

Playing real pretend

Leah Kharibian

Akershus castle



DANCING CLOG GIRLS, LAURA FORD 2016

Akershus castle and fortress is a fine place to encounter the work of the British sculptor, Laura Ford (b.1961). There are many resonances between her work and the location. One is that they share the quality of insistent, yet impenetrable, presence.

Castles and fortresses, to state the obvious, are built to be visible and imposing. They both protect and dominate their hinterland. They also command and control the view. Significantly, they are places from which to see out, not structures to be peered into. They are indomitable and deliberately play their cards close to their chest. Akershus, particularly when approached from Oslofjord, is a mass of sheer ramparts with an outward appearance of blindness that belies the fact that nothing around it can go unobserved. So, too, with Laura Ford's sculptures. They might be far more modest in scale – many of them suggesting children in form – but they all they have an arresting, implacable sense of being. Once discovered by the viewer, they are not to be

ignored. They demand attention and inhabit the space they occupy, affecting its mood; sometimes in quite sinister and insinuating ways. They are both immediately recognisable on certain levels but are also distinctly hard to know. They observe, they see, while often appearing blind.

Seeing but not being seen (or fully known) is important in Ford's work. Eyes, for instance, are rare in her sculptures – certainly in those that take human rather than animal form. The eyes of her figures are frequently hidden, obscured, or simply absent. At most, they might be ersatz eyes; embroidered or appliquéd on. But while the eyes are absent, it seems obvious that these sculptures see and are sentient. Not least because many of them appear to radiate feelings so intense that while we can't help but notice their occasionally sketchy anatomy and haphazard assemblage, they are clearly possessed of live imaginations.

The group of weeping, sulking girls called 'Silent Howlers' (2016), for instance, seem intensely observant of their surroundings. Behind their curiously helmet- or Duplo-like curtains of hair we sense they are gauging the dramatic effect of their various abandonments to misery. All this is legible without the need of a face. One of Ford's most honed talents is the art and accuracy with which she captures stance, body language and gesture. Our response to the 'Silent Howlers' self-consciously hunched shoulders, the hand twisting the cardigan hem, the sad-between-the-arms slump of their weight, is one of deep-seated physical and emotional recognition. We have all howled to be heard by a grown-up, sometimes for far longer than necessary for the sheer pleasure of the harmonics of the thing, or lurked, pitifully, in just such poses, for sympathy. What works so well in Ford's sculpture is that these are things we all know without needing any sort of theoretical gloss or explanation. Similarly, we do not need to have been girls to get what the 'Silent Howlers' are about nor to have been a little boy, with our modest trunk/penis somewhat shamefully tucked into our dressing gown, to appreciate the foot-shuffling embarrassment of 'Bedtime Boy' (2013). We have all, at whatever age, felt the bewildering sense of being lost and small that seems to emanate from the hesitant half-bird, half boy of 'Little Bird' (2011).

But along with the laugh or frisson of panic we experience at the body-memories Ford's sculptures evoke, there also comes a sense of exclusion. This arises from another intuitive recognition – that of seeing another person deep (or lost) in play. Playing pretend – or more dangerously, as children often say with feeling, of playing real pretend – is an act so wholehearted that it excludes almost every reality other than that being imagined. Latecomers can

sometimes be permitted 'join in', but it is not a commonly granted favour. Ford's sculptures seem too absorbed in their games to invite us to join their world. For them, playing pretend has wrapped them in mantles of imagining as dense and impenetrable as the Akershus walls. For example, in looking at the twirling forms of the three 'Clog Girls' (2013, cast in bronze 2016), with their skirts sticking out just so, and their luxurious fur pinafores so plush and their plaits beneath their hats so complex and fine, it seems clear they are lost in a shared moment of ecstatic play. Being outsiders to the game, we are at a disadvantage to understand precisely who they think they have become, however, or the nature of the event at which they imagine they are twirling. And what are we to make of their blank faces and peg-like noses? It's an uncomfortable place for us to be.

A closer look at 'Clog Girls' reveals something additionally bothersome about their transformation. The force of their imagining appears to be pushing their metamorphosis to a tipping point at which the change is running out of their control. The wooden clogs on their feet, for instance, have begun to sprout gnarly roots. Their outstretched arms and handsome, knotted sleeves – such elegant counterweights to their courtly dance – appear frozen. Their stiff corsets and tight plaits suggest an ongoing constriction and atrophy.

Playing too hard, as adults often remind children, 'will end in tears.' It was common when Ford and I were young for grown-ups to attempt to enforce obedience by issuing threats such as: 'If you pull that face and the wind changes, you'll look that way for ever.' It was a powerful incentive to pull terrible faces (particularly crossing ones eyes) on windy days in a sort of gleeful terror of permanent transformation. In looking at Ford's sculptures one wonders if a number of them have dared the wind once too often. The quietly desperate form of 'Espaliered Woman III' (2007), for instance, appears to have overdone her imaginative transformation into an espaliered fruit tree. Her arms have multiplied and spread, her feet have taken root. Even the mound of one breast, the wrinkles in her stockings and what may have been the lopsided frill of a jolly skirt have solidified into bracket fungus. What was perhaps a fantasy of expansive fruitfulness on her behalf, or of a desire to rest and soak up the sun, now reads as a poor choice. The fungus additionally suggests that she has begun to rot. It makes her both a melancholy as well as an unsettling presence. In 'Armour Boys' (2015) this idea of unwanted, unlooked-for transformation has gone even further. Their game of playing dead has been so successful that their bodies appear to have quit the scene altogether, leaving only the crushed and mangled shells of their armour behind. Here, there is a

suggestion that some external disaster has overtaken the pretend, as if in playing at war it happened to them for real. Ford has likened the way she pictures their bodies strewn beneath the trees to the scattered wreckage of a plane crash. On giving them a closer look you can see that her choice of surface patination suggests they have been variously burnt, charred or corroded. It's as if the boys had been at the centre of a conflagration.

This chilling note, in which the ugly realities of the adult world intrude into the fun or even dominate the mood, often sounds within the dense chords struck by Ford's work. The giant, one-legged redneck from her 'Glory, Glory' series (2005, cast in bronze 2016), for instance, is a sinister, bellicose figure. Loaded with an army's-worth of duffle bags she stands poised on her crutches like a cannon to fire over the battlements. In recent years, Ford's animal sculptures have perhaps addressed social issues even more directly. Each animal is anthropomorphised to varying degrees, although whether their transformation is the result of desire or imposition is open to question. 'Skinny Hyena' (2012), for example, one of a group of 'ill' animals first made by Ford for a British hospital, looks less than cheered at his entanglement with the world of humans. It is hard to imagine that he volunteered to wear the uncomfortable neck-brace that holds his head so rigidly in place. He had hoped for food, perhaps, but this is what he got instead. If 'Skinny Hyena' suggests the objectification of the poor as problems to be 'solved', the 'Waldegrave Poodles' (2015), by contrast, speak of unassailable privilege. Inspired by Sir Joshua Reynolds' painted portrait of three aristocratic sisters, 'The Ladies Waldegrave' (1780), Ford's poodles radiate self-satisfied delight. With their rouged cheeks and powdered wigs they pose on their stand, elevated above the ordinary world; each the simpering sun of their own solar system. Here, as with all of Ford's sculpture, the comic and the absurd, the ecstatic and the creepy coalesce to form objects that are simultaneously accessible and hermetic. Always balancing multiple emotions, gestures and associations that prevent her work from ever being about one thing or another, Ford deliberately leaves all the interpretative doors open to the viewer while reserving the right to retreat behind the battlements of her private world of play.

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