

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise

For Now and For Ever continues Michael Doolan's fascination with the world of toys. His muse is pint sized popular culture and in a perverse reversal of the cheap, plastic materiality of children's toys, Doolan crafts extraordinary ceramic sculptures using traditional modelling techniques. His recent move towards making oversized toy world simulacra confirms that for Doolan toys are always more than just toys.

"Is Fifi a flower or a person?" I asked my son. "Both, she is a flower person" he replied with an assurance only a five year old possesses. In the cosmos of childhood, Fifi the flowertot is understood to be both plant and person, both materially real and thoroughly imaginary. For the uninitiated Fifi & the Flowertots is an animated children's television series produced by Ken Chapman, the creator of Bob the Builder. Fifi, the title character and amnesiac heroine, is an anthropomorphised forget-me-not who practices organic gardening. Fifi's origin as a stop motion animation character is endlessly reconfigured in the marketplace: talking dolls, scented storybooks, backpacks, tree houses and trailers proliferate.

Fifi Plush, a huggable twenty centimetre tall doll, is no doubt the inspiration for Michael Doolan's two metre For Now and For Ever (Flower Girl). With the original maquette modelled in clay, Flower Girl is a daffodil yellow, gargantuan ghost of the television heroine. But rather than emulating the seamless animation of digital Fifi, Doolan's Flower Girl consciously recreates the silent stasis and soft, ill-defined limbs of the plush toy simulacrum. He has erased the character's facial features, lending the figure a strange sentinel presence. The beholder is diminished, infantilised and more than a little intimidated by Doolan's everlasting flower.

Flower girl's nemesis in For Now and For Ever is an oversized black moose with an empty visage and a shiny black Darth Vader finish. Like the other human-animal hybrids in Doolan's bestiary Moose, Lost is marooned in the gallery space: the broken multi-directional sign at his feet underscoring his alienation.

Larger than a horse, capable of holding its breath underwater and in possession of uncanny, oversized antlers, the moose at least to antipodean eyes is an impossibility, a conundrum. Like the platypus in the eyes of Europeans, the moose appears the result of a willful miscegenation. Doolan has chosen his now signature, platinum glaze to adorn a smaller moose entitled For Now and For Ever (Moose). The improbability of the moose is such that Doolan's moose (or should that be meese?) belong more to television, an echo perhaps of the guileless Bullwinkle, than to nature. In the words of one of my students, "Bullwinkle is the only moose I've ever known."

Pepa, Doolan's ten year old daughter, is his talent scout and collaborator. Doolan has accompanied Pepa on countless trips to Camberwell market in suburban Melbourne where Pepa, a pint sized artworld oracle, finds second hand toys

for her willing apprentice and artist father. Back in Doolan's studio Pepa crafts her own versions of their market wins and pre-loved spoils, frequently assembling new environments and scenarios for her creatures. Pepa's personal collection of toys includes several families of anthropomorphised animals known as the Sylvania Families. Created in 1985 by Japanese company Epoch, the line of furry families had reached cult status and international distribution by 1988 only to be discontinued by the late nineties. More recently the Sylvania Families have been reintroduced into the Australian market. By choosing fickle toy world characters to replicate, Doolan exposes the trifling fashions and fortunes of the toy world imperium. Capricious consumables are hyper-crafted into high art permanence, made for now AND forever.

The Sylvania Families feature woodland animals including mouse, rabbit and frog families. The figures all wear clothes and are granted a quasi-human status. In Aesopian fashion they draw our attention not to animal behaviour but to human folly. Doolan's platinum replicas serve as three-dimensional fables of human vices. The figures are faceless and after several kiln firings, their platinum lusted faces become mirrors where the beholder can't help becoming entangled in their own sentimental projections. Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, perhaps unwittingly articulated the narcissism underpinning our attraction to the animal kingdom, when he concluded that

when other animals give us a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them (and there are many that do so), they inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection toward their persons; we like to have them near us, and we enter into a kind of relation with them.

Doolan's choice of woodland animals and scenarios also uncovers the darker underbelly of the childhood narrative experience. Groupings of woodland critters, stripped of facial features and set amongst anthropomorphised tree trunks, recall the gothic undertow of children's fairytales. The arrested development of the creatures generates metamorphic possibility; their highly reflective faux liquid surfaces prevent the objects from assuming fixed identities. Like The Terminator's liquid man, they appear to be in a constant state of transformation. Doolan's most recent experiments involve camouflaging the ceramic surface of his creatures and environments, including a woodcutter rabbit and grandma's house, in a second fabric skin. Doolan's material deception, achieved by disguising clay as metal, cloth or even plastic, implies another level of deception.

If you go down to the woods today, you'd better go in disguise.

Lisa Slade

Lecturer in Art History and Theory at
the University of Newcastle
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