

Sue Hubbard

Art Critic

Laura Ford Days of Judgement

Roche Court Sculpture Park

Roche Court is one of those well kept cultural secrets like Garsington Opera at Wormsley in the Chiltern Hills, or Charleston, the former home of the painter Vanessa Bell; loved and valued by those in the know as something unique and rather special. Just off the main A30, it is easy to miss the unassuming sign that directs you to the private sculpture park a few miles outside Salisbury. But as you turn into the driveway that leads through the idyllic Wiltshire countryside you are in for a surprise. In the middle of a field, at a height of more than 17 feet and measuring more than 25 feet across and 75 feet from end to end, stands a huge Cor-ten steel sculpture, *Millbank Steps* by Sir Anthony Caro, commissioned originally for Tate Britain in 2004, and comprising of four huge, stepped arches. This heroic form, like some great prehistoric henge, frames the clouds and sky, along with the surrounding fields, in a way that is quite magical, creating a dialogue between sculpture, architecture and even landscape painting, so that seeing the work here is a completely different experience to encountering it in a gallery. And that is the whole point of Roche Court; to experience contemporary sculpture within a rural setting.



Days of Judgement

Founded in 1958, the original New Art Centre was located in Sloane Street, London. Then in 1994 it relocated to Roche Court, a nineteenth-century house in rolling parkland, built in 1804 for Admiral Nelson, reputedly for trysts with his mistress Emma, though these were apparently cut short by his premature death at Trafalgar. Traces of Iron Age and Roman farms and two Saxon cemeteries have been located nearby on Roche Court Down. In the twenty acres or so of parkland and garden with its ha-ha and scenic views, sited amid the walled vegetable garden with its Victorian glass houses or dotted in wooded dells and hollows, are around 100 works by 20th and 21st century sculptors. From the terrace of the house a pair of huge bronze hares by Barry Flanagan can be seen leaping in the cleft of the valley. Roche Court also represents various artists' estates including those of Barbara Hepworth, Kenneth Armitage and Ian Stephenson.

In the autumn of 1998 the architect, Stephen Marshall, added the new gallery that now joins the house and the Orangery which, along with the award-winning Artist's House, has proved to be a perfect addition to the park and won six architectural awards including the RIBA Stephen Lawrence Prize for best small building. This allows for an ever-changing programme of exhibitions. The present show is by Laura Ford.



Days of Judgement - Cats 1-7

Ford is well known for her sculptures that appropriate childhood imagery and re-interpret it within a post-Freudian light. She has, in the past, made not quite life-size sculptures of small girls brandishing guns and trees with feet in little red shoes. There has been a badger dressed as an urban down-and-out, a Mrs. Tiggy Winkle hedgehog disguised as a bag lady and a malevolent black bird that,

disturbingly, has a child's legs clad in school shoes and baggy stockings. Ford's territory is that of the nursery rhyme and fairy tale, to which she gives an idiosyncratic and slightly disturbing twist. Although not explicitly narrative her work captures something of the pre-cognitive emotions of the child: anger, jealousy and a desire for revenge. Her animals are never completely cosy, though they have an anthropomorphic quality; a reminder that behind the veneer of culture untamed passions still lurk, especially in the child. And there is dark humour. In her early Bang-Bang - a small gun-toting girl in a frilly dress of white plaster, with a hand-knitted head - appears full of gleeful murderous intent. Like Paula Rego, Ford understands the power of childhood passions and the darkness of the Id.

Trained originally at Bath Academy of Art in the 1970s she was included in the *New Contemporaries*, 1983, before taking up a place at Chelsea Art School when, whilst still a student, her work was included in *The Sculpture Show* at the Hayward and the Serpentine. For this current exhibition at Roche Court she has taken as her unlikely starting point Masaccio's fresco, *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, from which she has borrowed the pose and sense of abjection. Pacing the gallery floor that overlooks the garden are a group of larger than life skinny black cats with very long tails in various states of anxiety and distress. Part cat burglar, part cartoon characters they not only evoke Dr. Seuss's absurdist *Cat in a Hat* illustrations but conjure something of T.S. Eliot's anxious office workers in *The Waste Land* streaming over London Bridge wracked with existential angst or, possibly, today's bankers ground down with the worry of financial and social collapse. Completely black there is also something of the malevolence of the witch's companion about them. In medieval European superstition it was thought that one way to identify a woman as a witch was if she owned a cat. This was believed to be a demon or evil spirit in disguise that acted as her familiar and aid. Outside in the park, two further bronze cats stalk the grounds, their blank faces concerned only with their own thoughts and rituals as they appear to search out their potential prey in the surrounding fields and woods.



Days of Judgement - Limited Penguins

In the Orangery, Ford has installed a group of sculptures that look like a class of primary school children dressed up as penguins, for underneath their black costumes with their orange beaks like those of a medieval plague doctor, are pairs of small feet in black gym shoes. Ford has described these as sculptures dressed as people, dressed as animals, so that the incongruity and ambivalence seem to add to a sense of the uncanny. Whilst initially comical and cute there is something intrinsically disturbing about these small figures as if, like Gulliver in Lilliput, we, the viewer, are walking through a crowd of not too welcoming midgets. Clustered together and apparently marooned and displaced in the incongruous setting of a gallery they also seem to suggest our confused attitudes to global warming, whereby on one hand we Disneyfy and anthropomorphise wild animals, whilst allowing their real habitats to be destroyed.

Through humour, wit and a sense of play Laura Ford's reconnects us to our lost childhoods. Not the saccharine, innocent childhood of the Victorian storybook or of modern advertising but that which was understood by story tellers such as The Brothers Grimm or that master of the fairy tale Charles Perrault, a childhood that reveals the dark, often complex emotions that remain embedded in the deep core of our psyches often well into adulthood and can here be seen in a cluster of apparently innocuous penguins or a group of sleek black cats.

Laura Ford Days of Judgement at the Roche Court Sculpture Park, Wiltshire from 24 November 2012 to 3 February 2013