

Michael Doolan

For the last ten years Michael Doolan has cast a retinue of up-scaled characters from toyland in various tableaux illustrating all manner of conflicted, moral dilemmas. There's Mr Gumby, finger puppets, Lego girls and boys, Pokemon, ET. But the cowboy's gone rogue, GI Joe is set to ambush the bunnies, and a speeding locomotive is on collision course. A finger puppet lies motionless on the ground. The bears are stupefied, looking on. We are never sure of the particular issue, only an overwhelming sense of conflict. There are no obvious goodies and baddies. It's uncertain what the teams are, and what the issues are. But it's all come down to a single, stalled dramatic turning point in the game. In isolation each figure registers a simple emotional state – smiling face, blank stare, grimace. But in their careful, studied arrangement, in the precise craning neck of a bear, the astonished look on a green alien's face, the slumped resignation of a soft toy, or the rigid bearing of hard plastic aggressor, they act in concert to portray a range of contrary responses to each dire prospect: shock and horror at brutal vengeance; disbelief at the double cross; or a slow dawning that something is dead, has dropped out of a tree 'splat' right in front of them.

There are neither children or adults in these scenes, only conflicted notions of right and wrong, left behind to animate each character, each event, on the teetering verge of morality. It may seem that children's toys have been arranged according to adult concepts, even that these are emergent moments of adulthood in the games of children, when children might in play become adults, just as the institutions of rational law and morality or war come to structure and over-determine impulse, desire and reflex actions.

From which perspective it's possible to see the whole of human endeavour as a hopeless, unending rationalisation of love, or anger, or jealousy since these moments may equally describe the fall of Rome, a lover's tiff, or the contest of land rights. In exactly the same way, wars may be 'just', force may be 'required' and discipline may be 'necessary'.

Certainly the time-honoured fixity and fragility of ceramics is a perfect means to concretise these developments, opposed to the malleable, moving parts of most toys, and arresting human development at these precise moments of infantile predilection. Doolan recreates the surface texture of soft fabric, hard plastic, even mirror in all sorts of intricate, coiled, hollow-forms. He uses traditional coil technique, and matches these various materials with glazes that are fired and refired up to a dozen times. He also pushes the tensile limits of clay, often having to remake things several times. Thus he stages the transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of a material transformation.

Due to the prevalence of digital means, we might take this transformation a little for granted. But needless to say, these scenes are hand-wrought, though they seem

more likely to derive from Photoshop than the first pots of human kind. And although they are clearly part of an epochal fascination with animated toys (i.e. Toy Story) they are also substantially, radically different; dirt not pixels (and actually the opposite of animation).

Lately, even the toys seem aware of their own transformation in clay, set at odds with their original purpose, confounded, fixed: a teddy bear upended on its head crumpled under its own earthen weight; massing blue figures unable to enter their own matching blue house (because they don't have any arms or legs or mouths, and their dumb house doesn't have any doors or windows); a toppled bird unable to right itself sits pathetically at the foot of a tree without branches. In each case, a simple and common (or casual) dysfunction in the world of children is raised to unbearable pathos in the world of adults (Boo Hoo).

Of course, our interpretation of these scenarios as adults is instructive, since we often project our adult behaviour on to childish play. But Doolan knows that behind thinly veiled pretences and justifications we are still children. And he also knows that there is nothing simple about a child's view, nothing so plain or rational about an adult's view either once you scratch the veneer of civilisation. We are the same species after all.

The latest reflective works – popular characters stripped of facial features and unilaterally rendered in highly reflective mirror-like glaze – stage the exact dilemma of an adult looking intently upon a toy only to see his own face, his own bearing and intensity, reflected back to him. In seeking to know what a child sees I find myself. Indeed, I am an animal, sometimes a monster. I have learnt to share in order to get more. I am still afraid of the dark but I do like to be little bit scared.

Just as the crossing from childhood to adulthood is rendered as an almost imperceptible material transition from synthetic to ceramic, so the very question of what's in a toy is repeated endlessly in this near-formless, fluid void.

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