

NEW WORK FRANCIS UPRTICHARD

Francis Upritchard

"I wanted my new figures to be really close to Dungeons and Dragons figures. Fantasy alongside the sentimental, nostalgic and idealised"



1 **Double Dog Urn** (2002), ceramic, modelling material

2 **Three Fingered Glove with Four Rings** (2005) leather glove, rings by Karl Fritsch, 18.5 x 9 x 6cm

3 **Worried Effigy** (2006) modelling material, wire, wooden base, 38.7 x 16 x 16cm

4 Installation view of **Rainwob II**, ArtSpace, Sydney, 2008

Opposite: **The Sheriff** (2008) modelling material, paint, steel, 57.5 x 24 x 23cm

FRANCIS UPRTICHARD, who will represent New Zealand at the 2009 Venice Biennale, has been described as the "doctor of contemporary voodoo". Her sculptures – from a furry sloth to bandaged mummies and shrunken heads – recall ethnographic relics, but can't be attached to any one culture, hinting at everything from Maori imagery to European heraldry. Upritchard first gained attention in 2001 when she and Luke Gottelier founded the Bart Wells Institute in a disused warehouse in East London, showing their own and other new artists' work. She was then shortlisted for Beck's Futures in 2003, and featured in Charles Saatchi's New Blood in 2004. Her recent works – shown earlier this year in Australia and New Zealand – draw on the counterculture utopianism of the 60s and 70s. *INTERVIEW: Natasha Conland*

Upritchard is a very distinguished Welsh name. What is your background?

Upritchard may be Welsh and distinguished, but when people say UP-ritchard it sounds much the opposite. It's super cute to me when some people say Ou-pritchard. That sounds dead posh. As for the ancestry, my father's side came to New Zealand from Ireland. Farmers, I guess.

You have said that there seem to be few sculptors currently working with the figure. Why does the figure interest you?

Perhaps I meant that few good sculptors are working with the figure. I love Paul McCarthy's pirate figures, although I don't usually like figurative sculptures. But I do like figurative painting, and that confuses me. I guess it's easy to make a thing look like a toy, but I wanted to see if I could make a figure that I found interesting.

What materials do you use?

My first figures were made with Balata, a natural rubber from Brazil. You soften it in boiling water, massage colour in with dyes and then sculpt it under cold water to stop the separate parts sticking together. As it cools down it becomes very stiff, so I had to make these works in about half an hour and I couldn't work on refinement or detail. The process gives them a mangled "bog man" appearance, but they also look like underfed prophets or sages. The new works, which I call "plastic people", are made of Super Sculpey [strong artists' clay] over a wire structure, and they're much more refined.

Can you talk about these new works? The elfish-looking creature in a rainbow suit (overleaf) is fascinating.

The suit is actually a skin, and what perhaps looks like a hat is her hairstyle. She's called Amelia (2007) and is very loosely based on my friend's little sister. All his family look very similar, with lovely noses. I wanted to do a

portrait of each of them using photographs as a starting point. The precursor to this series is a portrait of Kate MacGarry [Upritchard's London dealer] that I made based on a photograph of her which I took in Mexico. The photo is of her clutching a water bottle to her chest – she looks much more doll-like than she is in reality. The sculpture is called *Worried Effigy* (2006) – she's wringing her hands and has a squinty look on her face.

Your Rainwob series seems to refer to experimental homes of the 60s and 70s. What sort of society are you creating?

I find it so hard to explain my non-utopian dreams... I feel very hopeless as an agent for political change. I guess in the end that my buildings are a salute to those who at least try to change things – and Rainwob is an attempt at an unsuccessful utopia. In New Plymouth [New Zealand] – where I've just completed my residency – there was a house built with a honeycomb structure called Norian... no right angles. The man who designed it had interesting ideas about the negative values of right angles, God and cheese – I really like people who believe in their own inventions and follow them to such an extreme. So I want my buildings to look handmade, self-determined, nutty and impractical, like a naive attempt to create a home with the best possible intentions.

Your work feels overtly "made". What is the value of materiality in your work?

At art school in the late 90s theory was really in, but at the time I kicked against the notion of making work that in any way illustrated an idea. I've always loved paintings – you can do an enormous variety of things with a brush and paint on canvas. I try to give surface just as much attention as a painter has to. I really enjoy making the work and I like to make things quite fast. I can't stand casting, as I hate the extra labour involved. I feel it just takes the work further away from

its original state. I loathe sanding down seams or checking for bubbles – it makes art feel like a production line rather than an experiment.

Your recent figures have a strong element of fantasy about them.

The new figures – despite the psychedelic colours – are quite old-fashioned. I wanted them to be really close to Dungeons and Dragons figures. Fantasy alongside the sentimental, nostalgic and idealised – or perhaps I mean stylised. Almost like dolls. I like that people who don't know very much about art really like them. They're my most accessible work so far, which I'd always thought was a bad thing but now I'm not so sure. People like the fingers and toes and they invent reasons for the expressions... and politely ignore the organs.

The man standing with his foot on a cowboy hat holding his penis is curious.

The yellow dude, the Sheriff – he's an odd one! The week I made it was ameriCARna weekend in New Plymouth, and his hat is a bit like Mount Taranaki [snow-capped volcano on New Zealand's North Island]. He's a monkey man. A wanker. Actually, I think he's just fiddling with it. He's also a bit like Goliath's David to me – he's the sheriff and he's conquered something with a really big hat. I love that yellow – it's a very nasty colour... insipid. I never used to like yellow.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

I'd really like one of those huge shiny Jeff Koons Balloon Poodle sculptures. It wouldn't fit in my house, but it would just fit in my back yard. I live in a brutal looking council estate and the yard is looked down on to by lots of other people, and backs on to a car park, so this big, happy, shiny thing would really brighten up the place.

Exhibitions: Kate MacGarry, London, Jan 2009; www.katemacgarry.com

CV Born: 1976, New Plymouth, New Zealand Studied: University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand Lives and works: London Represented: Kate MacGarry, London; Ivan Anthony, Auckland, New Zealand

Images courtesy Francis Upritchard and Kate MacGarry, London, and ArtSpace, Sydney





- 1 Geezer in Car (2008), metal structure, modelling plastic, paint, 42 x 42 x 45cm
2 Rona (2008), modelling material, paint, steel, 42 x 30 x 44cm
3 Horse Man (2008), modelling material, paint, steel, 54.5 x 16 x 41cm
4 Amelia (2007), modelling material, foil, wire, paint 64 x 17 x 20cm
Opposite: Maki (2008), metal structure, modelling plastic, paint, 62 x 23 x 21cm

All images courtesy Francis Upritchard and Kate MacGarry, London except Horse Man and Rona, courtesy Francis Upritchard, Ivan Anthony, Auckland, New Zealand and Goretta-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand. Maki and Geezer in Car, photos by Silversalt (Jennifer Leahy), courtesy of Artspace, Sydney

