

1 Michael Doolan 2 *Blue Story (Bear and Bird)*, hand-modelled earthenware, adhered automotive nylon, 2007, H36cm
3 *A Cautionary Tale Continuum (Yellow)*, hand-modelled earthenware, adhered automotive nylon, 2010, H34cm

A Fractured Fairy Tale

Inga Walton explores the ‘unhappily ever after’ work of Michael Doolan.

In spite of the boundary-pushing scientific developments which have defined our age and, in the minds of many, represent a challenge to nature or to ideas of divine creation, one feat of bioengineering has not eventuated – of all the many ‘transgressive’ acts of human creativity, it remains unlikely that Pinocchio will ever be a ‘real boy’. Other once-beloved children’s characters and toys from what some see as a more innocent and forgiving time are not faring so well either. Appropriately, Golliwogs have been consigned to the sin-bin of political correctness, and various popular culture entities such as Noddy, Biggles, Thomas the Tank Engine, Tintin, Jynx (from Pokémon), Bratz, and Barbie, are either on probation, or have had various of their attributes ‘reworked’. Michael Doolan feels their pain and sense of bewilderment, or at least what he envisages that might be, assuming toys are autonomous subjects in their ‘private’ time, rather than objectified playthings.

DYSFUNCTIONAL STORY TIME Challenging the fairy tale ideal, Doolan’s works disarm and seduce the viewer with their veneer of benign cuteness and appeal to collective nostalgia; even the scaled-up size suggests the toy has grown in relative proportion to the potential former owner. Nonetheless, something darker is afoot, owing much to the folk stories collected by Giovanni Francesco Straparola (c.1480-1557) and later Charles Perrault (1628-1703). ‘I see my narrative-based works as a series of “cautionary tales”... deliberately set to recall the gothic undertow and expose the dark underbelly of the early childhood narrative experience,’ Doolan confirms. It is often a bleak re-appraisal which serves to dismantle familiar childhood motifs and replaces them with cheery bright tableaux of a dysfunctional story time and rainbows-gone-wrong. The soft, yielding comfort of favourite toys has been usurped by the fixed and brittle clay body that remains beneath the surface of the works. It is as if idealised, halcyon notions of childhood have been entombed in these almost funereal objects; innocence, naïveté, and promise give way to disillusionment, responsibility, and cynicism. Children can’t wait to grow up; adults often rue the circumstances by which they became better acquainted with the world.

There is invariably something melancholic or calamitous in Doolan’s snow-dome Toyland environment – a world replete with death, dismemberment, social unrest, abandonment, isolation, and anguish. Singly or in groups, Doolan’s protagonists appear forlorn and paralysed by ineptitude, mutely baffled at how events have departed so far from the expected script. If there is a sour note



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amidst the saccharine, Doolan will find it – and his scepticism appears warranted. These days toys are less about sentiment or personal affinity, but increasingly loaded with diverse agendas: as a cross-media marketing tool for TV, film, game, and fast food interests; a ‘pester power’ stalwart for multinational companies like Mattel, Hasbro, and Disney; a sought-after addition for those re-creating childhood collections; as objects of identification and obsession for a range of subcultural groups ranging from ‘furries’ to plushophiles. Similarly, Doolan is intrigued by the way certain characters such as Puss in Boots and cartoon figures like Mickey Mouse, Goofy, and Sylvester are endowed with human qualities and distinct personalities which are never questioned by the audience. ‘The concept of anthropomorphism is a current theme...the



4 *Devil*, hand-modelled earthenware, platinum lustre, 2008, H23cm 5 *Bambi*, hand-modelled earthenware, platinum lustre, 2009, H19cm 6 *Pink Dog*, hand-modelled earthenware, auto enamel and

aluminium, 2010, H34cm 7 *For Now and For Ever (Frog Family)*, hand-modelled earthenware, platinum lustre, 2007, H42cm max

human-animal hybrid or humanised animal alive in the fairy tale...the animal [as] trickster and digresser of society's rules interests me greatly!

MAKING In the studio Doolan's works result from a series of detailed drawings and drafts, which are then hand-modelled and hollow-formed in a fine white stoneware clay body, employing a range of handbuilding techniques. Particular surfaces such as the nylon, aluminium, and automotive paint finishes are applied by industry from the non-arts sector. 'This "outside the studio" engagement has come about through my experience developing outdoor works. These large-scale sculptures are created from digital scans of my original clay maquettes; this has fed back into the smaller scale ceramic works

and has enabled me to move beyond the expected ceramics arena.' Like magpies, we are drawn to the lustrous shiny surface Doolan achieves, a featureless expanse upon which the viewer can project, and is oddly implicated by his/her distorted, looming reflection. Reminiscent of the 'House of Mirrors' at a carnival, this gives a confusing or unrecognisable version of the self, suggesting that images, like memory, are impermanent and subject to change. 'With laying up large and complex surfaces with platinum lustre, for example, the ongoing challenge is to achieve an unmarked surface, free from any imperfections. This results in a low overall success rate, where the kiln environment or the application process doesn't go according to the best possible planning,' Doolan comments ruefully.



8 *A Cautionary Tale Continuum (Blue)*, hand-modelled earthenware, adhered automotive nylon, 2010, H37cm
9 *A Cautionary Tale Continuum (Red)*, hand-modelled earthenware, adhered automotive nylon, 2010, H32cm

10 *A Cautionary Tale Continuum (Orange)*, hand-modelled earthenware, adhered automotive nylon, 2010, H36cm
11 *A Cautionary Tale Continuum (Green)*, hand-modelled earthenware, adhered automotive nylon, 2010, H38cm

Within his practice there are references to Jeff Koons' sculptures, particularly the gaudy *Celebration* series (1994-2008), an influence Doolan readily acknowledges. 'In my mind his seminal work *Rabbit* [from the *Statuary* series, 1986] is an incredibly important work. It successfully re-stages the concept of materiality and questions common aesthetics, but my works deliberately lack the mechanised remoteness of Koons.' Whereas editions by the likes of Koons, Takashi Murakami, and Damien Hirst constitute a 'brand' or product and are produced by assistants, Doolan's figures are personally crafted and unique. In turn this is emblematic of the difference between old-fashioned artisan-made toys and the mass manufacturing of cheaper, disposable toys and figurines throughout Asia for the export market. 'The idea of the hand-wrought is important to me...I never

cast my objects or use templates. I must say though, simply from an aesthetic point of view, the dumbed down, mass production versions of these characters do attract me. The clever simplicity employed to replicate [them] for the mass market is interesting. I am drawn to re-staging these works if there is a quality that jumps out at me. I have picked up some interesting objects in both Korea and Japan that I have rebuilt and modified...I also tend to cherry-pick some qualities that attract me to one particular toy and include them in another to create more of a hybrid.'

STORIES Doolan is acutely conscious that children's seemingly harmless fantasies and role-play with their toys can also serve to enact ideas of power, domination, conformity, and gender stereotypes,




Photography Graham Baring
Michael Doolan lectures at Sydney College of the Arts, New South Wales, Australia
Exhibitions *Korero – Ceramics In Conversation*, Taiwan Ceramics Biennale 2010, Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taipei, until 31 October 2010; *Zen to Kawaii: The Japanese Affect*, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, Australia, until 19 December 2010; *Your Move – Australian Artists*

Play Chess, Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia, 30 October 2010-30 January 2011

Representation Karen Woodbury Gallery, Richmond, Victoria, Australia; Bett Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

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thereby perpetuating the values and hierarchies of a patriarchal society. It is an acknowledgement that children can be cruel, narcissistic, fickle, bitterly competitive, and malevolent – and that some never grow out of it. 'The process in the creation of these works is simply, to me, like writing or making a story. It's about trying to develop a scenario which most effectively evokes the quality I'm attempting to suggest, a tension, an emotional tipping-point in the narrative. Here, the viewer takes over – I ask them to complete the story.' Doolan's works may speak initially to our childhood longing and misspent youth, with their perennially shiny-and-new surfaces or pelts of nylon fuzz. However, it is his determination to address the sobering 'unhappily ever after' that often follows which makes the stories Doolan tells relevant, compelling, and layered with pathos. 



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