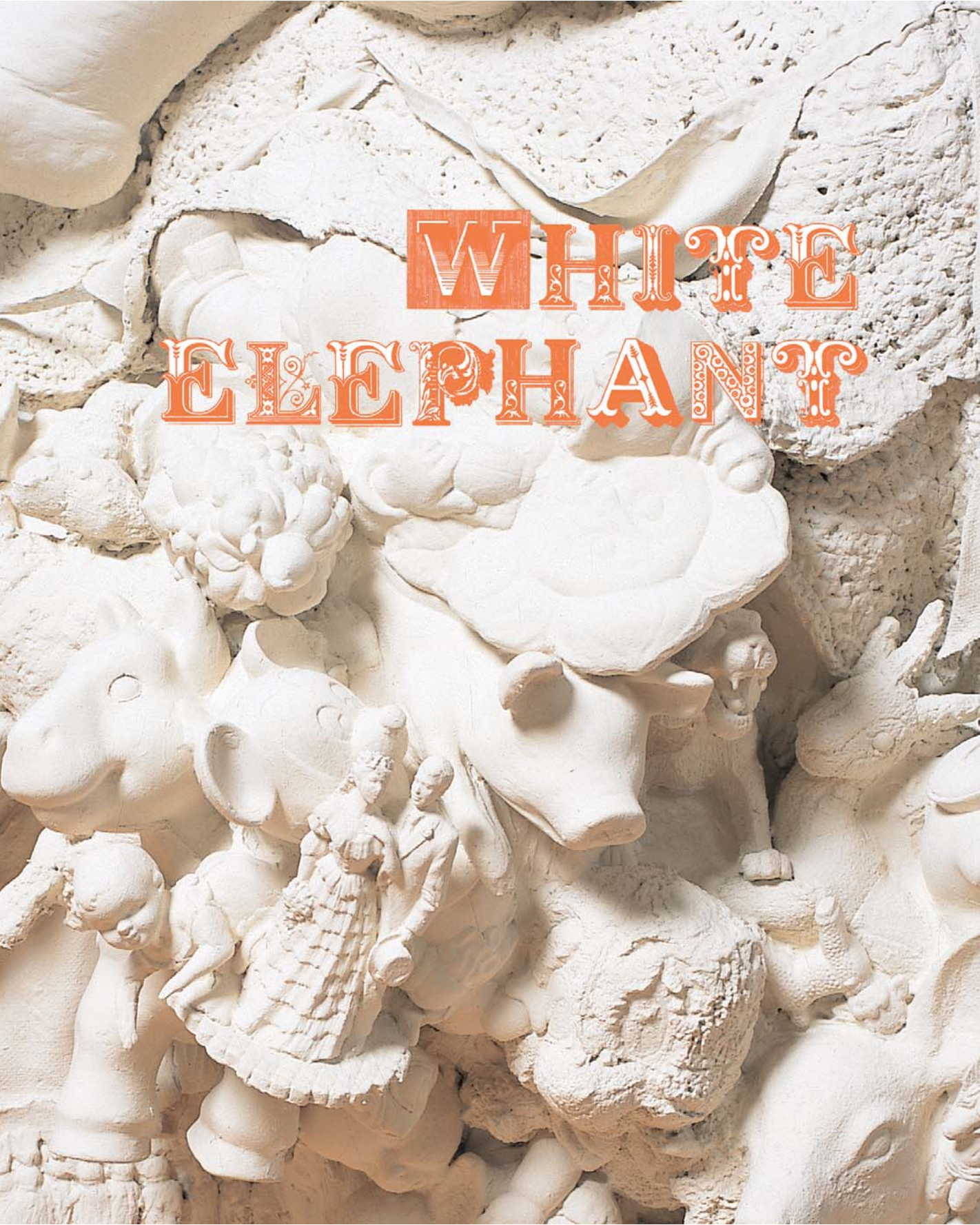


# WHITE ELEPHANT





# cathie pilkington

7 november – 7 december 2007

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# Acknowledgements

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- John Erle-Drax

And everyone at Marlborough Fine Art.

# Archeology of the Frivolous

On entering Cathie Pilkington’s studio one is struck by the quantity, intensity and variety of work. Surrounded by a crowd of objects in differing states of completion the question impresses itself; can they all have been made by one person? Were it not for the signs of ongoing activity they might have been collected from diverse, obscure sources; this one perhaps from a provincial toy museum, that from the prop store of a defunct East German television studio. As Rilke, with characteristic hyperbole, wrote of Rodin’s prolific output, ‘...one longs to see these hands that have lived like a hundred hands; like a nation of hands that rose before sunrise for the accomplishment of this work’.

Pilkington’s hands are quite dirty and decorated with colourful plastic rings that resemble boiled sweets. She has a crooked, wobbly little finger on her right hand where it broke and was “fixed” with a steel pin. She confides that this is her secret modelling tool, ‘...a bit like Freddie Mercury’s sticky out teeth projecting his voice further.’ Pilkington is an exceptionally gifted modeller, but she is suspicious of an over-emphasis on skill in art or the trace of the artist’s hand. ‘Rodin smells funny’ she says, ‘I can’t stand the overblown, romantic gesturing on his wobbly, fecal surfaces.’ The scatological reference seems appropriate. There *is* something turd-like about Rodin’s sculptures; dark, whippy, curling forms energetically extruded from the artist’s prodigious greatness. These dark deposits of genius have come to stand as the terminus of the grand sculptural tradition. Ironically, for Rilke the vitality of Rodin’s modelled surfaces, his ‘undulations without

end’, had rescued the soul of sculpture from an encrustation of past greatness, the ‘strata after strata of costumes that had piled over it like an ever-renewed varnish’.

We should be grateful that Pilkington has not re-rescued the soul of sculpture. However, she *has* sutured together some resources, like cultural body parts, to create a sculpture-like practice all of her own; an endearingly monstrous kind of art. And rather than wishing to lay bare the vital essence of a singular sculpture, it is precisely in the discontinuity of costumes, coverings, chrome-platings, matted encrustations, and glossy varnished layers that the non-identical being of Pilkington’s art is found. Amongst her resources some are entirely contemporary, some are traditional. Constructing, fixing, stitching, finding, assembling, painting, cobbling; any and every approach might be employed if the piece demands it – they are all freaks and they are all welcome. There is no hierarchy, no high or low, in the mixture of techniques that feed into Pilkington’s work. Her convoluted approach to handmaking, her untruth to materials, has an unexpected directness and integrity. What appears to be glazed ceramic turns out to be plastic and gloss paint. What appears to be fibreglass is actually oil paint on bronze. Found objects and made objects are interchangeable, indiscernible.

So far, so playful. Pilkington’s work seems to operate in a domain that could be called sub-sculptural. It seeps into your limbic brain beneath lofty forehead-clutching debate about contemporary art, embedded in a psychic



sedimentation of peculiar ornaments, forgotten souvenirs, and unsettling antique toys, too sentimental, frivolous and domestic to engage grand debates about what sculpture ought to be. *The motherlode* could serve as an emblem of this. A monstrous infant reclines like Olympia on a bed of bric-a-brac. She is an imperious, decadent fatty, a caricature of Great Sculpture, compacting a landfill of figurines, dolls and knick-knacks of the kind that gather dust on charity shop shelves.

Pilkington's art begins in this neglected substrate of common or garden unsculpture but does not end there. She reinvents and amplifies it. Her meta-crafted objects combine intensity and directness with layered meanings and perfectly calculated effects. Take as an illustration of Pilkington's reflexive self-commentary the work *Surrogate*. It recreates Harry Harlow's brutal monkey experiment as a piece of anthropomorphic taxidermy, a singerie that reads simultaneously as an image of traumatized childhood and a witty meditation on sculptural representation. Or how about *White Elephant*, the title piece of the show? In it Punch appears as a liveried, pirouetting manservant-cum-cheerleader, advertising what lies within and offering viewers a heap of tiny elephants on a tray. As a portrayal of an exhibition as a spectacle, the work produces a dizzying mise-en-abyme effect. A similarly recursive structure crops up in *Babushka*, where a self-absorbed baby-thinker seems to be reflecting on whether or not the Russian doll he is holding contains a soul. Like the brooding introvert of Rilke's *Duino Elegy* he is thinking; 'If I stare for long enough an angel will have to

come and bring it to life': just as we grown-ups are drawn by the vividness of these figures to imagine for a moment that sculpture has a soul after all. Rilke was ambivalent about the relation between dolls and sculpture, weighing the autonomy of the hefty sculpture he truly admired, Rodin's, against the parasitic charms of Lotte Pritzel's flimsy wax and cloth 'dolls for the vitrine' for which he wrote his celebrated essay.

One can quite easily visualize such opposites of material and status cohabiting in the present show. *White Elephant* is a sprawling, majestic concept album of an exhibition that segues through folk and pop into classical, heavy metal, sci-fi and horror genres, an elaborate, multi-themed production. This is how I imagine Pilkington reconnecting to the Rilke-Rodin sculpture rhetoric; through a mist of dry ice, with her virtuoso quasi-sculptural jamming which is extravagant, absurd and heartfelt.

Neil Walton 2007



White elephant



Cymraeg Golly





Majolica







Gonk



Empire



Octoman





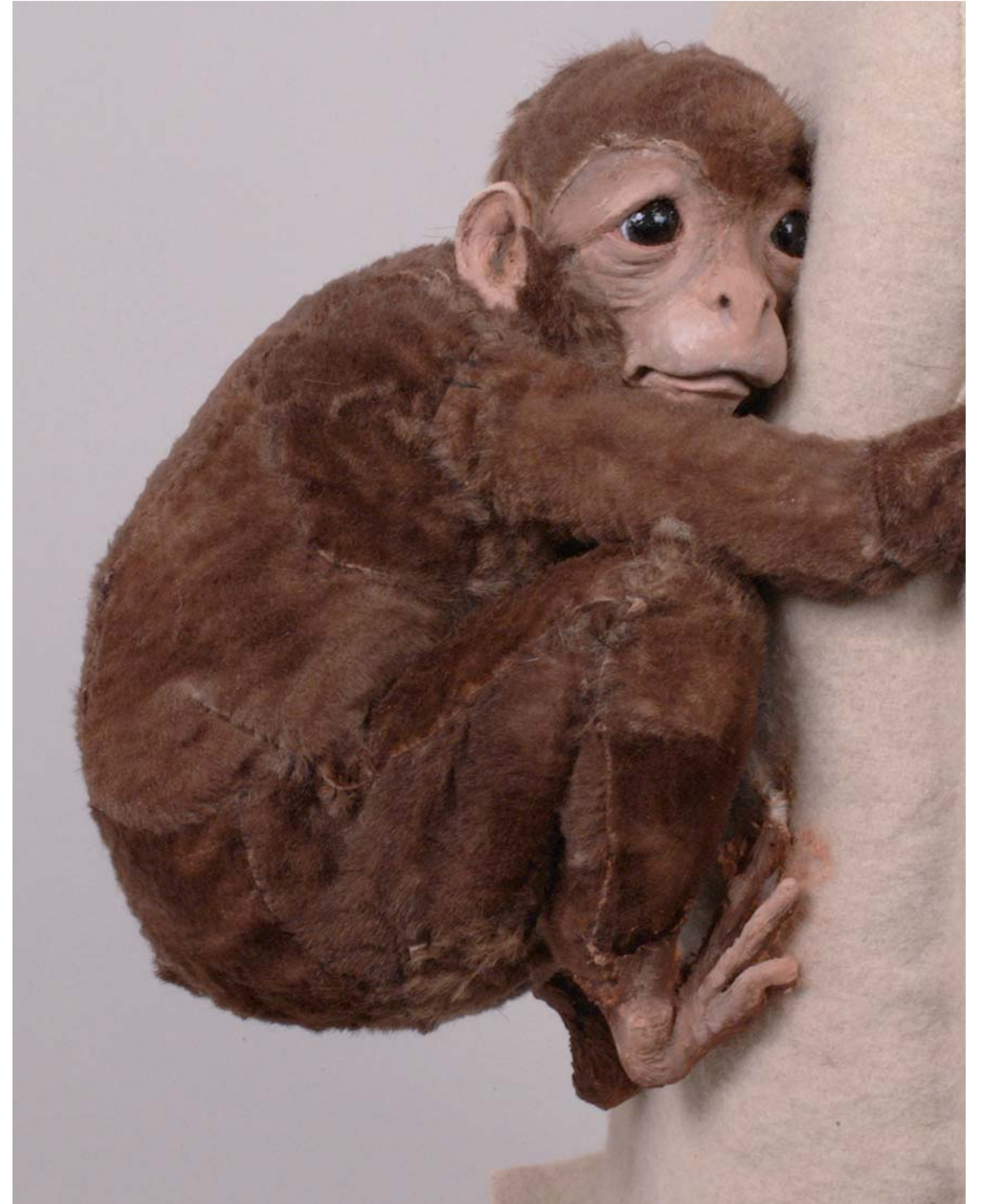


Folk





Surrogate







The motherlode







Pantheon





# List of works

**PANTHEON 2006/7**

Victorian Museum cabinet  
Jesmonite, bronze and paint  
Unique

**PANTHEON EDITIONS**

**BABOUSHKA 2006/7**

35 x 26 x 20 cm  
Each version in an edition of 2 with 1 A/P

**POUPARD 2006/7**

50 x 24 x 13 cm  
Each version in edition of 2 with 1 A/P

**KEWPIE 2006/7**

60 x 30 x 16 cm  
Each version in edition of 2 with 1 A/P

**OLYMPIA 2006/7**

24 x 45 x 28 cm  
Each version in an edition of 2 with 1 A/P

**PUTTO**

26 x 25 x 17 cm  
Each version in edition of 2 with 1 A/P

**EMPIRE 2007**

Paper, lace, plastic, ribbon fur and  
emulsion paint  
63 x 53 x 60 cm  
unique

**CYMRAEG GOLLY 2006/7**

Jesmonite, paint, cotton, lace and felt  
61 x 33 x 33 cm  
edition of 3 and 1 A/P

**FOLK 2007**

Wool, plastic, ribbon, charms and dolls  
80 x 36 x 37 cm  
unique

**SURROGATE 2007**

Wood, wire, wool, jesmonite, fur and paint  
57 x 30 x 30 cm  
unique

**MAJOLICA 2007**

Ceramic, gloss and oil paint  
73 x 40 x 32 cm  
unique

**GONK 2007**

Welded and polished steel  
56 x 47 x 63 cm  
unique

**OCTOMAN**

Aluminium wire, steel, kapok, rubber, fleece  
and paint  
80 x 60 x 65 cm  
unique

**THE MOTHERLODE 2007**

Painted Jesmonite  
190 x 160 x 160 cm  
edition of 3

**WHITE ELEPHANT 2007**

Painted jesmonite, cloth, ceramic, mirror tiles  
and motor  
88 x 170 x 100 cm

# Biography

1968 Born in Manchester

**EDUCATION**

1995 – 1997 Royal College of Art  
1985 – 1991 Edinburgh College of Art  
1984 – 1985 North Cheshire College

**EMPLOYMENT**

2000 – 2004 Camberwell College of Art  
1997 – 2000 Cheltenham and Gloucester  
College of Art  
1991 – 1995 Edinburgh College of Art  
1991 – 1995 Leith School of Art

**SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

2005 Cathie Pilkington, Programe, London  
2004 I'm a Winner! The Apartment. Athens  
Curio Space Station 65. London  
2003 Homunculus The Economist Plaza.  
London  
2000 Short Stories Galway Arts Centre. Ireland  
1998 Viva Chihuahua! Prema. Uley.  
Gloucestershire

**SELECTED EXHIBITIONS**

2007 The Craft, Transition Gallery, London  
2006 The Craft, The Metropole Gallery,  
Folkstone  
2006 Summer Exhibition, Marlborough Fine  
Art, London  
2005 Engerland! OneOtwo, the Tea Buildings,  
London.  
2003 Emporium Domo Baal. London  
Flock The Model Arts Centre. Sligo. Ireland  
Off the Leash Graves Art Gallery. Sheffield  
Captive Bred Bolton City Art Gallery  
2002 Royal Academy Summer Show  
2001 For the love of dog Battersea Pumphouse  
Gallery

Auras and Avatars The First Public School.  
Greece  
Animal The Collective Gallery. Edinburgh  
2000 Mandarin Duck Awards Milan. Italy  
Fathom The Study Gallery. Poole. Dorset  
Glory Hole Magri Walk. Whitechapel. London  
Sculpture Malmsbury Abbey and Gloucester  
Cathedral  
1999 Dub Housing Steirscher Herbst 99.  
Austria  
Rover Manchester City Art Gallery  
Medway Open Rochester Art Gallery. England  
1998 False Economy Gasworks. London  
Viva Chihuahua! The Tannery. London  
1997 Kettle Blue Gallery Beaumont.  
Luxembourg  
Atrium Charing Cross. London  
1991 Hot House Kew Gardens. London  
John Watson Prize Gallery of Modern Art.  
Edinburgh  
2006 Summer Exhibition, Marlborough Fine  
Art, 19 July – 9 September

**COLLECTIONS AND AWARDS**

2001 Deste Foundation. Athens  
2000 Manchester City Art Gallery  
1999 L.A.B award to individual Artists  
1997 Fine Art Research Fellowship. Cheltenham

**PUBLIC COMMISSIONS**

2000 @ Bristol. Harbourside. Bristol  
2005 Evalina Childrens Hospital London.  
2005 Comme des Garcons, Dover Street  
Market, London.

**SELECTED BIOGRAPHY**

2007 The Guardian Weekend Magazine, 10  
March 07, Cathie Pilkington Art interview.



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White elephant (detail)

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